Five Ways to Improve Your Customer Experience

By Tim Young

Elsewhere in this issue, I explored the question of what CEM is and isn't. I freely admit, however, that that particular question is purely semantic in nature. At the end of the day, what's important is improving the experience of your end users. Fortunately, there are a million ways of doing just that. I wanted to take a moment to run through a few of our favorites.

1) You've got the data: Use it.

The beauty of being a service provider, and not an over-the-top play or some other interested party, is that you've got an unbelievable amount of information at your disposal. You know and understand where customers go, what their usage patterns are, and lots of other useful bits and pieces about their behavior. But what's the point of having that data if you aren't putting it to work for you?

"Despite the fact that the carriers have invaluable customer data at their disposal, they remain stubbornly network-focused rather than using this information to become more customer-centric organizations," said Brian Carroll, CEO of solution provider Arantech. While many operators comb through the data in real time, looking to find and fix faults as quickly as possible, there are other ways that information can be used. "This data can provide the operator with an endless stream of business

intelligence," Carroll said, "which can be filtered across all departments within the business from operations, to sales and marketing and customer care."

"Reporting tools must work at a business level, so managers don't have to wade through reams of technical data," said Richard Thomas, CEO of network monitoring vendor NetEvidence. "They ensure that an IT system (in and out of the cloud) is a fully auditable environment by providing total visibility of all services such as networks, VoIP, email and CRM."

2) Don't try to be everything to everyone.

One of the truly great customer service stories making the rounds these days is Peter Shankman's tale about Morton's Steakhouse delivering a steak to Newark Airport because he joked about wanting one on Twitter. (It's really worth a read, and you can find it here.)

To summarize, Shankman, a social media entrepreneur of some note, tweeted about how nice it would be if Morton's met him at the airport with a porterhouse in two hours, directly referenced the Morton's Twitter handle in the note, and moved on with his life. When he landed in Newark, a tuxedoed waiter from Morton's met him with a steak and a smile. It was a total surprise, and Shankman insists it wasn't a stunt and that he wasn't in on the secret.

It's a cool story. No doubt about it. But as customer experience consultant Bruce Temkin noted on his own blog in the aftermath of the steak surprise, this story is great marketing, but isn't really about customer experience at all. It's a marketing story. Morton's can't send steak-laden waiters to every airport filled

with hungry travelers. In fact, they'd be wise to never do that exact thing ever again. There's little added utility in doing so. It was a great story, but it's in no way generalizable.

Shankman calls his steakapalooza the, "best customer service story ever told," and it is the best story, but it isn't the best customer service. The best customer service is repeatable, reliable, and lacks flair. Theatrics are bad. Trust is better.

And customers don't expect Superman. According to Yankee Group survey data, the most important ingredients, in overall customer experience, are competitive pricing (62%) and network service quality (53%). 87% want a call center agent who has the authority to fix the customer's problem, or can get that authority quickly. This isn't high art. These are basic expectations.

3) Don't Ignore the Obvious.

In keeping with the above, remember that many customers are so unaccustomed to getting exactly what they want, and pay for on a consistent basis, that when they actually get it, they're floored. However, as an industry, we like to think that we've maxed out the customer experience somehow. That devices are already so thoroughly taxing the network that we couldn't possibly give more.

But is that the case? To illustrate, I give you a story related to me by Anssi Tauriainen, CEO of Aito Technologies, a customer analytics software provider:

"I broke my smartphone few weeks ago during my holiday, and had to switch back to a traditional mobile phone until the time the smart phone was repaired. To my big surprise, it turned out to be a great experience. Voice calls were always crisp and clear. No more dropping calls. And I had to recharge the phone only once per week. At a rational level I understand this is not caused by my operator, but it didn't take many days for me to start blaming them again for everything once I got my smartphone back. To me it proved that there is still a lot of work to be done by operators and device manufacturers to unlock the full potential of the new technology."

These things aren't always within the control of the service provider, but it does underscore one of the many ways in which the customer experience can take a wrong turn.

Customer reactions aren't always logical. Sometimes they're visceral. So it's often best to keep things simple. "Although as a Service Provider you're fiercely proud of your network and the technology it's built from, accept that your customers are simply not interested, said Thomas. "Deliver what you do in the simplest way possible, express your services, and service levels in business terms, and hide the technology."

4) Know when to carry your customers and know when to let them walk.

Let's go back to the example of Morton's delivering the steak to the airport: The customer directly requested (albeit jokingly) that the restaurant deliver an ornate meal, and the restaurant did so. But what if the customer hadn't asked for all that? What if the customer wanted to go get his own steak?

Joshua Biel, Director of Vertical Marketing for the Service Provider arm of virtualization software vendor Parallels, reminds us that one way to enhance the customer experience, "would be to make sure that robust customer control panels are in place that let customers do such things as make changes to existing services, add (or remove) new services, and pay bills." Self-service is a fine tool for enhancing the customer experience. I can't speak for everyone, but

I know that I refuse to contact a customer service rep unless I absolutely must. If it comes to having to make a call, I'm usually already irritated and probably no fun to talk to. I'll opt for self-service in technical matters 9 times out of ten.

And finally,

5) Communicate

I mean come on. You're a communications company. Would it kill you to reach out to your customers now and again?

Jokes aside, it's amazing what a simple text alert can do to enliven the customer experience.

A text message sent to a customer alerting him that he is roaming onto an international tower. An opt-in location-based notification for a customer letting her know that her hotel is just a block away from her favorite clothing store.

And sometimes this might mean a highly targeted marketing campaign. "More often than not, operators push out blanket marketing campaigns that may only appeal to a small segment of their subscriber base and risk alienating the majority of their customers," said Carroll. "However, by analyzing the customer data, operators could form an accurate profile of each subscriber based on what services they're using, their device, network status and location."

Customer experience enhancement doesn't have to be magical. It just needs to be consistent, clear, reasonable, and accessible.