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Human
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Issue

The Future of the Human-AI Experience

Humanizing Innovation Through Customer-Centricity

Customer Experience Around the World

The Real Experience Designers

One of Us

Humanizing Innovation Through Customer-Centricity

By Jax Wechsler

For CEOs all over the globe, the phrase "customer-centricity" never strays far from their lips as they strive to enable their organizations to deliver remarkable customer experiences. Customer-centricity, or putting the customer at the centre, is a simple idea. Yet actualizing this strategic aim is complex for various reasons. Affective factors which support or impair a customer-centric strategic aim include such things as organizational culture, organizational structure, its systems and processes, and its staff and leadership. As human experience is by definition subjective, it consequently cannot be "designed." So how can it fit into this complex web? Where customer-centric innovation relies on collaboration and deep customer insight, how can design support customer-centricity within organizations, empowering firms to design and deliver optimal customer experiences?

Management discourse talks about the "age of the customer," maintaining that competitive advantage can be had by providing products and services that address unmet customer needs. Quantitative research has its place, but the language of numbers addresses only the what and not why. Design is inherently human-centered, and designers rely on ethnographically inspired qualitative research methods to understand human needs and opportunities for new products and services. Yet customer insights garnered from research are usually only socialized with innovation project stakeholders.

Customer Experience Isn't the Objective – It's the Discipline

Organizations are social environs. It follows that innovative customer-centric products and services result from the collective efforts of numerous stakeholders. With the rise of product-service-system ecosystems, or tangible products combined with intangible services combined to fulfill customer needs such as the iPod and the iTunes store, delivering human experiences across multiple touchpoints can be challenging to orchestrate and sustain. It is not unreasonable to state that customer-centricity involves all staff.

Where designing and delivering remarkable customer experience rely on the participation of so many staff, there is an opportunity to share customer-centric knowledge broadly within the organization. Organizational culture guides how staff act and interact, and many small and seemingly inconsequential decisions can impact the customer experience. Customers experience your organization as a collective sum-total of numerous micro-interactions. Facilitating broad customer empathy and understanding throughout the organization encourages a more customer-centered organizational culture, ultimately providing a more human face to your product or service.

I was recently involved in a stream of qualitative research activities within a design-led innovation initiative for a large firm. The research was conducted to understand customer pain points and needs in order to improve a complex product-service-system ordering and delivery service. Visualizations illustrated the customer research, such as journey maps depicting current ordering processes; personas explained customer behaviors, needs, and motivations; and videos demonstrated the research insights from the customer's perspective. These objects were delivered to the organization along with some prototypes for an improved online ordering service.

To our surprise, some of these objects were used by staff in unexpected ways. A call center manager shared the research videos with his call center team to enable them to better understand the challenges of customers on the other side of the phone. The personas were included in an induction pack for new staff who liaise with this customer group. The journey maps provided springboards for groups of staff to consider process improvement, helping to make intangible services more tangible, in order to ground conversation about service improvement. As customer-centric visualizations do not require domain knowledge for context, they are easier to access and understand, and visual objects can provide staff with a unitary perspective to consider their own work in relation to that of the customer. A shared referent can facilitate conversation, customer empathy, and organizational learning – supporting a shift to customer-centricity, and ultimately enable the design and delivery of improved customer experiences.
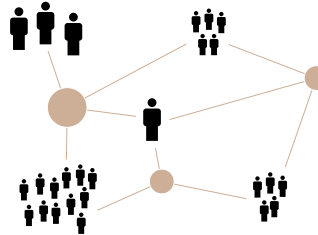
Spreading What's Worth Sharing

Knowledge travels socially within organizations. As a result, engaging and novel visual artifacts tend to be shared widely and voluntarily, functioning to support multi-dimensional organizational change. Consider a beautifully designed infographic that communicates financial information about the product-service-system and the customers who use it. This artifact was shared between informal and formal networks because it presented interesting information in a novel, elegant format.

Additionally, visual artifacts can facilitate a shared customer-centric design language. They provide customer-centric cognitive frameworks, helping staff to put the customer at the center of their everyday work practice. They can communicate the customer-centric strategic aim of the organization, showing staff that the firm cares about the customer experience. Customer-centric objects provide staff things to talk with, talk through, and talk about, and can support the non-hierarchical and informal relationships that are seen to be at the core of innovation. Providing a design language broadly within an organization can additionally function to encourage a design culture and elevate the position of design, supporting innovation led not only by customers, but also design.

These customer-centric design objects are far more memorable than any spreadsheet or densely-worded brief. Embodying both aesthetic and communicative efficiency, these objects help perpetuate these insights within organizations; they "stick." They support organizational sense-making processes, supporting customer-centric organizational learning, changing culture and behavior.

Plato contends that human behavior flows from three main sources: desire, emotion, and knowledge. Customer-centricity relies on the cumulative behaviors of all staff. How can you encourage your staff to want to deliver optimal experiences and be motivated to participate in customer-improvement initiatives? How can you give your customers a human face, and tap into the emotions of your staff to enable empathy? What knowledge can you broker to your colleagues to empower them to make more customer-centric decisions?

Deep customer insight has innovation impact. If it's communicated effectively and broadly, it can facilitate customer-centricity throughout the organization. Where customer experience can't be designed, organizations can design engaging sticky objects to support experience delivery. ////

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