

## Are they being served?

Roger Sant, vice president at Maritz Research Europe, argues that we need to transform the way we go about measuring and managing the customer experience.



Customer experience management is about closing the loop between the feedback customers give and the experiences they get. To do this, the feedback has to be acted upon - it needs to bring about change within an organisation leading to an improved customer experience.

But of the three main parties involved in this process - customers, frontline teams and insight departments - none appears to be satisfied with the current state of affairs. Customers are becoming more and more frustrated at being asked to fill out long, boring and often (in their eyes) irrelevant questionnaires. Surveys are not passing the 'what's in it for me' test - people want to know how their data is being used and what they are going to get in return. More than anything, they want to tell us about the things they think are important, not the things we want them to talk about. And since they can now do this via any number of chat rooms, review sites and social networks in a shared and open manner, why should they take the time to fill out questionnaires?

Meanwhile, frontline teams and customer-facing staff (in retail outlets, call centres, or running website interfaces) don't always feel that the customer feedback reports and information they receive is useful. Far too often these teams focus on 'alternative' ways of improving their scores (mystery customer spotting, offering free car mats in return for a perfect score, and 'misleading' the details of dissatisfied customers) rather than actually improving the customer experience. In these instances, market research is failing.

**“Brand and experience insight teams are inundated with information from many different sources. They want less data and more direction”**

As for brand and experience insight teams (my clients), they are inundated with information from many different sources. They want less data and more direction. They want to make more use of the data they've got by integrating and aligning all their results and findings.

With the advent of the digital age and all the information sharing that goes with that, businesses are losing control of customer feedback. People share their views about brands and experiences openly, for all to see, and both potential customers and front line teams can access this information freely. The ways we go about collecting and collating information need to change, as do the roles and responsibilities of customer insight departments.

## Ten things you can do today

In an insights utopia, customers would want to give feedback in the understanding that they would get some kind of return on their investment. The feedback process itself would contribute to a positive experience in an open and honest manner.

End users would wait with eagerness and anticipation for the feedback to arrive. They would value it and act upon it to improve the customer experience.

Insight teams would operate in an environment where all information sources are integrated, aligned and distilled down to core messages that lead to consistent action. All components of a brand - all its images and experiences - would be linked back to business outcome metrics such as share and revenue to understand the expected return on any investments that were recommended.

That's our vision of what the next generation of customer experience management should look like. The next question is, how we can move towards this vision? Here are 10 things you could be doing today:

### 1. Web harvesting

Scrape the web. Find out what people are saying about your brand on review sites, social networks, blogs and chat rooms. Classify the comments as positive or negative and create your own 'net recommendation' score. You can easily get started by picking a dozen or so important websites and doing this manually, or you can use text analysis software to analyse thousands of different sites. But be careful - you should not look at this in isolation as online sentiment can be unrepresentative of your target market. Use convergence analysis to see how these comments line up with other sources of information.

### 2. Text analysis

There have been huge advances in text analysis software over the last couple of years. A number of programs are now very effective at 'quantifying' unstructured text information by associating comments to brands, identifying them as positive or negative and classifying them by topic. These techniques are invaluable, not only for web harvesting but also for gleaning more useful information from open-ended questions, complaints data and any other form of free text feedback. This allows us to make more extensive and effective use of open comments in surveys, which in turn gives us more opportunity to let our customers talk about what they want to talk about.

### 3. Adaptive questioning techniques

Most of us have filled out questionnaires that asked us to rate 10-15 attributes relating to an occurrence about which we remember very little. We have to accept that sometimes people don't remember anything remotely good or bad about an experience, in fact sometimes people don't remember much about it at all. In these cases we need to skip the detail. One example of an adaptive questioning technique is to ask about memorable moments. Only if someone can remember something good or bad about an experience do we ask for the details. This will inevitably lead to a lot of 'missing' data but I argue that when we do force people to rate things they have little opinion about, the data we collect is misleading anyway - it clouds the findings. Furthermore it frustrates customers and puts them off completing other questionnaires in the future.

### 4. Look at the bigger picture

It is a combination of communication-driven images and direct experiences that influences people's choice and loyalty decisions and their behaviour. So why do so many companies treat brand and experience independently? Organisations that silo their communications and operations departments (and their brand and experience research studies) are not acting in a customer-focused way. Two different departments may manage brand communications and service delivery, but to the customer it's all one company. Only when we look at the bigger picture, combining brand and experience in the same analysis, can we properly determine the drivers of profitable behaviour and create more accurate ROI models. We need to understand the extent to which brand images and direct experiences influence overall opinions. To get started, try running a workshop involving cross functional teams (marketing, operations, HR, training) to discuss interdependencies and common goals. Bring along reports from both brand and experience studies to compare and contrast.

### 5. Understand your brand delivery gap

Are you keeping your brand promises? One of the consequences of separate communication and operation silos is that many companies aren't. If people don't believe that you are delivering on your promises, any further marketing spend on advertising and communicating them will be wasted until the experience has been fixed. There is a strong argument to prioritise experience before you make any more promises that you can't keep. Once you understand your brand delivery gap you can prioritise investments between communications and operations, as well as within them.

### 6. Create a common framework for categorising information

One of the greatest challenges to integrating information from different sources is that it is often organised and categorised in different ways. We need to create a common harmonised framework so that we can categorise information from any source in to the same buckets. For example, airline experiences could be broadly categorised as booking, check-in, boarding, in-flight, 'de-planing', luggage collection and timeliness. Sub-categories might include ease/hassle, timing/queuing and staff-related issues. This simple task, if well thought through, enables a comparison between survey

data, complaints, web harvests, feedback from frontline teams and any other source of information about customer experiences.

#### 7. Convergence analysis

Now that you have created your framework, start making comparisons. Which insights are coming out consistently across all different channels? When there is a convergence of findings we can be sure we have uncovered a critical issue that is in need of attention. But not all information should contribute the same weight of importance to our overall conclusions. Sources need to be scored on robustness, representativeness and clarity of message. Robustness is about our confidence in the message - is it from a few dozen people or a few thousand? Representativeness is to do with the type of people that the message comes from - do they speak for all of your target market or only for a small minority? Finally, is it a clear message that is easy to interpret and agree on, or a blurred message that could lead to different interpretations and debate? Even a subjective scoring on these three factors, coupled with a common coding framework, enables a convergence analysis that can break down a significant number of barriers to the successful integration of information.

#### 8. Don't report, communicate

A client said to me recently that doing the research, writing the report and giving the presentation were only 25% of the challenge - the other 75% relates to communicating the findings internally and getting them acted upon. Alternative channels such as newsletters, videos, workshops and training sessions are better ways of communicating than a research debrief. Creating online versions of these that people can access on demand is also beneficial. Find out what the end users of the information get that they like, what they get that they don't use, and what they don't get that they wish they did. Different people will inevitably want different things, so be prepared to create a range of reports and communications.

#### 9. Share data publicly

The concept of publishing ratings and findings for everyone to see is a contentious issue, but it is something that is going to happen whether we like it or not. People are already sharing their views and opinions online, rating and ranking brands on review sites, social networks, blogs and chat rooms; and marketers have little or no control over this. Some companies have already reacted by putting car dealership scores on their website or by displaying branch satisfaction scores in their retail banks. If we don't start sharing more information in a controlled manner, then it will simply get out in an uncontrolled way instead.

## 10. Blueprint the customer experience

'Blueprinting' is about mapping out the links between aspects of operations, communications, employees, customers and financials. It plays an important role at both the beginning and end of an evaluation process and can be as simple or as complex as we want to make it. The process starts with financial goals in terms of revenue, profit or market share. We then agree the behaviours we are looking for to achieve these goals - reduced defection, new customer acquisition, take-up of new products and services. Next we agree what experiences and brand opinions people need to have for them to exhibit these desired behaviours. This cascades down to internal processes: what do we need to do in terms of operations, communications and staff-customer interactions to deliver the right images, experiences and opinions? Finally we agree ownership and empowerment for each of these processes.

To thrive, insight departments need to become the gatekeepers of all a company's information. This means collecting and collating findings from many sources and integrating them to uncover key themes. It means distilling these down to core and consistent messages and communicating them effectively. Insight teams need to be part of a new generation of customer experience management in which all stakeholders are happy to participate, and from which all get something in return.