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Book Reviews

Profit or Pain from Your User Experience

Alan Meekings, Chris Russell, Michelle Fuller and Wendy Hewson
Hewson Group Consulting, 2003; 126pp; softback; £175 (members'
discount of £50 available); ISBN: 1-898-1-150-06-0

A research report that concludes with a quotation from Radio 4's cult programme *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*, and encourages readers to try out the 'loo roll' test when evaluating the design of grocery retailer home-delivery websites. . . surely, this must be a source of new perspectives and insights helping readers understand why e-commerce so often creates intense frustration and miserably fails to meet users' expectations! More importantly, the authors' style immediately reassures readers that this will be a source of practical guidance and common-sense advice, rather than a dense academically orientated text.

The basis of the report is extensive, and international. The attitudes on website usage data are drawn from surveys conducted by eDigitalResearch: a continuous research panel of online users of retail and travel sites — 500,000 interviews in the UK; 10,000 in-depth UK mystery-shopper experiences; and interviews through a global panel undertaken in July 2002. Added to this is an analysis by Doculabs of 3.7 million service requests to 200 US businesses. All of this is overlaid with the experiences of Landmark Consulting in the fields of contact centres and e-commerce, and of the Hewson Group, creators of the European Centre for CRM Research and leaders in research on internet services.

The aim of the research, as stated by the authors, is to look at the user experience from end to end, and provide three distinct and interrelated perspectives — those of the end user, of the designer and from within the organisation. Underpinning this are two key objectives: make the case, both strategically and financially, for improving the typical end-to-end user experience of internet sites and services; and highlight the elements of current best practice, in terms of design and management practice, illustrating the gap between the best and the norm.

These are very worthy aims and objectives, so does the report live up to the promise?

Well, I think it does. Not only does the report use a very clear and logical structure, representing the end-to-end experience, but it finishes with a very detailed description of what constitutes best practice for each stage in the pipeline, liberally laced with examples taken from real sites (the authors have taken the mature decision not to name and shame the worst performers — but I'm sure readers will spot some obvious cases!).

The authors present a very convincing case to organisations about the economic impact of the 'leaky pipe' — the extent to which valuable customers are allowed simply to melt away into the night when faced with the web experience. Not only is the overall point forcibly made, but the authors have attempted to calculate the exponential damage at each and every point in the 'pipe' and identified those points in the chain where

Practical

**International
coverage**

The best vs the norm

Examples

The 'leaky pipe'

‘repairs’ will most benefit the customers and the organisation. The results suggest that some management should be called to account by their shareholders for wilful neglect of key company assets — the customers. For example, the authors estimate that the average organisation in the grocery or travel markets could increase sales by 54 per cent and 33 per cent respectively, whereas the worst-case scenario, in the grocery sector, could uplift sales by a whopping 480 per cent!

Online loyalty

The research also demonstrates that many online users are very site loyal, with no less than 90 per cent of shoppers regularly using five sites or less, and with three-quarters of UK users spending no less than £2,020 with their top three sites. How many organisations realise this, and do they pay this sufficient attention? I think not enough.

Word of mouth

And, as the authors point out, there can be extensive consequential loss for an organisation that delivers a poor customer experience. First, there is the obvious loss of future business from this individual through this channel, but as important is the impact of these customers telling others about their experiences, and the damage also inflicted on other channels — customers dissatisfied with an e-experience tend then to boycott the organisation’s other channels as well. Can companies spot this happening? Again, I do not think so.

Contact centre requirements

A further key, and common-sense, point is that the online service needs adequate support back at the ranch — for example, an efficient e-mail answering service; call centre back-up for those who need to have a query resolved; facilities to take orders from those who may not altogether trust the security of web transactions; provision of the very necessary after-sales service. Hence the term ‘contact centre’ to service and support electronic and telecoms channels. But, as the report illustrates, many organisations have conspicuously failed to link the after-sales services to the customer interface channels.

The report also draws an interesting analogy between manufacturing and service delivery in terms of getting it right. First, there is a need to determine accountability for delivery of the end-to-end user experience; secondly, involve front-line staff in looking at the experience from a user’s perspective; thirdly, ensure that there is closed-loop feedback in place; finally, review the processes to align them with demand, eliminate waste and ensure a smooth flow of work.

Why is the online experience so painful?

So, we now have a very detailed analysis of the customer experience online, why it often leads to frustration among customers, what the financial damage is to the organisations that do not get it right and a road-map plus tools to get it right. The key question I have after reading this report is why do so many organisations find it so difficult to provide site users with a quality and effective level of customer service — why do organisations have a blind spot when it comes to this channel? You are left wondering who really cares about the core asset of any business, the customer — where is the customer champion at board level?

While the economic argument for providing service online as a channel is irrefutable for most organisations, the additional cost of going the extra mile to produce the difference between a bad and good site is negligible in terms of the initial investment in the channel. But it seems to me that

Cost minimisation

businesses either want to take the maximum savings from other channels when switching to online, or have no desire to develop this new channel from a user perspective — that is, it is simply a cost-minimisation decision. This report clearly underlines the shortsightedness, nay stupidity, of taking this approach in terms of lost business — from new prospects and current customers, and the loss of customers who at the click of a mouse are engaging with more enlightened competitors.

Why no consumer research?

So, where is the input from the marketers? No marketing team of any standing would surely dream of launching a new product or major advertising campaign without conducting extensive consumer research, so why are channels such as online and contact centres launched on unsuspecting customers by big corporates without similar investment? Maybe the report should also be required reading for finance directors.

B2B is under-represented

But beware — once you have read this report there is no excuse for getting it wrong!

Any criticisms after reading the report? Well, I have a couple. First, its focus is on business to consumer when much of the initial investment in e-commerce has been in business to business, where whole sectors are becoming increasingly dependent on this channel. Business-to-business transactions in the economy outnumber those with the consumer by a phenomenal extent. Are there points that B2C could learn from the B2B sector, or do B2B companies frustrate their customers to an equal extent? Common sense leads me to think that they do not, as this could lead to losing significant customers. . . but I could be wrong!

Poor illustrations

Secondly, there is liberal use of screen prints to illustrate best practice within section 5 of the report — an excellent idea in principle, but the examples are often unreadable due to their size.

Vision vs reality

Finally, perhaps the report also illustrates the fact that there is often a yawning gap, or black hole, between the vision held by top management in terms of the customer service experience and the reality at the day-to-day interfaces between the organisation and its customers. Senior management need to get out there and try out the channels for themselves, from a customer's perspective — and look at those of their competitors or, more importantly, those in the overall market that provide examples of best practice, as identified within the report.

And have you tried out the loo roll test? Well, visit your favourite grocery website, type in loo rolls and see what happens. According to the report, a search on Tesco returns four headings and 137 items. . . but no toilet tissue! Go on, try it today. . .

Peter Mouncey, FMRS, F IDM

Brand Warriors on the High Wire

Fiona Gilmore

Profile Books, 2003; 250pp; paperback; £9.99; ISBN: 1-86197-611-9

Since intense competition propelled brand to become the key differentiator and corporate success factor, we have all been transformed

Eclectic group of 17 executives

into brand warriors. That is the theory at least, although reading through the trade press one wonders how many companies are yet to put into place the tools behind their fighting rhetoric. Following the success of her first title, Fiona Gilmore returns on fighting form with the *High Wire* edition, assembling a series of personal accounts of the meaning of brand as witnessed through the eyes of 17 executives who have driven their high-profile organisations' powerful brand strategies. From media and manufacturing to music and motoring this is an eclectic group, although a sense of brand leadership spearheading radical corporate change binds the writers together, with themes of vision, passion and challenge echoing through the accounts.

For some this will simply feel like a new perspective on familiar ground, but hearing it from the voices of the executives themselves generates an excitement and personality devoid in so many marketing texts.

Disney, Yahoo!

Michael Eisner narrates his story as the steward of the Disney brand in the 1980s in its quest to 'make us smile'. Jerry Yang talks of his experience as a founder of Yahoo!, one of the newest brands to gain a spotlight on the global stage. From its classic 'dot.com' origins in the early 1990s, his vision of satisfying customer needs with simple services and excellent technology has created a brand culture which is palpable whether you are in their offices in London, Paris or Sydney or back with his team in their Sunnyvale campus.

Manchester United

The football industry makes a welcome appearance with Manchester United's Peter Draper exploring what branding means in an industry that has undergone such rapid business change. Draper is credited with many of the achievements that have extended the franchise of a leading British club to truly global brand status, and in particular he tackles the question of how to understand and manage brand loyalty in such a charged environment.

Sony

Sony Europe's president and CEO Jean-Michelle Perbet gives insight into the thinking behind the pan-European 'Go Create' campaign developed with Saatchi and Saatchi. Sony has tackled the issue of brand change head on, and the problem of reinventing the brand in the networked world is one many executives across all industries are yet to face up to.

A good read

Brand Warriors on the High Wire is a good read. It sits in the cross-over space on my bookshelf between classic business texts and biography, yet avoids worshipping the cult of the celebrity CEO. What makes the brand and matters to its team is subtly different for each writer, and because these perspectives is intensely practical rather than theoretical it acts as a great balance to classic brand marketing texts that build brand strategy up from fundamental principles.

But Gilmore is also writing about leadership and the brand leaders who took up the challenge to reshape radically the markets they wanted. For that reason it deserves to find many readers well beyond the walls of the marketing department.

Danny Meadows-Klue
Chief Executive, Digital Strategy Consulting

Customers are People . . . The Human Touch

John McKean

Wiley, 2003; 300pp; paperback; £18.99; ISBN: 0-470-84889-8

First impressions

Judging by the photograph on the jacket John McKean is a healthy man of middle years who eschews a necktie. At which point we quite like him. Read on and you will hear that he is the chief honcho at something called the Center for Information Based Competition. You may now feel less than enthusiastic. It gets worse — the Center apparently provides something called ‘thought leadership’. Then again, the preface offers ‘a human touch competency that creates the more profitable reaction in the person inside every customer’. Suddenly you do not want to be stuck in a lift with Mr McKean.

Narcotic rhetoric

As so often with such tomes, the reader is suspended between his or her sense of duty in mugging up on the latest management techniques and the growing feeling that the study process has become somehow narcotic, transporting you to a dreamy post-hippy world where words begin to sag, where the banal rises to rhetoric, where the author is almost bidding us hold hands so that we can get in touch with our inner marketing selves.

I exaggerate, but only a little. *Feng shui* makes a guest appearance on page 177, just after a list of colours in which you can learn that orange suggests hilarity and black suggests death. A chapter starts ‘Employees are snowflakes. They are magnificent. They are people.’ Solemn quotations punctuate the lists of mottos, from the likes of Thoreau, Goethe and Tallulah Bankhead. There is room for Martin Luther King to be quoted . . . ‘The time is always right to do what is right.’ Which may have played well on the platform but is merely puzzling on the page.

Customer treatment vs product virtues

The thesis that sustains all this is summarised in the title, *Customers are People . . . The Human Touch*. It argues that ‘Most customer decisions are based on treatment as customers rather than inherent product virtues. Yet customer initiatives seem to offer “relationships” that the customer does not want, concentrating on marketing techniques rather than anything more human. So, let’s explore the “human touch” . . .’

I would agree with the second of these statements and quarrel with the first. I buy very few things because the sales assistant beams at me. I invest money where it will do best not because the voice on the phone sounds amiable and well-informed. Nice is good, but it does not make the world go round.

Downfall of most CRM

Yet Mr McKean is surely right to report ‘the common downfall of most customer relationship management initiatives’ and to comment on the schematic nature of much CRM practice. Some of us were a tad sceptical when this new theology arose in the late 1990s. All this stuff about customers really being people smacked of the Emperor’s new clothes; we were being asked to chant the bleeding obvious for no reason other than fashion.

But this book merely sustains the chant, though selecting a different

Same chart, different key

key. There are many lists, there are many mottoes and there are many case histories — though they come from the likes of the Los Alamos National Bank, the Dorothy Lane Market, the Tudor Day Spa and Kern Video as well as the ubiquitous Wal-Mart. Not exactly the commanding heights of business practice, I fear, and while there may be lessons to be learned from small proprietorial retailers, I doubt that the lessons are applicable to many other businesses.

Not much of value

So, sadly, there is not much here for the direct marketer. The thesis is thin, the content eccentric and the style frenzied. Purely for list-wallahs, I think.

George Smith F IDM