

GOOD ENOUGH IS NO LONGER GOOD ENOUGH

The race to own customer experience is heating up as companies increasingly recognise the importance of delivering memorable experiences that will help them stand out from their competition. It is also equally important to recognise that treating your employees well is a necessary first step to providing a better customer experience.

By Prof Hanlie Smuts, Jacques Brosens and Rendani Kruger

We all live and work in a global economy. Organisations, more than ever before, have to stand up to competitors from all around the world. Despite notorious recent efforts towards protectionism and isolation, the globalisation genie has escaped and

it is unlikely that it will be forced back into the bottle. Furthermore, people's expectations are evolving.

Products and services can no longer be 'good enough' or 'functional'. In an age where consumers typically have countless alternatives to choose from, one cannot differentiate your offering on

the basis of value proposition alone. We have entered the era of experience.

THE EXPERIENCE DRIVEN VALUE CHAIN

People judge products or services, and by extension the brands that deliver these products or services, according to the ex-

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periences that they bring about. In order to survive and grow, organisations must work out how to deliberately engineer engaging experiences for key stakeholders. Organisations that focus merely on presenting utility, i.e. market offerings that are useful by way of fulfilling some needs, while they leave the perceived usability and pleasurability of products, services, and other points of interaction to chance, face the risk of negative word of mouth and reduced competitiveness.

Experiences are lived and perceptions about your organisation are shaped continuously. The question is whether your organisation is in control by purposefully and proactively staging those experiences or whether you build something, wrap it up in brand regalia, and hope for the best. Experience management is the activity where organisations measure and improve the various experiences they provide, not only to customers, but also to all their stakeholders like vendors, suppliers, employees, and shareholders. Experience can be defined as ‘the take-away impression formed by people’s encounters with products, services and businesses — a perception produced when humans consolidate sensory information.’ Experience management encompasses customer experience as well as other activities, such as employee experience, product user experience, and brand experience.

Customer Experience (CX) has received significant attention over the last decade, with scholars and business leaders alike reporting on its numerous commercial benefits. Research has shown that when customers are not only satisfied but also delighted, positive word of mouth and repurchase intention will follow, which will result in loyalty. Designing experiences which aim for satisfied, delighted and loyal customers have material benefits for an organisation, namely increased revenue, reduced costs, competitive advantage, and easier, less expensive maintenance of existing products, services, or processes. A far less hyped area is Employee Experience (EX), that is, the set of perceptions and



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responses that result from the interaction, or anticipated interaction, with products, services, events, and organisational environments by employees. Improving the quality of employees’ experiences when interacting with your organisation is, however, just as important as delivering positive CX. Imagine the following example: A call centre operator talks to hundreds of customers everyday.

He is tasked with assisting customers with account related questions and must provide any relevant information needed to appropriately handle customer enquiries. If this operator works with a poorly designed information system or within an uncomfortably cold office or is being treated badly by colleagues, how can he be expected to communicate with customers in a way that will make their experiences delightful? EX unquestionably affects CX. Similarly, the experiences of vendors, key partners, and other stakeholders can indirectly have an impact on CX. CX is but the last link in a value chain brimming with human experiences. Negative upstream experiences will certainly lead to negative downstream experiences and eventually unhappy customers.

TOTAL EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT

To create and manage experiences, businesses must assess, build, integrate, and continuously improve the interaction points that influence quality perceptions of stakeholders in a heterogeneous landscape across multiple channels. This requires three broad pursuits:

- 1. Measuring and analysing experiences to identify experience gaps.**
Total experience management starts with demarcating the stakeholders whose experiences you would like to handle more deliberately and determine where each of these stakeholders interacts with the organisation. High-level journey mapping is also typically employed to understand how



stakeholders move between different touch points. It is then important to keep your finger on the pulse as regards the experiences of these groups of people by collecting and analysing data about their emotions, beliefs and sentiments from a holistic perspective. A range of platforms exist that are becoming increasingly accurate in understanding these human perceptions by applying artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, and statistical modelling methods. Holistic experience analysis and measurement will allow you to discover experience shortcomings. These areas where people are not adequately satisfied or pleased are also called experience gaps or pain points.

2. Prioritising experience gaps based on brand promises.

It is not necessarily the goal of experience management to eliminate absolutely all pain points and redress every bone of contention that is raised by respondents. Most organisations define themselves by a finite set of brand promises. Coca-Cola wants to inspire moments of optimism and uplift. Starbucks wants to be the 'third place' in our daily lives. Nike wants to bring in-

spiration and innovation to every athlete in the world. The success of experience management comes down to balancing the need to fill experience gaps with the demand such an undertaking will place on resources. It has even been argued that removing all pain points would make experiences monotonous

and forgettable. For that reason, the endeavours to eradicate pain points should be prioritised based on your brand's promise. Accordingly, experiences that directly or indirectly impact commitments your brand has made to customers, employees, vendors, and other stakeholders respectively, should receive priority.



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3. Filling principal experience gaps through Experience Design

Experience Design (XD) is an umbrella term for the practice of designing products, services, processes, events, journeys, and environments rooted in human-centered principles. XD aims to enhance the quality of the user experience, pursues culturally sensitive solutions and avoids touch point discrimination. XD is a multidisciplinary affair that combines various forms of design, psychology, architecture, research, and engineering. All touch points in your organisation are not the same, and so the skills required to design solutions will not be the same for all experience problems. Notwithstanding, the general approach and principles persist. The principles are:

- The needs, goals, expectations, tasks and environments of the people who will be interacting with the touch points are clearly understood.
- Real users are involved throughout the design and development process.
- Solutions are guided and refined by continuous user evaluations and feedback.
- The design and development


process is iterative.

- Designers and developers take a holistic or integrated view of the problem and address the whole experience.
- The design and development team includes multidisciplinary skills and perspectives.

INDUSTRY 4.0, MEET AFRICA

When we think Africa, we think fascinating diversity. We, unfortunately, also have to think inequality. Industry 4.0 refers to the union of technologies propelled by IoT, augmented decision-making and leading-edge automation. Value chains are being transformed to unlock groundbreaking benefits and the ability to stage remarkable experiences. Advances in artificial intelligence, data analytics, and networking protocols, standards and connected devices have given rise to the promise of a smarter future.

However, 110 million people are still unconnected in sub-Saharan Africa, according to GSMA. Broadband connectivity in South Africa and Nigeria, two of the most advanced economies on the continent, lingers at 50% and 36% respectively. In terms of application, solutions are often designed without due consideration of the diversity of user groups, especially in African markets. These challenges imply that the great benefits of Industry 4.0 will not be accessible to a significant portion of the African population. Only people who have access to the necessary infrastructure and who happen to be similar to the users subjectively imagined by designers will be privy to the envisioned experiences.

Experience management can and should be adopted not only by organisations that wish to remain relevant and competitive in a rapidly evolving world, but also by those who support inclusive advancement. 

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