

Think strategy. Think big

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by Stuart Crainer | Nov 20, 2009

How did you move from a focus on customers to, now, "big think strategy"?

Several of my books were on customer experience. I launched the concept of experiential marketing, as least from a conceptual point of view, and also framed the right examples and benchmarks that companies can use to create a great customer experience. Most recently I've branched out into creative strategy, which I call "big think strategy". Of course, focusing on the customer experience also plays a role in big think strategy. In fact, revamping, or moving from a more functional and analytical approach in your organization to focusing on customers and their experiences, is one way of doing big think; but there are other ways, as well. Those have become the themes that run through all my work.

How do you see the customer experience over the last decade?

It has improved. Retailing is entirely different from 10 years ago. Take a casual clothing line such as Abercrombie & Fitch — the way they market themselves now in the retail space is entirely different. But it's not only about retailing. It's also about communications. It's about websites. So, the customer experience is a hot topic, and lots of companies are working on it. They're creating management positions within their organizations to create experiences for customers.

Is there one customer experience — or does it change with countries and cultures?

There are cultural differences, no doubt. An experience that might work in the United States may not work in Europe or Asia. So, you have to be very sensitive to customer trends, their needs and lifestyles, all of that. That's the exciting thing about customer experience management: you can never say, "We've fixed the experience now, this is how it is." You always need to update it; you always need to upgrade it.

Living in New York, I think it is natural to focus on the customer experience, because there are lots of interesting experiences around one in the daily life of people, but also commercially. When you look at the retail environment, for example, when you have contacts with the advertising agencies and the communication businesses, you can't help but think that marketing is not only about rational things and stressing product characteristics and product specifications, but also that you also need to be creative and unusual in the approach that you're using with your customers. New York is a great laboratory for studying what's going on with customers, but it's only one laboratory. That's why I travel a lot. Being a city person, I like to compare how companies market themselves in different parts of the world. There are many different industries, companies and countries; so, without doubt, there are many different kinds of customer experiences.

What are some of the trends in China and the Far East?

China is really improving a lot of customer experiences. Think about the Maglev, the high-speed train in Shanghai. It's mostly a Siemens product; but in Munich, in Germany, they never put it on the tracks. In Shanghai, they have done it! It's a great experience to be in the city within 10 minutes, and there are many other ways in which China is helping to improve what it feels like to be a customer. Recently I went to China and, right after I went through customs, a rating scale illuminated asking me to rate the officer in terms of how satisfied I was with the experience. That is world-class customs service. So, there are lots of interesting things going on in China with respect to experience management.

If the customer experience has improved in the last decade, where's it going next?

I think the customer experience will change in several ways. First of all, customers are very concerned about going green, buying green products, about companies being serious about being green. So, we will be seeing a lot of changes in this regard from companies trying to win the hearts of consumers. I also believe (and this is a major change) that customers will want to be more casual, more connected — even emotionally connected — with companies. They don't want to do business with big anonymous conglomerates that they don't know anything about and which may be behaving in unethical ways. So, I think we'll see a lot of more interactivity and openness in the transactions between companies and consumers.

So customers will come to expect more from companies.

That's right, and that is a challenge for experience management. When expectations increase, companies have to live up to the new expectations; and that requires a new management style. Management needs to be constantly in touch with customers, understanding what they expect and responding accordingly. But that is something that will make companies better.

This all sounds like something that would be hard to teach in a classroom. Is it?

I sometimes bring customers into the classroom. That's number one. Companies should be doing the same thing; they should bring customers into their organizations. Also, I teach my students a lot of the new technologies and the new research methods that are focused on customer insight — methods that have to do with running focus groups, for example, not in a laboratory, which is an artificial environment, but in stores. So, we talk about research techniques in