



Putting Customers at the Center of Your Business Model

By Nichole Kelly

Companies are starting to recognize that customer experience is an important element for having a differentiated brand. Social media has forced companies to take customer experience seriously as customers have taken to their social networks to tell their negative stories with passion and a virality that has been unmatched in other channels. However, the reality is that there is a lot of lip service about putting the customer at the center and making customer service improvements. At the end of the day, this transformation requires a change in culture, which leaves companies dealing with massive amounts of politics and inherent human capital challenges.

This post was inspired by a truly incredible experience I recently had at [Royal Taj](#), an amazing Indian restaurant in Columbia, Maryland. I went to Royal Taj the week they opened when there were

few patrons and I've watched the restaurant grow over the last few years. I've been so impressed to watch it turn into a hot spot with lines out the door during peak restaurant times. My recent experience made me stop and question the differences between my experience there and my experiences at other restaurants, and honestly with other businesses. Here are the key ingredients I believe led to their success. Each of these ingredients are relevant to every business that wants to drive their companies' success with a customer-centric approach.

THEY PROVIDE AN EXCEPTIONAL PRODUCT

The best customer experience won't matter if the product isn't good. Royal Taj, by far, has the best Indian



food in the area. The best way to describe their food is that well...it's perfect. The flavors are bold and you can get your food spicy or mild to ensure it meets your palettes desires. As a connoisseur of ethnic cuisine, one of the best tests is whether or not they can attract patrons from the culture. On numerous occasions, I've watched as their Indian patrons talk about how amazing and authentic their food is. I've watched as friends recommend Royal Taj to other friends telling them they have to go because it is the absolute best Indian food.

The first step for companies to begin putting their customers at the center of their business model is to ensure their product is top notch. Your products need to speak for themselves and leave an impression that people want to share with friends.

THEY KNOW THEIR CUSTOMERS BY NAME

Royal Raj is owned and managed by Bindha, Soni and Jasvinder Singh. Every time I've been to Royal Taj, I'm greeted by Bindha with a big hug welcoming us back. I've watched Bindha work the room and he has an innate ability to make every customer feel like they are the most important customer in the room. He asks questions about your family, who you are, what you do and then he remembers it the next time you come. As a person who is awful with names, I'm amazed that he can keep all the customer's personal stories straight. Bindha goes above and beyond at every turn. When I was there last weekend, it was raining. I watched Bindha walking customers to their cars with an oversized umbrella to make sure they didn't get wet. As I watched Bindha with

his customers, it's clear he truly cares about their experience and their lives. He makes you feel like you have a close friend at Royal Taj, so why would you choose anywhere else to enjoy an evening out? Frankly, you wouldn't. You want to go back to say hello to Bindha.

This can be a challenge for large companies with thousands or millions of customers, but it's not impossible. It just requires really good record keeping inside the CRM. Every customer service or sales representative has the ability to take notes on more than just the issue the customer is trying to solve. They can take notes on the conversation and take the time to get to know more about the customer.

This will require that your company doesn't measure your front line employees on how quickly they can get a customer off the phone. Instead, we should be measuring how much intelligence they can gather about the customer in the short-time they have with them. True customer intelligence goes beyond their experience with your product experience. It should also include who they are buying the product for and what they can learn about their preferences and their lives in the process.

The more we know about our customers, the better we can be at predicting their needs and building relationships. When at all possible, customers should be able to talk to the same person they have formed a relationship with for continuity in their experience. Customer service and sales representatives should have enough information to be able to ask, "How did (your child's name) enjoy the (product) you purchased from us last time?"

THEY SURPRISE AND DELIGHT

Another thing I noticed about Bindha is that he always surprises and delights his customers. When he is about to leave a table he offers a free round of wine, a free dessert or something else he thinks you will enjoy. He knows I love Chateau St. Michelle's Reisling and he makes sure we get a glass on him every time. He's given us free dessert and free Naan. We never expect to get anything free and we are more than willing to pay for what we consume, but he always surprises us with something meaningful that we remember. This is one of the reasons you feel like Bindha is a friend who treats you like a special customer. When I started watching, I noticed that Bindha does this with every table; it's a secret sauce he uses to make sure you remember your experience. And I think it's brilliant!

How can your company surprise and delight customers? It could be something simple like a hand-written thank you note, free shipping, free rush delivery, or a special gift they weren't expecting. The key with surprise and delight is that it must be a surprise. Customers can't start to expect it; they need to feel like it was something special just for them. We need to figure out how to surprise and delight customers EVERY time. This requires companies to allow their front-line staff to have the power to decide what the right surprise and delight gift is for each customer. And it's even better if they can personalize a note with the gift so the customer knows the person they dealt with was the reason they got the gift and that they were thinking of them when they included it.

THEY ARE ALWAYS READY TO SERVE

The great experience at Royal Taj, doesn't start and end with Bindha. It's clear customer experience is something they engrain in their employees. When you dine at Royal Taj you will see the entire staff standing in a line right in the dining room waiting for an opportunity to serve. They scan the dining room constantly and all you have to do is look at them

and they rush to your table to serve you. We've all been at restaurants where the staff casually stands chatting each other up, getting distracted and even doing unprofessional things. As a customer you feel like your needs are less important because they don't convey an interest in being ready to serve you.

How can your company always be at the ready looking for an opportunity to serve? Are you monitoring social channels for mentions of your company? Do you have live chat on your website? If so, do you proactively reach out to website visitors and let them know you are there to help? How are you making it ridiculously easy for customers to get your attention?

The challenges with putting customer experience at the core of your business comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. But seriously, it comes down to one thing; how committed are you to ensuring



customers have a great experience? If you are truly committed then you won't let any obstacle get in your way. You will find creative solutions to challenges instead of using them as excuses for under-serving your customers. Isn't it time for every company to put their customers at the center of their business model?

How important is customer experience in your company? Are you making great strides or using a lot of lip service? What are your biggest frustrations that company's need to address? Leave a comment and join the discussion for helping company's put customer experience at the core of their business model.

About the Author

Nichole Kelly is the CEO of Social Media Explorer | [SME Digital](#). She is also the author of [How to Measure Social Media](#). Her team helps companies figure out where social media fits and then helps execute the recommended strategy across the "right" mix of social media channels. Do you want to rock the awesome with your digital marketing strategy? [Contact Nichole](#)