Lip Service is No Longer Enough:
Why You Need a Unified Customer Experience Strategy

by Scott Abel, The Content Wrangler

If you're looking for ways to improve the customer experience, take a close look at the way you produce content. Chances are, you'll discover that many of the frustrations your customers have with your brand are a direct result of their experience with the content you produce. Or, more specifically, a direct result of how your organization creates, manages, and delivers the information you provide to customers.

According to research from Gartner, more than 90% of organizations don't have a formal content strategy in place to ensure the content they produce is consistent across all customer touch points. As a result, the customer journey is riddled with inconsistent experiences. Frustrating and confusing experiences with content that leaves customers wondering, "What happened?"

But, it doesn't have to be this way. In organizations where content is valued as a business asset -- and where customer experience is more than lip service -- the people that create customer-facing content work together. They collaborate to ensure that every interaction a customer has with the brand, across every touch point, is consistent. They break down silos that prevent collaboration. They reorganize staff. And, they rethink the way they work. Every effort is laser-focused on efficiently producing content that creates exceptional customer experiences.

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The Content Wrangler, Inc.

San Francisco 415.857.2235

What's the problem?

In a word: **Silos**. Customers expect a unified and consistent experience. But, most brands aren't set up to deliver what customers expect. Silos get in the way. They damage brand. They negatively impact loyalty. They do nothing to increase sales.

It's not enough to dazzle prospects with flashy advertising and sexy marketing collateral. You have to continue to dazzle them by providing amazingly useful, relevant, and accurate content after they become customers. At every touchpoint. On every platform. Every time.

To create exceptional customer experiences based on content, everyone who creates content needs to work together.

To do so, you'll need to rethink the way content is created, managed, and delivered by information developers in your organization. You'll need to break down the silos between departments. Sales, marketing, PR, technical documentation, support, and training can no longer operate in isolation from one another. To create exceptional experiences based on content, everyone who creates content needs to work together.

A unified customer experience

Once a prospect buys a product or service, the content they interact with is no longer familiar. The instructions provided don't look, feel, or sound anything like the marketing and sales materials that introduced them to your brand. Neither does the service contract, the warranty, the customer support website, the product documentation, nor the training materials. For no good reason, the content experience changes drastically -- and not in a good way. That's why organizations that recognize the importance of a unified customer experience have started rethinking what it means to be customer-centric.

If your organization is like most, and chances are good that yours is, it isn't organized around the customer. Instead, it's organized as

companies always have been: around a corporate hierarchy. Each department nestled nicely into a walled garden. Protected. Separate. Different. Cut off from the others who produce content for prospects and customers.

When a company is organized around itself, it's impossible to produce a unified customer experience. Silos ensure content inconsistency and make it impossible for an organization to speak with one voice. That's because marketers working in isolation from customer support have no idea why customers call the help hotline. The training department creates content without any involvement from the documentation team. And the technical support staff has no idea what the folks in sales are communicating to prospects.

When a company is organized around itself, it's impossible to provide a unified customer experience.

But, when a company recognizes that the content it creates -- regardless of who created it or for what purposes -- has a direct impact on customer experience, silos come down. They start to think strategically. Old models are discarded. Collaboration becomes the norm. Customers notice.

If your organization isn't able to provide a unified customer experience, chances are you are a victim of what content strategy guru Ann Rockley calls "the content silo trap". Here are few steps you can take to overcome this communication obstacle.

Step one: Admit you have a problem

Much the same as a 12-step program like Alcoholics Anonymous, the first step to creating a unified customer experience strategy involves admitting you have a problem. Recognizing the problem involves taking an honest look at the way everyone in your organization creates content. And, it involves understanding the experience of your prospects and customers at every stage of the customer journey.

Action: Put it in writing. Admit that you have a problem. Spell out why you believe it exists and what the implications of not solving it might be. Make sure to capture both the problems you believe are caused by content silos and the estimated financial impact on the organization.

Step two: Take an honest look

Take an honest look at your content production processes. If you do, what you're likely to find is that most everyone tries to create the best content possible; content they believe your prospects and customers want and need. They do so with the best of intentions. But, they do so in isolation from -- and differently than -- everyone else in the company who is creating content for exactly the same prospects and customers.

They may even hoard content, making it difficult for others in your organization to easily find and repurpose it.

If you take the time to look a little closer, especially with help from a knowledgable and experienced outsider, you'll find that the people who create customer-facing content in your organization do so using different approaches, rationales, models, and personas. They may use different -- and incompatible -- authoring software, content management systems, and other tools. They may even hoard content, making it difficult for others in your organization to easily find and repurpose it.

You may also find that content creators (and their managers) are rewarded for completing work on time and on budget, instead of being rewarded for working smarter. Content creators may not be empowered to work with others in meaningful ways. And, department managers may be fearful of stepping outside the existing corporate hierarchy. Instead, they may be focused on protecting their turf (and their jobs).

Action: Hire a qualified specialist with experience taking a critical look at the way organizations create, manage, and deliver content. An external, process-oriented content strategy expert will ask the

right questions; challenge your assumptions; measure your efficiency; identify process bottlenecks, unnecessary technology hurdles, and, manual tasks that would be better performed by machine.

Step three: Enlist the help of a champion who can influence organizational change

If collaboration and teamwork are little more than buzzwords spouted at your cross-departmental management meetings, your organization will be unable to create a unified customer experience. That's because unifying the customer experience means unifying the content-producing parts of your organization.

In organizations that value the customer experience created when a prospect or a customer interacts with content, all content creators work toward a unified goal -- a remarkable, content-powered customer experience. These organization have made a commitment to unifying content creation, management, and delivery processes in an effort to produce consistent content; to speak with one voice.

If your organization is like most, the leaders probably don't realize there's an enterprise-wide content problem. And, even if they do, without a clear assessment of the damage (prospects decide not to purchase your products/services and customers decide to purchase future products/services from the competition) they won't provide the level of support necessary to effect meaningful change.

Action: Create a unified content strategy designed to provide your organization with the ability to create content that supports a unified customer experience. Ensure the plan includes specific, measurable improvements and actionable steps that can be taken to get there. Enlist the help of a champion.

The best champions are upper level managers; folks with influence and power -- and access to budget dollars. Find out what your champion cares about most (what do they think success looks like?) and ensure your plan of attack addresses their concerns.

Make sure every step of the project provides value for the champion and map your metrics back to items the champion cares about, like ridding the organization of unnecessary waste or helping the company increase sales.

Change, maturity, and innovation

'Innovation has nothing to do with how many R&D dollars you have. When Apple came up with the Mac, IBM was spending at least 100 times more money on R&D. It's not about money. It's about the people you have, how you're led, and how much you get it."

-- Steve Jobs

A unified customer experience is a breakthrough innovation that can create significant competitive advantage. When prospects enjoy the content experience you provide, they are much more likely to purchase a product or service from you. And, if existing customers are delighted by the experience, they may be more likely to remain loyal customers.

Breakthrough innovations don't happen overnight. They are accomplished incrementally, over time. They usually involve significant change. They often start as a pilot or proof-of-concept that is based on an initial concept that is refined and improved as the project matures.

Breakthroughs can be difficult to achieve, especially if the organization lacks an ability (or the maturity) to execute. The ability of an organization to quickly and effectively react to threats, opportunities, or market forces is an indicator of how well they innovate (and how mature they are in the innovation department).

Remember, significant change can be challenging. It takes time and money to create a breakthrough innovation. Adopting a unified customer experience strategy will be easier for some organizations than for others. A strong leader, governance, funding, appropriate tools and technologies, as well as, process maturity, are required to succeed.

Innovative breakthroughs are often game-changing approaches that delight some and frighten others. To ensure the least amount of friction between content producing groups, enlist the help of a change management expert to ensure the least resistance.

Learn more

If your job is to create an exceptional customer experience based on content, consider attending Information Development World 2014: The Conference for Technical, Marketing, and Product Information Developers. The event takes place October 22-24 in San Jose, CA. The conference exists to help organizations learn to create content experiences that convert prospects and retain customers.

www.informationdevelopmentworld.com