

Three Tips for a Customer Centric Culture



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Building a customer centric culture is not easy, and it takes time, which is why so few companies are successful at it.

by: Jill Lazzaro Heinrich

Customer centricity is not a new concept. If anything it's becoming expected – at every level in the organization. Companies like Amazon, Apple, Nordstrom, Southwest Airlines, and Disney have proven how powerful a deep knowledge of your customer and thinking from the outside in, can be. They understand the job of nearly everyone in a company is to create value for the people they serve (who are ultimately their customers) and to consistently look for ways to increase that value. With the rise of social media, today's CEOs are also very clear on the power "word of mouth" can have on their business results.

In today's hyper competitive marketplace, initiatives to engage employees in putting customers first and delighting customers consistently requires building a company-wide customer centric culture. But it's not an easy task and it takes time, which is why so few companies are successful at it. For one thing, many associates in any type of company, may spend their careers never talking to an external customer or client – ever.

How often do we ask them to think like customer-facing employees and "become more customer centric"?

Even though customer centricity can drive product and service innovation and strengthen the relationships a company develops with its customers by improving customer loyalty, lifetime value, and lowering churn (which lowers cost-to-serve and increases employee engagement to create a competitive "moat").

Associates may not think of the work they do as having a direct impact on the company's customers. Many may view themselves as support functions – processing invoices, payroll, or managing internal processes not generally seen by the outside world. They know they have a role to play, but their view of how the work they do impacts external customers is fuzzy. Asked to be more customer centric, they may respond with what appears to be legitimate pushback:

"I don't ever talk to a customer."

"Isn't customer centricity for sales people?"

"I know my work is important to the business; does it matter if I'm customer focused?"

Engaging non-customer facing associates is particularly difficult, but it's everyone's job to create value and constantly look for ways to increase that value.

When associates think about their work in the context of creating value for their company's customers, they begin to see themselves as ambassadors for those same customers.



As communications leaders, we are asked to help employees become more “customer centric” to engage everyone in the customer focused culture. But, getting your associates to see and feel that what they do can impact a customer is critical to ensuring that a company’s strategy and mission can be achieved. How do you “connect the customer dots” for your team?

Over the course of my career in a variety of Communications, Voice of Customer and Customer Service roles at some of the world’s largest organizations, I was asked to think about how we connect these dots for associates. Over the years, I came to recognize three important considerations:

1. Define It: Who is your customer?

Define your customer up front, if you want your employees to think about the external customer, then define it that way. There may be internal customers in addition to external customers, so understand up front that both are part of your customer centricity strategy. It’s important in any communication about customers that everyone is on the same page with who we are talking about. Consider including the definition in annual employee satisfaction surveys, ensure it’s understood in annual reviews and, when discussing impacts or outcomes that center on customers, spell out the definition. Make sure leaders are clear on definitions when they discuss customer focus with employees.

Sharing customer insights with employees allows them to put themselves in your customers’ shoes. What are the customer pain points? What keeps them up at night? How are we addressing our customer needs? And develop your plan and communications accordingly. There are some unique and fun ways to do this – consider the following, interviewing actual customers, interviewing customer service associates, or creating a “day in the life” of a customer service representative. If you’re in retail, have employees walk the floors of your brick and mortar sites as customers and sales associates do each day.

2. Say It: “You don’t touch the customer every day”

The first hurdle in any new way of thinking is to acknowledge the proverbial elephant in the room. If associates aren’t customer facing, don’t try to tell them they are. Explain that the goal is to consider how their work makes an impact on the customer, not just whether it touches the customer. Don’t tell associates that everyone’s work touches the customer.

Philosophically, we all know our work impacts our customers. Creating a communications campaign that simply asks a non-customer facing associate to “become more customer centric” won’t work. Showing them how their work touches the customer is more important. And if you can do it visually, that’s even better (see #3).



3. Do it: Make it a game

Make it fun. Make it visual. An infographic that shows how their work connects to a customer could be fun. Ask employees to “draw” their links to the customers and share or even have them tell their story on camera about what they do that helps a customer. An example I’ve seen work well is playing “six degrees of separation”. Challenge associates to see how many degrees it takes to connect them to a customer. Create a contest and have associates share their analyses via internal social media. For instance, if you work in payroll, show how the work you do to ensure that associates’ payroll experience is simplified and accurate allows them to focus on their work and their operations in support of customers. The less time focused on issues around their pay, the more time they must focus on the work that DOES impact customers.

I’ve seen first-hand what can happen when associates are encouraged to think about their work in the context of creating value for their companies’ customers.

They begin to see themselves as ambassadors for those same customers. We often don’t think about our internal associates as an extension of our marketing department, but we could and should. By building this connection and advocacy, any employee can be empowered to feel as if they are customer facing.

To make customer focus a constant in associates’ minds, reminding them often on how their work connects to customers should become a common theme in employee communications. It’s not a one-time communication initiative. It’s about keeping the customer out in front of associates. Run communication initiatives over the course of the year that allow employees to share their voice on their connection to customers. *Keep it simple, real, engaging, and fun!*

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