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Expert Interview Series: Mike Wittenstein on the Challenges of Customer Experience Management

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Expert Interview Series
Mike Wittenstein
President, Storyminers

Mike Wittenstein leads Storyminers, a pioneering customer experience design firm based in Atlanta. We recently checked in with them to discuss some of the challenges enterprises face in managing customer experience today. Here's what he had to say:

How did you become so passionate about customer

experience?

I owe my passion to two mentors. Lou Carbone of Experience Engineering taught me about how to engineer clues into an experience to naturally resonate with customers. Steve Haeckel of IBM taught me how to engineer adaptiveness into a business's design. Blending their ideas together is what I love to do now. Their ideas are powerful – and they work!

What are the unique challenges behind evaluating and improving customer experience for B2B businesses?

Eliminating personal bias is still No. 1. Suppose you are a customer experience decision-maker now and you grew up through the engineering ranks. Just because you are an engineer doesn't mean that all customers' problems can be solved with engineering thinking. (Customers don't behave all that rationally. The same is true for operations, marketing, finance, and so on. Improving the customer's experience requires knowing more about how they see the business than how the business might see them.

No. 2 is about discovering what customers value most – then adapting the business to provide it. The conventional wisdom about B2B experiences is that buyers are intensely focused on the bottom-line. The reality is that B2B buyers look at total value creation for their firms, not just the invoice price. The perfect storm in B2B customer experience design is to provide more measurable and noticeable value for clients while keeping the price the same. At first blush, it sounds impossible. It's not – it's just hard because delivering more value often means changing how things work. There's a natural resistance to that notion. After all "change isn't good for the business". However, when a business changes to create more value for customers, everyone wins.

What are the most common mistakes you see B2B companies making when it comes to managing their customer experience?

By far, the biggest one is simply not managing or sustaining the experience on purpose. Many companies install some software, adjust some procedures, add a few pages to their websites,

then go back to business as usual. By itself, these 'checkbox items' won't make a big difference. B2B customers can tell when a company treats them in a 'set and forget' kind of fashion – and they don't like it.

What are the best tools for B2B customers on evaluating customer experience?

For companies just getting started, the most valuable info comes from "shopping" the company in all channels (web presence, google, social, office/plant visit, phone, fax (yes, even fax ;-), sales calls, presentations, trade shows, etc. Undercover customer work shows exactly what is happening to customers right now. It offers up irrefutable evidence of what's right and what's wrong. Often, it's easy to fix the low-hanging fruit problems immediately.

For larger organizations with multiple (perhaps siloed) departments touching the same customers (but not communicating with each other), journey maps are helpful. Journey maps show where and when a customer is and what's happening to them. More advanced ones include their emotional state as well as some

business logic.

For complex companies with long-term client relationships (think supplier-to-manufacturing deals like 10-year engine provisioning agreements to airplane manufacturers) blending operational and customer satisfaction metrics works well. Programs like the Net Promoter Score bring executive focus on what customers need from organizations that they are not getting. Client Advisory Boards can achieve the same thing, especially when the dialog is authentic.

How vital is quality data and research for improving customer experience?

The bigger your organization, the more important accuracy and quality are. At a certain size, no one person can see everything or fathom all the interactions. Those situations require abundant, high-quality data – the kind you get from surveys, touchpoint measurements, and now from IoT (Internet of Things) feeds, and sentiment analysis.

There is one thing, I believe, that trumps having lots of data and brilliant insights. It's the desire

and the mechanisms to do something positive with what you learn on behalf of customers. Companies need to get better at applying what they learn to their customers' benefit. The best data and answers in the world can't help if the leadership doesn't support the need for change.

What B2B companies do you think have done an exceptional job prioritizing customer experience? What can we learn from them?

Amazon Web Services teaches us that shortening and simplifying a customer's path to what they need creates value for the customer and the business at the same time.

GE Healthcare demonstrates that product design that involves the entire patient experience wins in the market.

Tens of thousands of professional services practices are staffed by caring experts (technologists, attorneys, designers, and every other kind of specialist) who put their customers first every day. Their attention to detail, personal presence, proactive approach, and fair disposition establish a why-go-anywhere-else?

baseline.

When these individuals go the extra mile anticipating clients' needs, preventing problems, spending time with staff to help them grow, sending over unsolicited hints, or making valuable introduction, the relationship evolves from satisfied customer to raving fan.

What advice do you find yourself repeating to businesses and over and over on creating better customer experiences?

"No matter how hard you try or how much you spend, your brand can't be any better than what your customers (actually) experience." In other words, if your efforts don't result in something your customers and clients notice and remember, they won't share it.

Walt Disney taught me (through his writings) that enjoying an experience so much that you want to have it again – and share it with others is the ultimate measure of success in the customer experience game.

What customer experience trends or innovations are you most interested in now? Why?

Since Storyminers is a customer experience design studio, I'm particularly interested in "Intelligent Experiences" that utilize information from many sources to adjust and improve the experience customers get in real time. We often apply the principal of "Anticipation" when designing B2B and B2C customer experiences when we need to know a customer's intent sooner. Knowing what customers want sooner means that the business can serve them better – at lower cost.

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