

COLUMNS

13 customer experience trends for 2017

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Image courtesy of Neiman Marcus

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Innovation that lets firms reach out and touch their customers is moving at warp speed, building on expectations that were unthinkable just five years ago.

When today's consumer has questions about your product, it is no longer acceptable to wait for the answers they must be addressed in real time or the customer will turn to the next readily available and better option.

How can your organization convert this impatient prospect into a customer and lay the groundwork for loyalty as we know it today? Our baker's dozen of customer experience trends for 2017 suggest a number of great starting points.

1. Companies deep-dive into customer feedback

Customer satisfaction is a deceptively complex concept, and when it comes to techniques for measuring it, one size does not fit all.

The survey-driven Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT), Net Promoter Score (NPS) and Customer Effort Score (CES) each get at different pieces of the puzzle, but all of them oversimplify.

Product and service improvements depend on consumer feedback, but as survey and scoring options multiply and mature, do not accept ratings expressed as single numbers.

Your customer relationships are complex, and if you want to truly understand them as well you should you will find that the devil is in the details.

2. Collecting personal data for the customer's benefit

According to Accenture, 73 percent of consumers prefer to do business with retailers that use their personal information to make the shopping experience more relevant.

Customers will readily share their preferences with firms they trust, but reciprocity requires firms to be both transparent with their policies and practices and focused on providing a tailored customer experience.

3. Chatbots provide new opportunities for self-service

Increasingly, chatbots are being employed to customize the user experience.

Today's chatbot delivers a direct, easy channel for communicating with a brand while making logical guesses about what a customer wants to do based on her previous actions.

Consumers can access flight data, get answers to questions, find out what is on sale, and more all at a reduced cost per contact for businesses.

American Express has a Facebook Messenger chatbot that lets its customers request receipts, track charges and redeem reward points.

Whole Foods offers its patrons the option of using emojis to communicate. If a customer messages an apple emoji, the chatbot furnishes apple-related results that might include, for example, a pie or cobbler recipe.

4. Consumers outsource problem resolution

Visions of long hold times and rude, poorly trained and incomprehensible service agents strike fear in the hearts of many customer service callers.

The dysfunction has grown so acute that it has given birth to a new breed of service, exemplified by GetHuman.

For \$20, GetHuman will contact a company to seek resolution on behalf of the frazzled customer.

At no charge, the service provides steps that the consumer can take to resolve the issue himself or herself.

There is no denying the appeal of GetHuman's service, but if a firm's customers are frequently opting to pay a middleman to resolve complaints, a company needs to rethink its investment in customer support.

5. Virtual reality and holograms reinvent the customer experience

Retailers are beginning to enhance and personalize the in-store shopping experience with holograms and virtual reality displays.

One such application lets customers "try on" an outfit without ever changing clothes, while others create entire virtual environments.

Retailers are being drawn to the technology as they learn how relatively little physical space is required to create dynamic 3D experiences.

Outdoor sports retailer The North Face has fashioned a display that places the customer in the middle of Yosemite National Park, while Lowe's uses Microsoft's HoloLens to let the homeowner design her virtual dream kitchen with every imaginable appliance, bell and whistle.

6. Talk-to-search will be the new norm

Voice input is the way the world is headed, with Siri, Alexa and GoogleNow epitomizing the new generation of the intelligent virtual assistant that continues to evolve and win adherents.

With voice search, consumers are free to multitask, speaking their search commands while cooking, shopping and driving.

Voice search is intuitive, effective and way too cool to resist. Watch for penetration, proliferation and a wave of new applications in 2017.

7. Companies fine-tune customer service to drive positive posts

Businesses love glowing customer reviews posted for everyone to see beyond being persuasive, the legitimate ones are free.

Unfortunately, as consumers become habituated to sharing their impressions of virtually every transaction, the double-edged sword of unbiased feedback can do as much harm as good.

Customer service that is incompetent, inconsistent or simply MIA when the customer needs it is among the chief targets of negative posts, and companies are recognizing the imperative to get it right.

For 2017, businesses will commit significant resources to greasing the review skids while paying a concomitant level of attention where they know it matters most.

8. Ad blocking drives a more selective marketing approach

With consumer use of ad-blocking software on the rise, marketers have been forced to become more relevant.

It is a win-win, because when the advertising that customers see reflects their personal needs and interests, the Web site retailer or manufacturer earns extra credit for caring enough to get it right. Can sales and loyalty be far behind?

site, retailer or manufacturer gains extra credit for coming through to get it right. Can sales and loyalty be far behind.

9. Millennials choose experiences over stuff and expect great service

Beyond its profound cultural influence, the ascendant generation wields tremendous spending power that is expected to accelerate in 2017.

A recent study by the Harris Group reveals that 72 percent of millennials prefer to spend their hard-earned cash on experiences rather than on material goods.

We have also learned that successful transactions with millennials require more than the orderly exchange of money for value.

Attentive customer service is key to earning their loyalty and stimulating a positive social response.

10. Customer experience embraces five senses

The customer experience is all encompassing.

A store today is about more than just the products and service you expect to find there its look, feel and, increasingly, its aroma are all key brand markers.

Proprietary scents are being created for specific brands and retailers and, beyond bricks-and-mortar applications, will carry forward to the packaging of online purchases.

Consumers will recognize the brand before they even open the box.

Lighting, color, scent, texture, sound and taste are all becoming integral aspects of the competitive differentiator.

11. Customers demand realistic versus fuzzy delivery times

Just as Amazon set the standard for same-day order delivery, Uber lets customers track their vehicles in real time.

Sure, the tiny car images are cute, but more than endearing they communicate confidence: that your car is about to show up.

Can you imagine the Uber app predicting the car will arrive within two hours? Of course not, and expectations have been raised across the spectrum.

Telling customers, "Your package is out for delivery" or "The technician is on the way" will not cut it in 2017.

12. Packaging (r)evolution extends the customer experience

Many of us still feel a thrill when an item we ordered arrives at our door, and that feeling is getting a major upgrade in the form of custom package design.

As it turns out, packaging is fundamental to the customer experience, significant for both the brand and retailer.

It is yet another piece of the differentiator puzzle and supports a company's unique signature.

Can you imagine receiving an Apple product packed in a large box filled with Styrofoam peanuts?

13. Companies track and coordinate customer feedback across multiple platforms

Many firms promote their products on a range of platforms, including their own Web sites and any number of relevant social media and retail sites.

Consumers purchase on one site while sometimes posting questions and complaints on another.

It is imperative to track feedback and provide timely answers to preserve customer relationships.

Dollars are well spent investing in technology to achieve coordination and avoid duplication or, worse, a non-response.

According to research from Salesforce, as many as 62 percent of high-performing consumer product retailers claim to have processes for using multichannel feedback to create single snapshots of customers and directly address their concerns.

Those who feel ignored will take their business elsewhere.

KEEPING UP with and emulating what successful competitors are doing to raise the bar on customer service has never been easy, but what is the alternative?

Taking inspiration from trendsetters such as Amazon, Apple, Uber and Zappos, any firm can innovate selectively to create success.

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And remember: Customer service techniques that do not build stronger human connections are ones you can safely walk away from.

Consistently put people, strategies and processes in place that promote deeper listening and make your customer feel like No. 1. That is a winning combination, both for any business and the customer.



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