

Going from zero to customer hero means learning to listen

 By Lee Naik

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Research shows the majority of businesses are only 'okay' in the eyes of their customers, so how do they bridge this expectations gap?



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Think you're a customer experience superhero? Think again. Not only are most companies not nearly as beloved by customers as they think they are, there may not even be a company worthy of the superhero mantle.

Forrester's recent customer experience index shows the vast majority of businesses are only 'okay' in the eyes of their customers. Furthermore, while 17% can be called good, companies rated as excellent couldn't even crack the 1% mark.

Why does the expectations gap exist?

It can't be due to lack of awareness or effort – over the years, customer-centricity has become a driving force in just about every boardroom. You can't put it down to a lack of resources either, not when even the most financially successful companies struggle to nurture brand love.

There's something else going on, and it's more subtle than a failure to execute.

Anyone who's worked in software sales might be familiar with 'happy ears' – that moment where the customer says something that convinces you they're going to pull the trigger, and you stop listening properly. You're already thinking of

the commission, so you hear only what you want to hear.

Just as importantly, as leaders, we changed our behaviour to encourage open, honest and non-judgmental discussion with the people around us.

But happy ears don't translate to happy customers. Not when you're too focused on your own gains over their needs. Not when you're staring at the end goal that you miss the context around you.

It's human nature to engage in this kind of thinking, and this is an issue that pervades all sizes of businesses at every level. Confirmation bias can cause you to misinterpret even the most thorough data because you want it to fit your preconceived conclusions.

What's more, it's not something that you can get rid of by throwing enough money at or investing in better business intelligence software. The only way to prevent it is to build up your organisational EQ, so that you can learn to recognise it when it happens and shut it down.

Breaking down the tower

Want to know how high your organisation rates on the emotional intelligence scale? Ask your employees first. How strongly do they feel you're working to meet their needs? If your own employees don't believe you're listening to them, there's no way your customers will feel differently.

I remember when early on after I'd started at TransUnion, we ran an intensive employee engagement survey. The results were a wake-up call – we were bad at listening to our employees and understanding their needs.

Some of the feedback that stuck with me most was about how our leadership was isolated from the day-to-day workings of the business: "You guys are stuck in your ivory towers. Do you really understand what's going on?"

It wasn't an easy thing to hear at the time, but in retrospect, it was the best thing that could have happened. We changed our approach and set off on a journey to become better listeners.

As an organisation, we put in place mechanisms to encourage employee and customer feedback. We set up different channels to monitor people's needs and wants, from Net Promoter Score surveys and chatbots to town halls and physical listening workshops.

We were also very careful to avoid treating any of these mechanisms as simple checkbox exercises. We made sure the feedback we got was actionable, implementing positive changes where we could. Based on what we learned, we changed our product to what customers wanted.

It's the little things

Just as importantly, as leaders, we changed our behaviour to encourage open, honest and non-judgmental discussion with the people around us. We acknowledged that we hadn't always been the best listeners and focused on building an organisational culture that takes responsibility and works to heal relationships.

Every day, I walk around the building and chat to people. I try to get a feel for what's going on in their lives, how their current projects are going, and so on. It's not a formal thing, but it's one way I can make myself more approachable and get a feel for what the general mood in the office is.

Without those missing ingredients – self-awareness, honesty and empathy, practised every day – change wouldn't have been possible. Even if those kinds of behaviours don't come naturally, treat them like a morning meditation – building up a routine every day of getting to know the people around you and challenging your own assumptions.

I'm proud to say we've come a long way since that initial 'ivory tower' perception, but we've got a lot more work ahead of us before we can honestly call ourselves customer heroes.

It's going to take time but as long as we've replaced our happy ears with honest ones, we'll be on the right path.

ABOUT LEE NAIK

Lee Naik is the CEO of TransUnion Africa.

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