



Counter-Intuitive

By Alison Diana

Successful TCE Initiatives call for more than high measures of customer satisfaction.

If there is a common corporate mantra today it would be the need for a 'total customer experience.' But while many industries are spending heavily on customer service, they are missing the point when it comes to TCE.

"Experience occurs on both a conscious and unconscious level. And it impacts the customer on both an emotional and a rational level," Lou Carbone told an audience of technology executives and professionals at a recent Gartner Symposium in Orlando.

Companies, therefore, do not achieve TCE by providing good customer service or on-time product delivery. Nor is this done by having strong brand recognition or high performance scores. Rather, "TCE describes how customers want to feel when they do business with a company, and how that company wants its clients to feel."

Carbone would know. He is president and founder of Experience Engineering, a Twin Cities, Minn.-based consulting firm that has helped formulate the TCE initiatives for a wide swath of the Fortune 100, and author of the corporate marketer's must read *Clued In: How to Keep Customers Coming Back Again and Again*.

New Tools

Industries like high tech, which place an outsized emphasis on service, could be well-positioned for successful TCE efforts if they let go of old-school metrics and tools. This is a Carbone insight: The same focus groups and surveys typically used to measure customer satisfaction are inadequate when it comes to measuring the more subtle complexities of TCE.

New measurement tools are available. Some organizations are turning to the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), designed to reveal "what people don't know they know" and the underlying motivations that influence someone's decision to buy a product or form an opinion about a company. Others are profiling customers to tabulate the correlation between customer expectation and actual performance.

But TCE requires more than metrics and measurements.

"We all share a common goal to listen, understand and respond to the needs of our customers and partners. This ultimately yields meaningful value propositions and relationships that grow stronger with trust," says Toby Richards, general manager of the Customer and Partner Experience at Microsoft Corp. "While the technology industry can benefit from real-time feedback through online communities and innovations like Windows Error Reporting, we ultimately earn our customers' trust as a result of repetitive, positive experiences driven by product excellence, our ability to

listen and respond, and business simplicity.”

Immersion Approach

Too many companies are taking a scattershot approach to TCE—neglecting to realize that “total” not only describes the customer’s experience, but also the corporate thinking that underlies it. A business cannot implement a TCE initiative on a departmental level. Everyone—from the chairman and CEO to front-line employees—must be engaged. Ultimately, every aspect of the company’s behavior must be assessed from the customer’s perspective to ensure that all dimensions of the customer’s experience meets their expectations.

To achieve a more cohesive approach, increasingly businesses are putting top-level executives in charge of TCE. A December 2004 Forrester Research survey of large North American enterprises revealed that roughly 25 percent of the companies had named or hired a single executive to maintain oversight of their customers’ experience. Broken out by industry, this trend was most noticeable at services firms, including high tech and, oddly enough, least apparent at traditional retailers and wholesalers.

Are You Experienced?

Many of these newly installed customer czars are putting enterprise-wide processes in place for employees to follow. These are aimed at boosting their TCE scores and providing simple ways to communicate customer feedback. Typically, says Carbone, this involves a five step undertaking:

1. **Customer Assessment** – Whether it sells technology or coffee, a business must begin the process by assessing the current experience it provides to its customers.
2. **Behavior Auditing** – Next, it needs to structure a discipline that allows it to audit the experience. How does the company want its customers to respond? What are its customers looking to get out of the relationship?
3. **Proactive Response** – Once the customer’s response is assessed relative to the business’ goals, the company needs to determine how it can close the gap.
4. **Experience Redesign** – With new, more constructive corporate behavior in mind, a new customer experience needs to be designed.
5. **Course Corrections and Measurement** – Finally, an ongoing process needs to be put in place to measure customer response and adjust corporate behavior to keep the customer’s experience in line with the goals set by the business.

Unlike many other transformational business approaches, TCE can bring about measurable improvements in the customer’s experience almost overnight. Many companies report that as their managers and employees have tuned into their behavior from their clients’ perspective, they have been able to quickly respond in ways that significantly improve their customers’ experience.

Some of these actions can be subtle. One bank observed that their loan applicants were put off when their applications were tossed unceremoniously onto a large pile of similar forms. By merely instructing their loan officers to hold onto the application until the applicant had left the office, the bank was able to reinforce its message that it treated each client as an individual.

Dramatic Changes

Other responses can be more dramatic. After undergoing TCE training, the doctors and nurses at one hospital volunteered to spend a weekend

redecorating the waiting area for their emergency room. The facelift was based on patient feedback and follow-on surveys indicated that these simple changes instilled a substantially greater level of patient comfort and trust in the hospital.

"The smart players are working to build holistic experiences around their product lines and recognizing the importance of the entire experience a customer receives as a result of engaging with their firm," says Phil Bruno, a professional speaker, trainer and consultant who heads up St. Louis, Mo.-based Treat 'em Right.

But Bruno says the experience needs to be guided by metrics and it's a mistake to get creative just for creativity's sake. Done well, a TCE process can deliver loyal customers that insulate a company from the vagaries of market whim and pricing pressure. Done haphazardly, a TCE effort can blind a business to its opportunities, opening the door to its more customer-savvy competitors.