Five ‘No Regrets’ Moves for Superior Customer Engagement

By Tom French, Laura LaBerge, and Paul Magill

No organization can avoid coming to grips with the rapidly evolving behavior of consumers and business customers. They check prices at a keystroke and are increasingly selective about which brands share their lives. They form impressions from every encounter and post withering online reviews.

These changes present significant organizational challenges, as well as opportunities. The biggest is that all of us have become marketers. In many companies, the marketing function is best placed to orchestrate customer engagement for the entire organization. To do so, the function must be pervasive—able to influence touch points it doesn’t directly control.

The spectrum of organizational choices is broader than ever, and companies are struggling to determine the appropriate role of marketing for their business. What’s more, senior executives often view any internal effort by the marketing function as a “land grab.”

The five “no regrets” moves described below help senior executives to move beyond their function-by-function view of customer engagement and to improve the coordination of activities across the broad range of touch points they must care about. By widening the lens companies use to view customer-engagement needs, enabling more rapid responses, and building internal lines of communication, these steps create nimbler organizations with more pervasive marketing.

1. Hold a Customer-Engagement Summit

Almost all companies have annual or semiannual business-planning processes that bring senior managers together from units and functions to discuss strategies and objectives. Yet few undertake a similar process to discuss how to engage with the lifeblood of all companies: customers.

Hold such a summit, with a participant list that starts right at the top and cuts across units and functions. The focus of such a summit is customer engagement, which should not be confused with the customer experience; engagement goes beyond managing the experience at touch points to include all the ways companies motivate customers to invest in an ongoing relationship with a product or brand.

The summit must address three things. First, line and staff managers have to align on the vision for engagement: what relationship do you want with your customers? Second, the summit’s participants should coordinate the activities required to reach and engage customers across the full range of touch points. Finally, a company ought to agree on the elements of the customer-engagement ecosystem that should be undertaken in-house and those that will involve outside partners.

2. Create a Customer Engagement Council

The purpose is to bring together all primary forms of engagement—marketing, communications, service, sales, product management, and so on—to coordinate tactics across touch points in a more
timely manner. This council, which should be an operational and decision-making body, must translate the findings of the customer engagement summit into specific actions at individual touch points. To accomplish this goal, the council’s membership needs to be large enough to ensure that all key players are represented but small enough to make decisions efficiently.

The second consideration is how regularly the council should meet. The frequency of such meetings generally is based on what key engagement activities the group is driving and their cycle time. The third consideration involves inputs and support: the council must make fact-based decisions, so it needs information on everything from priority touch points to customer behavior and the moves of competitors.

Finally, such a council must have a customer-engagement charter. To reduce the risk of gaps, rework, and turf wars, everyone in the organization needs clarity about decision rights over touch points and the key processes that affect them.

3. Appoint a ‘Chief Content Officer’

Companies need to create a supply chain of increasingly sophisticated and interactive content to feed consumer demand for information and engagement, not to mention a mechanism for managing the content consumers themselves generate. The emergence of companies-as-publishers demands the appointment of a chief content officer (CCO).

The CCO role is designed to provide the on-brand, topical, and provocative content needed to engage customers. The CCO must develop and manage all aspects of the supply chain for content, ranging from deciding where and how it’s sourced to overseeing the external agencies and in-house creative talent generating it.

4. Create a ‘Listening Center’

Engagement is a conversation, yet companies are increasingly excluded from many of the most important discussions. More social and other media are available to mobilize your fans and opponents than ever before, and any interaction between a customer and your company could be the match that starts a viral fire. In this environment, companies should establish listening centers that monitor what is being said about their organizations, products, and services on social media, blogs, and other online forums.

5. Challenge your Total Customer-Engagement Budget

Companies can now communicate with customers much more productively: digital and social channels, for example, are radically cheaper (and sometimes more effective) than traditional media communications or face-to-face sales visits. When you make trade-offs across functions, you can free large amounts of money to invest elsewhere; if the experience of customers is so positive that they voluntarily serve as advocates for your brand, for example, can you reduce advertising expenditures?

Add up what you spend on customer engagement—in areas such as sales, service, operations, and product Management— as well as in marketing. Then identify all the radically cheaper approaches you could take and ask, for example, how you would take them if your budget was 15 percent of its current size or how a competitor in an emerging market would approach this problem. Such exercises help to break the ingrained assumptions and conventional wisdom that creep into organizations and to highlight overlooked opportunities.

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