



ARTICLE

Customer and employee experience in a world transformed by COVID-19

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'Have you sanitised?'

This question was thrown at me by the landlady as I crossed the threshold of a country pub in the UK, soon after lockdown rules had been relaxed. The eyes of everyone turned to me. An imaginary arrow appeared above my head with a sign saying: 'THE MAN WHO HASN'T SANITISED'. The transformation from visiting customer to social pariah was painful and immediate.



It's clear that the journey to something that resembles what we remember as normality will be protracted and uncertain – and that government restrictions and guidance will change and change again. One of the many challenges created by COVID-19 is this – how do organisations reshape their customer and employee experience to conform to new rules and regulations in a way that maintains staff engagement – and that provides customers and clients with a service and an experience they are happy (and willing) to pay for?

Before trying to answer that question, let's look at the different components of that challenge in greater detail. The first is around setting the right expectations at the first interaction.

DIGITAL

Often, especially these days, the first interaction(s) that customers have with a brand is online. Simple, intuitive and efficient digital experiences are what win – demonstrating to customers from the beginning and at each and every touchpoint along that way that you care and are on their side. Use the digital experience to also help prepare them for the new (potentially) physical one... what should they expect? What precautions are you taking? Have you changed your steps of service or what you provide upon arrival in a way that they can better prepare themselves for in advance?

PHYSICAL SAFETY

This is a duty of care. Social distancing, a rigorous cleaning regime, a one-way flow directing the movement of people, the use of masks and, yes - sanitising – organisations have a duty to deploy versions of all these things to ensure the physical safety of their staff and customers.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Mitigating the risks and addressing the threat of physical infection is vital – but what impact do the measures taken have on the next component of the challenge – psychological safety? Do those measures provide reassurance that everything is under control and that a safe environment has been created? Or do they heighten anxiety and concern? The DANGER OF DEATH signs placed near cliff edges or electricity sub-stations send a clear message – but don't necessarily make you feel comfortable and at ease. How do you ensure that the precautions you put in place are effective – but that they do not feel intrusive, alarming and invasive to the people affected by them?

VALUE FOR MONEY

Lockdown made brutally clear just how many businesses depend for their survival on discretionary expenditure. No one has to go to a bar, restaurant or cinema, stay in a hotel or book a flight to go on holiday. For the long weeks of lockdown, hardly anyone was doing any of those things. Now, as we emerge from the depths of the crisis, every service provider has to reshape the experience they offer to entice their customers to return. But how much am I willing to pay for an experience that feels diminished and depersonalised?

Take, as an example, a weekend break in a hotel. Post-COVID, the checking-in process is done online, I am given an App to download which gives me access to my room. Fine. That is efficient and COVID-secure – but so far, I haven't had human contact – until someone informs me I have gone the wrong way through the one-way flow system. In my room there is a greeting pack – contained in a sealed brown envelope that looks like the ones used to transport specimens in hospitals. Before I enter the lounge, signs remind me to sanitise, using the dispensers provided. Another sign on the table tells me that, because of the virus, it is not possible to provide magazines and

newspapers – but that the links below will give me access to the periodicals of my choice. After a week of Zoom meetings and Skype calls the last thing I want to do is gaze into a screen.

The hotel is well-intentioned and trying hard to fulfil its duty of care. But do I want to pay for an experience where I feel that infection control is the dominant priority, that I am being processed rather than looked after and where my dominant emotions are irritation and anxiety?



There is an 80% increase in revenue for businesses that focus on improving customer experience (Forbes, 2019).



62% of customers are willing to pay more for good customer service – and even more for convenience (Forbes/Hyken, 2020).

RECOGNITION HUNGER

This is a human need identified in the psychology of human relationships and is central to the next component of the challenge. Each one of us has a fundamental need for our presence to be acknowledged and for our unique individuality to be recognised. Psychologists talk about 'strokes' as the basic units of social interaction. Stroking is any act, not necessarily a physical act such as a handshake, that recognises another human being. COVID-19 has, of course, made the giving and receiving of strokes risky and problematic.

Infection control means that all physical interactions are now socially unacceptable. Almost all of the human communication in which strokes are given is now mediated through technology. The immediacy and the fluency of the complex exchange of strokes that make up human interaction is therefore greatly limited. I can't read your body language as you are minimised to a small square or a set of initials at the bottom of my screen. Your facial expression is half-hidden behind a mask. Our conversation is disrupted as we cut across each other's contributions on our Zoom call.

CONTEXT

You book an online appointment with your doctor. Your partner and family are all at home so you go to the privacy of your bedroom. You take off your trousers so your doctor can assess the progress of your injured knee. And suddenly it all feels strangely and uncomfortably intimate. Removing the boundary that lies between public and professional space – and the space that is personal, private and belongs to us creates many problems.

Working at home means living at work. Kitchens and bedrooms become offices. The signals that make, for example, a patient feel comfortable and safe in a hospital – the reception desk, the consulting room, the medical equipment, have all been removed in a tele-medicine consultation.

FROM CHALLENGE TO ACTION

The implementation of physical safety measures, the difficulty of creating a sense of psychological safety, the depersonalisation of the customer experience, the reduction in the number – and the decline in the quality – of the social ‘touches’ that satisfy our hunger for recognition, the invasion of personal space by professional and commercial activity – all these things are part of the challenge faced by organisations in a post-COVID world – how to reshape their customer and employee experience to conform to new rules and regulations in a way that maintains staff engagement – and that provides customers and clients with a service and an experience they are happy to pay for.

Here are some of the solutions we are developing (and advice we are sharing) with our clients:



Humanise your digital experience

Maximise the presence of the human voice. Design every experience with empathy. Make the customer feel empowered, that they have autonomy to assert and choices to make. For each touch point, challenge yourself – how can we make this moment as effective and as human as possible? How can we make this feel like service and not process?



69% of digital experience professionals report that the digital customer experience has become more important to their customers because of COVID-19 (Fullstory, 2020).



Make it iterative and gather feedback from the frontlines

Do this again and again because the approach you tried last week was only partially successful and you will need to make further adjustments. Engaging staff in solving problems and in evolving your revised service offer and value proposition produces better results and also significantly increases the likelihood of buy in.



Insert your brand voice into your safety routines

Define your COVID-19 compliance protocols – and then humanise the way they are implemented – with a light touch and with a dash of humour.



In a survey of more than 6,000, consumers say the best action brands can take to receive positive marks during the COVID-19 pandemic is to keep customers (58%) and employees (55%) safe (Social Media Link, 2020).



Map customer and employee journeys

Map customer and employee journeys to identify every touch point between your organisation and the customers or clients you serve. Identify the moments that matter most and focus on (and invest in) those.



Companies that excel at customer experience have 1.5 times more engaged employees than less customer-focused companies (Forbes/Qualtrics, 2020).



\$11 Billion is lost annually due to employee turnover (Qualtrics, 2020).



Regarding brand communication, 89% of respondents said brands should provide reliable, accurate information during the COVID-19 pandemic (Twitter User Survey, 2020).



Be adept at quickly turning customer service models into training programmes

Be adept at quickly turning customer service models into training programmes that give your staff the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to succeed in this new world.

One way to think of the approach needed in the new world is this – seek to create an atmosphere of abundance not constraint. If all your customers, clients or staff members see are the constraints imposed by COVID-19 they are unlikely to feel satisfied or engaged. If they feel a sense of abundance – in the warmth and generosity of every human interaction, in the kindness and attention that is given, in the anticipating and meeting of individual needs – you have every chance of thriving in a world that has been massively and permanently changed.

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