

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE OFFICERS AND CONTACT CENTER AGENTS IN THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT AGE



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As organizations transform to adopt customer experience management (CEM) into their business, a new role, that of the customer experience officer (CXO) (sometimes called a chief customer officer), has emerged.

The Role of the Customer Experience Officer

CXOs typically serve as top executives. They are charged with designing, orchestrating, and improving customer

experiences across all customer touchpoints, including sales, customer service, social media, billing, technical support, contact centers, face-to-face, and so on. These executive officers are responsible for creating a company-wide focus on customers and establishing metrics for defining customer relationships. In addition, CXOs glean insight from customer interactions that could lead to new opportunities, new markets, or increased revenue.

CXOs address a previously unfulfilled need. Their success is largely dependent on the organization's capacity for change and the maturity of their change management efforts.

This position is relatively new, and most CXOs (80 percent) have been in the job for two years or less, according to Paul Hagen from Forrester Research. In fact, a 2011 survey found that 55 percent have been in the job for one year or less (Hagen, 2011). The newness of the position is challenging in its own right. But other challenges, including resistance from other departments that don't necessarily see their role from a service perspective, must also be overcome.

For long-term success, a strategic mandate to differentiate the company based on the customer experience is a must. The CXO needs the support of the entire company in order to make a positive impact. Without this cooperation, creating a customer-centric culture and a consistent customer experience across all touchpoints will be extraordinarily difficult. This should be addressed before the CXO is brought in or hired from within. Steps to prepare for the appointment of a CXO include:

- **Developing goals** that align with the CXO's purpose.
- **Realigning the organizational structure** to help enable the CXO.
- **Getting leadership buy-in** to the concept and value of a superior customer experience.

By setting the groundwork and creating a customer-centric mindset, the organization is better positioned to have a dedicated role to take the customer experience to a higher level and create a more efficient process for the company and its customers.

The scope of the CXO role could vary from one organization to the next. For one organization, its prime responsibility could be maintaining revenues from existing customers and

managing the customer experience in service and support departments; for another, it could be managing across multiple organizational divisions, developing new markets, and acquiring new customers.

Regardless of their many duties, CXOs are typically responsible for:

- **Developing** a clear view of customer needs that can drive sales and marketing, product development, and customer service strategies.
- **Balancing** customer acquisition with customer retention. CXOs help companies identify their best customers and find more of the same without hurting existing relationships.
- **Creating and managing** customer value metrics that can be used to prioritize service.
- **Identifying** sources of dissatisfaction and potential customer defections.
- **Helping** the entire organization to adopt a customer-centric mindset.

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The Role of the Contact Center Agent

The contact center agent's role is undergoing a significant shift as well. In the not-so-distant past, call center agents answered phone calls and were trained to follow standard on-screen scripts based on the call type. Today, interactions take place across all kinds of channels including social media, website comments, forum posts, Web chats, instant messaging, mobile phones, and webcams.

Moreover, contact center agents have become increasingly responsible for the quality of the interactions rather than the quantity. For example, call duration is no longer relevant when contact center agents must handle complex inquiries (such as helping a customer fill out a loan application) or cross-sell products.

The contact center's agents are brand representatives, and their interactions

with customers influence brand perceptions. For example, allowing a tweet or Facebook post to go unacknowledged is unacceptable. Without a prompt reply, customers could feel dismissed, undervalued, or that the company doesn't care. In contrast, a quick response can block those feelings from ever happening and leave the customer feeling both valued and that the company cares. A quick response is also a brand differentiator because, even though it's expected by consumers, not all contact centers are equipped with the technology enablers or the talent to respond quickly.

Contact center agents interact with customers every day, all day. Serving at the front line of the organization, the contact center has a good sense about what customers think of the company and its products and services, and influence it directly. In the past, it was rare for call center agents to be

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able to share these insights; they were tasked with handling the next call as quickly as possible. Today, an exchange between a customer and an agent can be captured and analyzed, allowing managers to understand the data coming in and respond accordingly.

In addition to servicing customers, contact centers also serve as a form of inbound marketing. As consumers increasingly opt out of traditional outbound marketing techniques such as telemarketing, email campaigns, and direct mail, their incoming calls bring opportunities for up-selling and cross-selling. This doesn't mean randomly suggesting products and services; it means understanding the customer's whole history with the company to identify sales opportunities that make sense. From there, the call should be routed to the right sales agent to both handle the initial inquiry and introduce appropriate offers.

Recognizing the front-line role that agents play as the voice of the business is critical. Companies that embrace CEM understand the importance of investing in talented, professional agents. Contact centers need a higher level of professionalism from their agents than they did 10 years ago. Having "good people skills" is no longer enough. However, to attract the right talent, such as business professionals with college degrees and knowledge workers, the stigma of working in a contact center must be removed. For example, a 2012 Forrester survey commissioned by Avaya found that 63 percent of organizations struggle

to find, attract, and retain the right contact center agents. However, 83 percent cited a correlation between improved agent performance and improved customer experience.

Agents must be capable of performing higher-level work than simply looking up account balances or giving directions. The skills needed across different channels, interaction types, customer segments, and more vary extensively, making it important to get the right mix of agent skills for each channel, interaction, and segment. In addition, agents need a detailed understanding of what's going on within the organization, including marketing campaigns, sales, and support—because consistent messaging is a must.

Managing experiences and relations requires a new breed of contact center agent. Agents can be an organization's number one asset—or liability. Happy agents typically translate into happy customers. Agents must have the will to continuously deliver a top-notch customer experience and exceed expectations. In other words, contact center agents need both the will and the skill to serve as an engine for CEM. Give agents the right tools and empower them, and customers will have a good experience regardless of the type of interaction. [A]

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