

CO-CREATE AN EXPERIENCE THAT CUSTOMERS VALUE

Involve your customers in designing an experience that adds value for all stakeholders.

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Executives are increasingly focused on the customer experience as the key to differentiate their brands in the marketplace, yet many organizations are still in the early stages of defining what that experience is. For most, understanding the customer involves data collection, analysis and internal interpretation, resulting in a company-centric view of what they think customers want the experience to be. In the contact center, that usually translates into things like faster response times, fewer steps to resolve the issue, not being transferred or not having to repeat information—in other words, providing good customer service. But as countless studies have stressed, good service is not enough to retain customers, much less create passion for your brand.

What is often missing during the development of the customer experience strategy is the main element: the customer. Making assumptions about what customers value generally leads to poor decision-making and costly mistakes. Instead of taking the inside-out approach, some forward-thinking companies are engaging customers throughout the strategy development process. Called customer experience co-creation, this collaborative approach gets customers directly involved in the process of designing their own experience through an interactive and ongoing dialogue.

“The classic view of competitive advantage was that it existed within the walls of the firm. You designed it, you controlled it—all of the value was generated by the company,” explains Francis Gouillart. “We then started to realize that there was competitive advantage in the ability to create an ecosystem that engages other people outside the walls of your company.” Gouillart is president and cofounder of the Experience Co-Creation Partnership, a privately held strategy consulting firm, and coauthor of *The Power of Co-Creation: Build It with Them to Boost Growth, Productivity and Profits*.

A co-creation strategy typically starts with the organization’s customer-facing employees, such as service or sales, says Gouillart, and then expands to customers and other stakeholders.

How Is Co-Creation Different?

Admittedly, strategies for improving processes that touch the customer are not lacking, and most contact center leaders have probably managed to cycle through quite a few in their time. What makes co-creation different from other team-based, collaborative initiatives like reengineering, work-out or Six Sigma?

The most obvious is a **deeper involvement of the customer** during the design of the experience. Unlike customer surveys that limit the customers’ feedback to predetermined responses or one-time input offered through focus groups, co-creation brings the customer *inside* the company, figuratively speaking. This can be a difficult transformation for some companies, as it requires them to provide customers with access and transparency into their processes.

Traditional process-improvement initiatives are typically carried out using an ad hoc approach in which a team is assembled for a specific project or task and then is dissolved once they have achieved their goal. The co-creation team, on the other hand, is linked to a larger community of people, and they are expected to **work together permanently** as part of the new system.

While focus groups offer companies a chance to collect ideas and learn more about what their customers think, for customers, the input tends to be one time and one way. In a co-creation process, the **feedback loop is essential**, says Susan Abbott, principal customer experience strategist and researcher at Abbott Research & Consulting. “Co-creation allows customers to share their ideas, create an ongoing dialogue and influence the future direction of the company. However, if consumers devote their time and effort to give the company their best ideas and thinking, they want to know that they’ve been heard. Companies need to cycle back, and if they can’t deliver exactly what the customer wants, offer suggestions and gather additional

feedback from customers. It's a continual feedback loop in the design process so that it's not just the company determining what the contact center experience will look like, rather it brings the users right into the process of creating that experience."

The **role of experience is expanded** in co-creation. "Co-creation is very experience-centric," Gouillart says. "In co-creation, we're interested in everybody's experience—the customers, the contact center agents and the other people who are going to become part of that system." For instance, the typical goal in process design is to ensure that the process delivers against the specs that the customer provides with repeatability and predictability. In co-creation, the experience always comes before the process, he says. Consider the life of a contact center agent: What is that like? How is he being measured? What are the internal dynamics of that call center team? How was the team created? How were the individuals recruited? How do they advance?

"The experience of the call center agent in his or her cubicle is as important as the experience of the customer," Gouillart explains. "There is a reinstrumentation of the view that needs to take place so that you are creating a sense of empathy between the two sides. Very often, the source of imagination in co-creation comes more from the call center agent redesigning his or her own role than it does from understanding the unique needs of the customer."

Similarly, the **role of data is expanded**. The communities that are set up as part of a co-creation effort are permanent, so correlations between the experiences are measured. For example, if the quality of the contact center agent's experience increases, what is the impact on the customer experience quality score? Did it also increase? "There is a strong connection between the experiences that will allow us to generate additional data and insights," he says.

A final point to keep in mind about co-creation: While it may sound similar to crowdsourcing, **it is not crowdsourcing**. The terms often have been used interchangeably, but there are critical differences in how the two strategies are defined, says Gouillart. Crowdsourcing, like the name suggests, solicits participation or feedback from a crowd of people in an open forum (think Wikipedia). It's often used to outsource a specific task or problem. For companies, the appeal of tapping the collective intelligence of the public to solve a problem or provide input has more to do with cost savings (in terms of internal resources, capacity, marketing) than long-term customer engagement. Co-creation, on the other hand, is an ongoing engagement that includes collaboration with internal stakeholders. It's more about the relationship than a task.

Co-Creation in Practice

Co-creation offers endless possibilities for customer engagement with product or process improvement. How have companies used customer co-creation to innovate customer and employee experiences? The following are just a few examples of co-created solutions.

TRANSFORMING THE CUSTOMER'S EXPERIENCE

Jeppesen Sanderson, a subsidiary of The Boeing Company that specializes in the development of navigational solutions for the transport industry, involved an community of pilots in the creation of its Mobile FliteDeck, the industry's first interactive mobile enroute flight application for iPad.

The firm operates in a strictly regulated industry, which added an element of risk to the open development process. However, the cross-industry collaboration also included representatives from the Federal Aviation Administration, which helped the team to work through regulatory challenges and define a solution that not only complied with FAA requirements and met their target audience's needs, but also set new standards for the aviation industry.



Susan Abbott

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Francis Gouillart

EXPERIENCE CO-CREATION PARTNERSHIP

Jeppesen Sanderson was recognized for their innovative approach by the Co-Creation Association, a Special Interest Group of the Product Development and Management Association (PDMA), with a 2012 Co-Creation Award for Best Use of Co-Creation in the For Profit Innovation category.

TRANSFORMING THE CUSTOMER'S AND AGENT'S EXPERIENCE

Co-creation allows you to jointly transform the experience of the contact center agent and the customers, says Gouillart. He offers a co-creation effort that his firm conducted with Microsoft as an example.

Despite performing well in all of the traditional service delivery metrics, the company continued to lose ground to Apple in recent years as even lifelong Microsoft users began to make the switch. The company's service leaders came to the realization that they were not engaging customers in the right way, and that their approach to measuring service was no longer working. It's this type of epiphany that sets the stage for a successful co-creation effort, Gouillart points out.

Microsoft customers revealed that it wasn't a matter of poor service—they were frustrated with the anonymous call center experience. Through the process of co-creation, the company created a new type of contact center called Answer Desk that has changed the nature of the interaction between the contact center agent and the customer, Gouillart says. Customer who visit the company's support site are presented with the group of agents who are available to take their call at that moment. Each agent is represented by his or her photo accompanied with self-descriptions of the services they provide, what they're good at and their experience.

Customers can then choose the agent with whom they want to interact—whether they wish to speak with a woman, someone who is older, more casual, etc. The experience for customers is more human—they can identify with the agent so there is a closer connection. For agents, job satisfaction has skyrocketed. “Because they are selected by the customer as opposed to being at the passive end of an IVR system, the agents' experience is dramatically different and the valuation of what they do is much more significant,” Gouillart says.

In addition to higher satisfaction ratings from customers and employees, the new approach also benefited the contact center by attracting a new pool of highly skilled talent.

TRANSFORMING THE FRONTLINE AGENT'S EXPERIENCE

Co-creation efforts also can be focused *within* the center to improve the frontline agent's experience, increase employee satisfaction and enhance the culture. Gouillart points to 24/7 Customer Inc., a cloud-based customer service provider, as a compelling example. Headquartered in the Silicon Valley, 24/7 Customer has more than 10,000 employees worldwide and operates sites in the United States, United Kingdom, Guatemala, the Philippines, India, Nicaragua, China and Australia.

The company's India-based centers were faced with stiff competition for skilled agents to staff the night shift. The firm targeted young women attending the local technology institutes as their ideal candidates. However, going out at night even for work is considered inappropriate for women in India, and is largely opposed by Indian families and society. Thus, recruiting for the night shifts proved to be a considerable challenge.

Through co-creation, 24/7 Customer was able to design a new recruiting process that was uniquely tailored to address the underlying issues for potential job candidates. They scrapped the traditional solo interview and invited candidates to apply as a social group with up to 10 or 11 members. “The new interview process resembles a Broadway audition,” Gouillart explains. “In essence, the candidates ‘perform’ as group interacting with the recruiting team and interviewers. They are then hired as a team and continue to work together as a team.”

The BPO's success rate for attracting and hiring quality staff increased substantially. There were additional benefits for the center, as well. The company found that the teams that were self-assembled performed higher, experienced lower absenteeism, and advanced professionally much quicker.

Moving Forward: First Steps

Co-creation pulls together stakeholders from various functions and levels within the company, as well as external customers. According to Abbot, executive sponsorship is critical to ensure participation and success because you're not only collaborating crossfunctionally, but up and down the organization.


The first step in developing co-creation system is identifying a systemic problem to solve and for which you want to involve customers, contact center staff, and other internal stakeholders, says Gouillart. The best way to start is with a workshop that all of your key internal stakeholders attend. This is typically a half-day session where your team develops four or five focused hypotheses around what the co-creation would produce and what type of community you need to engage—who should be involved, how they should be engaged, what types of platforms you will provide for them, and what type of value the co-creation will generate.

Who should be involved? Individuals with an open mind and creative aptitude are well suited for a co-creative team. Gouillart points out that younger people are more instinctively co-creative simply because of the role that social media plays in their lives. "Facebook doesn't teach you to be co-creative, per se, but it does teach you to understand the value of opening up," he explains.

Co-creation requires a change in mindset from the traditional process-oriented thinking. It requires the ability to formulate questions rather than providing answers. "Those who are often challenged by co-creation are the process, quality and Six Sigma people who traditionally view the creation of the process as an attribute of the company," Gouillart says. "The notion that you are going to open this up as a two-way interaction that is going to have less structure—at least in the early stages—that is tougher for them. If people are very used to managing a certain way, it can be very difficult for them to change.

"There is a lot of Six Sigma thinking in the traditional call center that you have to unlearn, in part," he says. "Many people have been drilled into thinking that efficiency requires standardization, so, therefore, the script or the process needs to be the same within the contact center."

Additional training in creative problem-solving and innovation skills can help, says Abbott. "People are usually creative in different ways—some are creative in logistics while others are innovative with product ideas or marketing communications. If you have a team, it's helpful to stack the deck for exactly the sort of creativity you're looking for," she says.

However, Abbott adds, "The skills should take a back seat to absolute passion for the customer. You have to have people who have a high level of enthusiasm for looking after customers, because that's what brings people together and that's what helps them to get across the obstacles. What makes it exciting is when people really want to do something great and they want to do something that creates a win-win for the company and the customer." 

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LEARN MORE ABOUT CO-CREATION: RESOURCES FEATURED IN THIS ARTICLE

Experience Co-Creation Partnership

<http://www.eccpartnership.com>

The Experience Co-Creation Partnership (ECCP) is a privately held strategy consulting firm headquartered in Concord, Mass. ECCP offers co-creation workshops, executive education, consulting services, books and articles, including “Community-Powered Problem Solving,” recently published in *Harvard Business Review* (April 2013).

Francis Guillard's blog: The Co-Creation Effect

<http://francisguillard.com>

Abbott Research & Consulting

<http://abbottresearch.com>

Abbott Research & Consulting facilitates innovation, conducts all types of qualitative research, and synthesizes data and trends into strategies for clients. The firm also offers workshops, reports, publications, focus groups and an e-newsletter that provides ideas to manage customer experience for success, insight and innovation.

Susan Abbott's blog: The Idea Studio

<http://www.customercrossroads.com>

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