

How to make ‘customer experience’ more than a buzzword

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It seems almost everyone today is talking about “customer experience.”

It has become the retail buzzword du jour, ranking with such classics as “taking it to the next level,” “thinking outside the box,” or my personal favorite, “right-sizing,” (does anyone ever feel “right” after they’ve been “sized” to the unemployment line?

And as with so many other buzzwords, the meaning becomes cloudier with increased usage.

Ask five people to describe what it means to deliver a great customer experience, and you’ll get several different answers, although most will likely describe something akin to what used to be called “customer service.” Remember that from the olden days?

Others may describe a sales process, and still others may talk about promotional events or in-store activities aimed at herding the customer toward a purchase. After all, that’s the goal — to capture a sale — right? Certainly that has been the traditional view.

However, the language we use says a lot about how we approach a goal or activity. When the goal is to capture a sale or convert a prospect, the focus shifts, perhaps even imperceptibly, away from the customer’s need and toward the needs of the seller — in this case the need for a sale.

Perhaps this is why so many research studies reveal consumer dissatisfaction with furniture and bedding shopping. Is anyone ever converted eagerly? Does anyone ever tell friends or family about how their dollars were captured?

In a time of changing demographics and rapidly evolving technology, the power today is in the consumer’s hands. It’s all about them, and they know it. That is why understanding and being able to deliver an outstanding “customer experience” is so critical.

Author and consultant Denise Lee Yohn has done some excellent work in this area, including an article for the Harvard Business Review entitled, *7 Steps to Deliver Better Customer Experiences*. In it, she takes a holistic view of customer experience that requires alignment across the entirety of any organization looking to execute successfully.

It begins with an examination of the user’s brand platform, a comprehensive analysis and affirmation of the most critical attributes that will be associated with this brand, both internally and externally. She goes on to discuss the importance of segmentation — internally, across each potential point of interaction with the consumer, and externally, recognizing and delivering unique experiences to consumers with myriad needs and interests.

There are, of course, more steps, and for those looking to turn a buzzword into a plan of attack, she has created an actionable framework that is an excellent place to start.

And in today’s marketplace there is probably no more important phrase than “customer experience” to have in your vocabulary.