

Sometimes the best customer experience is NO customer experience

by Jim Barnes, Chief Customer Strategist, BMAI

I recently came across a most delightful quote attributed to John Logue. He said "it's almost impossible to overestimate the unimportance of most things." It seems to me that this quote might form the basis for a discussion on how a firm should approach certain aspects of its customer experience strategy.

I spend a lot of time thinking and talking about customer experience with clients and at speaking engagements. I believe that marketers and business managers in general should be paying a great deal of attention to the customer experience they are providing. But, let's think about exactly what delivering a customer experience might entail.

Some firms have made a considerable effort to deliver an effective customer experience strategy. Others do not seem to have paid as much attention or even to have given much thought to the notion. The result is that many deliver inconsistent and often negative experiences on a regular basis. They clearly do not understand what the customer experience entails or its potential to influence satisfaction and loyalty.

I believe also that the customer experience deserves a great deal of thought if firms are going to offer a meaningful experience to customers. But some would have you believe that every customer experience has the potential to be impressive or meaningful, to be a "Wow!" experience. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

In this context, I am also reminded of Jerry Seinfeld's observation that his hit TV show was a program about nothing. Jerry was successful in building a show and possibly a career on nothing. He, George, Elaine and Kramer played themselves and the show was about the things that happened in their daily lives. That's precisely what most customer experiences are about; the things that happen to us as we go about the routine that characterizes our lives. Included in those experiences is the stop on the way home to fill up the tank, the Saturday afternoon movie matinee with the kids, the weekly trip to the supermarket, the monthly visit to the hair dresser, the commuter flight home after a week on the road. Not exactly the things that stimulate or excite us. Just stuff we have to get done.

How many of these experiences are memorable or even have the potential to be memorable? Very few, actually.

Most customer experiences are considered by customers to be successful if nothing happens; or, more precisely, if nothing negative happens. Most interactions are mundane and need not be turned into something over the top or entertaining or special or memorable. Customers just want to get in and out and get what they need with no mistakes, no delays and no bad surprises.

In commenting on the recently-announced commitment of a local healthcare authority to "provide the best care possible to those we serve and ensure their stay in one of our facilities is a positive experience", a newspaper columnist questioned the likelihood of turning a hospital visit into a positive experience. He observed "if you're lying on a stretcher or visiting a sick relative, the most you can hope for is an experience free of nasty surprises."

Consider the stop at the supermarket on the way home to pick up a few grocery essentials. You want to find a place to park, get in and out quickly, not find yourself behind a guy with 37 items in the "10 items or less" line, and get home in time to get dinner ready.

It's Friday, you've been on the road all week and you've booked a 7 PM commuter flight back home to Philadelphia. What do you want to happen? Nothing! Or nothing bad at least.

The best strategy when delivering most "customer experiences" may be to make sure things don't go wrong. Most companies would be advised to address this point before setting out to surprise and delight with the unexpected. In most customer interactions, nothing important happens. No opportunity exists to offer anything meaningful or remotely exciting.

Particularly in the case of businesses offering routine services, regularly delivered to customers, the best customer strategy is to make sure nothing goes wrong. Think about the nature of the customer experience your customers expect and the one that they would like to encounter when dealing with you. Some customer interactions lend themselves to over-the-top service, surprising enhancements, and even entertainment, but most do not. Most interactions with customers are routine and your best approach to delivering a satisfying experience is simply to make sure they can accomplish what they want to get done with nothing going terribly wrong.