Customer Experience

Developing a customer-experience vision

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To provide a distinctive experience for customers, an organization must unite around the goal of meeting their true needs. Done well, the effort can power a vast amount of innovation.

Brooke Boyarsky, Will Enger, and Ron Ritter

Almost every successful company recognizes that it is in the customer-experience business. Organizations committed to this principle are as diverse as the online retail giant Amazon; The Walt Disney Company, from its earliest days operating in a small California studio; and the US Air Force, which uses an exotic B2B-like interface to provide close air support for ground troops under fire. Conversely, companies that are not attuned to a customer-driven marketplace are remarkably easy to spot. Consider the traditional US taxi industry, which is facing significant new competition from the likes of Lyft and Uber. Customer-service standouts clearly understand that this is central to their success as businesses.

Knowing that your organization is primarily in the customer-service business is not, however, enough to achieve organizational change. To build internal momentum for initiatives to develop a unique customer experience, a company must understand how that helps it perform distinctively in the market. The conviction and shared aspiration that stem from understanding the customer experience an organization wants to deliver can not only inspire, align, and guide it but also bring innovation, energy, and a human face to what would otherwise just be strategy. The story of one US airport's efforts to define a distinctive customer experience illustrates how such a transformation can take shape.

Defining aspirations

The customer experience an organization wants to provide can vary widely. For some companies, this transformed experience represents a step change. For others, the aspiration may, at least in the short term, require only more modest changes. Either way, the aspiration will translate into an overall mission and, ultimately, into guiding principles for frontline behavior.

One caveat: it is easy to err by aiming too low. In our experience, looking at historical performance and at whatever helped satisfy customers in the past can often make marginal tweaks seem good enough. Understanding the *fundamental* wants and needs of customers must be a step in determining what a great experience for them should look like.

For example, five years ago, a taxi company might have thought that decreasing the wait time when a customer ordered a cab would be sufficient. But some companies saw a competitive opportunity in addressing the wishes of customers trying to deal with a transportation challenge by getting more control, comfort, and safety, as well as lower costs. Understanding and addressing customer needs more effectively is a key reason successful start-ups disrupt industries in today's more customer-centric marketplace.

We find that several key questions commonly underpin successful stories and strategies:

- What is a company's appetite for change in the near term? Is the goal to change the customer experience fundamentally or simply to improve it at the margins?
- What is the gap between the needs and wants of customers and what they actually experience?
- How can the company gain a customer-experience advantage against competitors?
- At which point in the experience should the company concentrate to have a real impact?
- How do the overall capabilities of the staff support the customer experience the company wants to provide?

It is vital to define an aspiration centered on what matters to customers—and on how it affects your business. There may be no customer-experience location more demanding than major airports, and executives at one recently discovered how powerful and counterintuitive the responses to these questions can be. The executives formed a broad

change team and spent several months determining what the airport should aim to deliver. Their aspiration at once captured the simplicity of the goal and the daunting complexity of the task: to provide the most enjoyable and efficient way possible for travelers to get from one destination to another.

The effort to deliver that experience started with a multilayer diagnostic. It involved complex analyses, passenger tracking (via Wi-Fi) that yielded more than a million data points in the first few weeks, and employee focus groups that concentrated on the issues that matter to employees and customers. Traditional shop-floor observations were included as well. Combining these inputs, the airport's team developed a profile of what makes customers satisfied (or dissatisfied) with airports, as well as actionable insights that led directly to the design of a new customer-experience program (exhibit).

There were surprises because initial ideas about what matters to customers were not always accurate, so the airport was at risk of being pulled into aspects of its operations that did not really matter. Among the drivers that did, such as moving smoothly through security, what really satisfied customers was not always obvious. For example, satisfaction with interactions involving the Transportation Security

Exhibit

The customer-experience program was designed to solve an airport's problems serving travelers.

Source: McKinsey analysis

Administration (TSA) had more to do with the customers' perceptions of the way its officers behaved than with time spent standing in line.

Understanding customers and their journeys

Gathering and segmenting data are classic starting points in understanding customers. But data are not enough. Successful customer-experience efforts apply a human filter to the collected data to ask overarching questions. Exactly who are my customers as individuals? What motivates them? What do they want to achieve? What are the fundamental causes of satisfaction? Obviously, tackling these questions requires a concerted analytical effort, which helps an organization design and implement a more sophisticated program and, critically, persuade employees to embrace its goals.

The airport turned to the Compass Model,[1] drawn from Disney—one approach to understanding different types of customers. The points of the compass help an organization plan a customer-satisfaction program by identifying emotional mind-sets, wishes, and needs. In the airport's case, the compass showed the following:

- *north:* needs, or what the customer desires from the experience. Some needs are stated, but it is important to understand that many are not. *I need to transfer to an aircraft to begin an air-travel journey* might be one need.

- *west:* wants—the underlying objective or purpose of travelers, stated, unstated, or perhaps not even fully recognized by them; for example, *I want a really positive end to my business trip that leaves me feeling good, relaxed, and in a positive mind-set to go home.*

- *south:* stereotypes, or preconceived notions, positive or negative, that customers have about the airport experience. A customer might expect this: *Curbside will be a hassle. TSA lines will be long and hard to predict. There will be no time to eat. And the airline may lose my bag, so best to carry it onboard.*

- *east:* emotions that customers have or are likely to experience; for example, *I feel rushed and annoyed that this is so hard to deal with. I'm anxious about getting to the gate and missing my flight. I really need this trip to be behind me.*

Organizations can bring the customer's perspective into focus through something as simple as these four points. This approach also helps employees align their perspectives with a customer-experience program and connect much more effectively with customers. Of course, it can also be used to better understand and ultimately support employees—the people who must deliver great service.

How employees deliver

A year into the airport's transformation, a member of its board shared a leadership insight that struck at the central role employees play in delivering a superior customer experience and the organizational challenge it poses for management. "I will care about what you say when I believe you care about me," the board member recalled one frontline worker saying to him. At the airport, 18,000 people work for more than 60 entities. All customer-experience leaders understand that they can provide a great experience only through frontline workers.

Such a customer experience begins with employees who know about it, care about it, and are well positioned to deliver it. In the case of an airport, it can't be provided by employees who must wait 45 minutes in the cold in a staff-shuttle line, have no real "backstage" area to step away from customers during breaks, lack training outside their own narrow technical tasks, or resent leaders who never ask for (or even appear to care about) their input.

During the airport's diagnostic stage, staffers from many organizations were regularly seen avoiding contact with customers: marching through the airport, hats pulled down, heads bowed, work badges removed on their way to their places of work. Were these just grumpy staff members? Far from it. Focus groups revealed that employees tried to avoid dealing with travelers' questions because the employees had no answers. Many lacked practical tools to help customers or even training in basic navigation around the airport complex. The upshot: organizations must make frontline workers customer-experience leaders by bringing them closer to customers. Transforming the customer experience requires an engaging employee experience.

Creating a shared aspiration

The highly diverse, frontline nature of superior customer-experience programs requires a shared aspiration, which can serve as a guiding light for strategic decisions and execution. Otherwise, a corporate strategy to improve the customer experience will go only so far.

At Disney, for example, all cast members share an aspiration they call the Common Purpose: to "create happiness."[2] In the military or in organizations such as the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration, stakeholders follow "commander's intent," a shared aspiration that can unify all interested parties around a mission. Commander's intent also succinctly describes what constitutes success for the operation. It includes the operation's purpose and the conditions that define the end state, as well as the mission, the concept of operations, and the tactical behavior needed for the desired outcome.

The airport's broad leadership team came together in a series of sessions to agree on an ultimate purpose. Discussions involved more than 60 entities as diverse as airlines, coffee vendors, the local police department, the TSA, and janitorial contractors.

The shared aspiration the group decided on was "to delight and value each guest with the finest airport experience in the world."

The work that followed sought to apply this aspiration to a set of thematic objectives that would begin to frame the airport's customer-experience transformation and the way stakeholders would achieve it. For the airport, this effort yielded a list of outcomes covering the customer's end-to-end airport experience:

- *safety:* assuring the safe and secure conduct of all guests and staff (an obvious and paramount objective in an airport)
- *comfort:* improving the quality of the experience in seating, entertainment, restrooms, interactions with employees, and architectural and design style
- *ease:* helping customers find their way around the airport, understand what to do while there, get help, and learn the best way to spend their time on-site
- *speed:* compressing wait times, creating early bag-drop options, and navigating congestion

Executing change

In our experience, this kind of simple formulation can serve as a powerful foundation for channeling problem solving and innovation to unite team members at all levels. Large, diverse organizations need simplicity and structure to execute at scale. To believe in a customer-experience program and to engage with it actively, employees must know that leadership clearly understands the situation, has an organized way to move forward, and is serious about change.

Three things create this strong basis for action: a definition of the degree of change desired, a strong understanding of what matters to customers, and

a shared aspiration and framework for change. Innovation teams formed to achieve these objectives generate high-impact ideas. A large part of building a common aspiration involves seriously engaging front-line leaders in this kind of practical innovation. People can fully engage their minds with the problem at hand, see progress, and feel entrusted with the goal of promoting change. Metrics reflecting the stages of the customer's end-to-end experience are also essential to reinforce its overall quality.

Thus, with a shared aspiration clearly defined, airport administrators and team members organized groups of employees around the four customer themes: safety, comfort, ease, and speed. The teams then doubled down on the employee experience with a care-and-recognition effort. Mixed teams, with stakeholders from the airline, car-rental, retailing, law-enforcement, and airport staffs, actively worked to develop ideas, including new apps to navigate around the airport, new forms of entertainment, layout changes, and a curbside valet and bag check at parking garages.

Throughout the whole organization, from the board level down, the most critical idea was a simple focus on the conduct of all staff members across the airport's 60-odd entities. The employee team developed five defined points as the bedrock of a great customer experience:

- Remain mindful of surroundings, and stop unsafe behavior.
- Pick up trash or report an area that needs attention.
- Display appropriate body language and use a calm tone of voice.
- Make eye contact and smile.
- Stop and proactively offer to assist with the next step in the customer's journey.

These points provided the link between the staff and the underlying customer-experience drivers. Not one of the frontline employees needed to understand the complex regressions used to identify customer preferences. They could simplify what was needed so well that all of them, regardless of employer, could follow through with effective action.

Two years after the project's launch, more than 50 staff members gather every other week to reinforce and advance this level of shared aspiration by solving problems, developing innovations, and demonstrating distinctive examples of the behavior the project was designed to encourage. Average retail spending per passenger at the airport is more than 15 percent higher than the pretransformation baseline. On the front lines, engagement among stakeholders is also on the rise. TSA officers recognize curbside staff members. Airline employees acknowledge peers from competitors. The CEO and his staff are out on the front lines interacting with employees and working to realize the goals that form the living manifestation of the customer-experience strategy.

If you carry the aspiration forward, it is even possible to envision a return, someday, to the spirit of the early days of flying, when an airport was a place where visitors felt privileged to spend time. ■

[1] The Compass Model is the intellectual property of The Walt Disney Company. See Theodore Kinni, *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service*, second edition, Lake Buena Vista, FL: Disney Institute, 2011.

[2] The Common Purpose is the intellectual property of The Walt Disney Company. See Kinni, *Be Our Guest*.

Brooke Boyarsky is a consultant in McKinsey's Dallas office, where **Will Enger** is an associate principal; **Ron Ritter** is a principal in the Miami office.