

Managing the customer experience appropriately

by Carlo Clementi

Markets have already recognized the importance of customer's experience as a fundamental factor in improving the satisfaction process, in determining the purchase loyalty, in increasing the level of trust, in creating the conditions for a stronger emotional bond and in producing a competitive advantage for the company. For this reason, the leading companies on the market have placed, or are placing, the customer's experience at the centre of their offering. Despite its importance, the experience provided to the customer is not always considered appropriately, within a correct operational structure and a strategic articulation. Due to the heterogeneity and immateriality of its characteristics, companies limit themselves to considering only the design of the service, for its immediate perception, for the availability of professional skills from external companies, and for its reduced organizational impact, since it focuses just on front-office activities. However, if the experience is considered disconnected both from the architecture of underlying operational processes, functional to the satisfaction of the client's expectations, and the strategic-operational framework, represented by the concept of service, it tends to lose its effectiveness. The peculiar aspect emerging from multi-sectorial research on the quality of the customers' experience is characterised by under-utilization, or incorrect use, of this important tool by many companies and institutions. In fact, just a few customers find the level of experience received satisfactory, although companies and their employees believe in the excellent level provided. Therefore, in this regard, interpretative, operational and perceptual gaps emerge that companies and institutions cannot afford to ignore.

In order to clarify what is meant by customer experience, it is possible to define it as the moment in which the customer feels a sensation or acquires knowledge through an interaction with the staff or the elements of a context created by the supplier. In this sense, the importance of experience is not only understandable as by-product of any purchase or service encounter, but also as an antecedent of a set of fundamental elements of judgment with multiple implications for the company, ranging from customer satisfaction to the ability

to generate loyal users, from the definition of purchase expectations to the ability to generate trust, or from supporting the corporate brand to developing emotional ties with customers.

A critical aspect is that, while a product and a service are the result of a structured organizational process, the customer's experience is the personal interpretation of the individual. This understanding is influenced by the specific interaction with elements or people in contact and by the operational and emotional involvement felt during the process between customer and supplier. Experience is the result of a specifically personal perceptive activity, which develops and exists, as such, only in the mind of the subject who lives it, combining in perceptive terms the client's emotional state with the respective psychological condition. Therefore, the characteristic of this phenomenon consists in its uniqueness, since two subjects exposed to the same phenomena, within the same context, will not have the same experience. Although influenced by its individuality, the experience felt by the customer has a fundamental importance in the world of commerce as it is the basis on which the evaluation of the customer rests. Such evaluation, whether good, bad or indifferent, represents the element of the greatest influence in the customer's intentions, both as regards the decision to reiterate a purchase or to recommend a specific experience to others.

It is a well-established fact that several reasons have contributed to raise the importance of the customer experience. The proliferation of the channels used to reach various markets, the increasingly broader commercial structures, the different methods of communication with customers, all these have made the customer experience a consistent and distinctive factor for the company. Thanks to the greater commercial sensitivity, some of the most dynamic companies have started to consider the experience as no longer a residual element but as a factor to be entirely managed. As a result, design studios have begun to cooperate with these companies to improve the experiential path offered to the customer. Tools and techniques have been refined with the aim of helping companies to consider, evaluate and design the experience, encouraging customer participation in the process design and increasing the degree of success. However, the organizations that have benefited most from

an engineering approach to the experience are those that have integrated the process to their corporate vision, operations and strategy and have made it a central topic in the communication among employees to sharpen their abilities and strengthen their capabilities. Based on this perspective, organizations no longer consider the customer experience as one of the activities to be carried out, but they have changed its meaning. The experience process is therefore transformed from an important element for customer satisfaction to a fundamental factor for company competitiveness, to be used to differentiate its offer away from an increasingly fierce competition.

A good experience for the customer contributes to creating a competitive advantage that implies benefits both for employees, for the company and for the customer himself. The benefits for employees are linked to the positive implications they have on the performance of the organization, in fact this involves not only the better understanding of their roles, and implicitly the overall process of experience delivered to the customer, but also generates a greater involvement and satisfaction in the work accomplished. The benefits for the company are represented by costs reduction and efficiency gains, since the customer, provided with a good experience, will be motivated to make further purchases and to communicate his/her satisfaction to others. The benefits for customers lie in the different concept of value and in the ways of generating it, more centred on personalized experiences. Informed, active and connected customers have an increased need to be an active part in a value co-creation process together with the company. Therefore, the moments of interaction, namely the contact points during the customer's experience, become the environment where value creation and its extraction take place. This approach rejects the market stereotype which views the consumer mainly involved in the activity of exchange, receiving a product or service that others have thought and created for him.

The actions and behaviours, that the digital world has made possible for the activities carried out on the web, now tend to be requested and replicated by customers in their day to day reality. The greater involvement, the transparency of information, the possibility of operating without space-time constraints, the ability to make detailed comparisons, the aptitude for

immediate action, and the complete autonomy of decision, all these are factors which the client can no longer do without. As a result, companies must take into account the above issues in designing the architecture of the experience and the supporting operational processes.

A successful experience is one that the customer finds unique, memorable and sustainable over time, so much so that the client will repeat it and promote it enthusiastically to other potential customers. But the experience for the client represents a holistic whole that emerges from the intersection between the cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical sphere. It may include elements which companies or institutions may have influence and management skills for, and others outside their control. Hence, it is not possible for an organization to design an experience that produces specific emotions in a specific and accurate way. The elements that contribute to creating the customer's experience are manifold, and moreover it is unlikely that the customer himself is aware of the process behind it. However, if an experience cannot be drawn, designed or engineered, the mechanism used to generate it can be. This perspective makes clear that, if the experience cannot be designed by the company, the service process that delivers it to customers can, in a form structured and articulated enough to make each element perceivable as part of one definite emotion.

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