



Fostering a Human-Centric Approach in Today's Tech-First World

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- *Diving into how brands have successfully balanced digital technologies with human-centric needs to in today's dynamic world*

I have personally seen how Customer Experience (CX) has evolved over the years. In the early 2000s, being customer-centric meant offering empathetic services over the phone. In fact, I started my career as a customer service agent, guiding a 70-year-old grandmother over the phone on how to use predictive text on her mobile device.

Over the years, phone calls and email support morphed into webchats and interactions via social media, such as WhatsApp. Recent [reports](#) indicate that at least 1 in 3 customers currently use social media when contacting businesses. And it's not just the medium of communication that has changed.

Different industries are embracing emerging technologies to transform their various customer touchpoints. For example, by leveraging technology, we are seeing a steady shift to eliminate cash transactions for both online and physical businesses. While technologies rapidly reshape how companies deliver CX - making it more frictionless - it is important to retain empathy as the underlying component of CX, understanding and integrating the essential aspects of balancing human-centricity within a tech-first environment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RETAINING EMPATHY

Over the past two years, customers have become more comfortable with digital interactions. A recent [study by Google](#) highlighted that Asian consumers have accepted digital services as a part of everyday life, and intend to continue to using them even when conditions return to normal. In the race to adopt the latest tech-related CX innovations, however, many companies may risk losing touch with the real cornerstone of great CX: *empathy* and *authentic interactions*.

An interesting example was when a well-known travel company deployed a chatbot to manage a sudden spike in the number of customer inquiries about ticket refunds following the closure of borders due to the pandemic. The chatbot did not have the capability to accurately identify and route such requests. Instead, customers found themselves plodding through 30 to 45 clicks to request a refund without the option of talking to a human agent. This tedious and impersonal process exacerbated what was already a frustrating scenario.

Unfortunately, such occurrences are not uncommon in our digital-first world. [Studies](#) show that only 22% of respondents are happy with chatbots, while 60% do not trust chatbots to solve their issues efficiently.

The key to successfully deploying cutting-edge tech in the CX space is to have an in-depth understanding of customers' journeys, and by identifying the optimal areas for implementing technology at key touchpoints. Digitalisation needs to be woven into that journey with the aim of striking a good balance between efficiency and making the most of potential opportunities arising from those interactions. By doing so, we authentically create meaningful engagements with customers, fostering loyalty and their willingness to explore other solutions we may have to offer.

As an example of striking this balance, Grab has demonstrated a good understanding of their customers' journeys and selectively deployed technology to enhance their CX, rather than cramming too many superfluous solutions into a single space. Their systematic and automated



refund process, which automatically provides a voucher within 30 minutes of an incorrect order is an excellent way of keeping customers happy. Where necessary, the issue is escalated to a human agent, who connects and resolves the matter with the customer and merchant involved in a timely and seamless manner.

The benefits of this balanced approach include:

- 1) the automation of resolutions for minor errors immediately, which placates frustrated customers;
- 2) streamlining of operations by automating errors that can be easily fixed; and
- 3) ensuring human agents can step in as problem solvers, building relationships with customers while ensuring quality responses and identifying weaknesses in the system.

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS OF 'HUMAN-CENTRICITY'

How do brands become more human-centric in a digital world? Learning from the likes of Alibaba, Grab, and other leading businesses with world-class CX, here are a few ways we can maintain the human touch:

1. INVEST IN UNDERSTANDING THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Customer experience has evolved beyond post-sales support or pre-sales enquiries. Today, customer experience is an amalgamation of every single touchpoint and interaction with the brand, product or service.

It is imperative for businesses to empathise with their customers in all their interactions, and to adopt an all-encompassing view of the customer journey. Brands will then be able to anticipate customer expectations at each milestone, deliver solutions that serve these expectations, and hone in on improving weaknesses or other touchpoints that could be enhanced by tech solutions.

2. MEASURE EVERY TOUCH POINT AND EVERY INTERACTION

Every engagement and touchpoint offers rich data about customers, and constitutes a master key for businesses. Understanding your customers' behaviour can be found in data collection, interpretation, and insight generation, that will help you unlock your next CX innovation.

Touchpoint analysis and metrics have the power to enhance every facet of business, from website design, to operational efficiency, and overall customer satisfaction. As the first phase of building a database, companies should consider these basic metrics:

- Time taken to sign up
- Number of clicks to purchase a product
- Time spent on a certain page
- Customer drop-off rates
- Time spent making an inquiry or complaint

3. UNDERSTAND YOUR TARGET DEMOGRAPHICS AND TRAIN YOUR TEAM ACCORDINGLY

There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to customers. Different age groups have different expectations in terms of support and service. For example, the current rapid migration to digital may tempt some companies to phase out phone support in favour of chat support. But while younger customers prefer online chats, older customers may prefer talking to an agent over the phone.

To share a personal example: I once had an older customer who called in once a month, without fail, for help with online payments during the pandemic. In this scenario, we trained agents to anticipate his calls, understand the context of his conversations, and effectively



shorten his enquiry process. This resulted in shorter call times, without compromising on our service to a customer in need.

Although automation enables quick resolutions for routine issues, customers across all age groups still prefer human support in complex situations. [People who experience human-to-human connections in times of need tend to feel more satisfied, especially in today's highly digitalised and isolating environment.](#) This emphasises the importance of offering immediate agent support whenever requested by the customer.

That being said, businesses should increase their focus on training employees to tackle situations that require a higher degree of problem-solving skills. Instead of preparing call scripts for agents, the ability to empathise is a far more powerful capability in understanding and helping frustrated customers. Organisations must equip agents with the right tools and empower them to solve individual situations in the most human way possible!

4. CREATE A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC CULTURE AND PRIORITISE SINCERITY

The entire organisation should be dedicated to maintaining a customer-centric culture - not just the customer experience team!

The day every department comes on board with treating customers with sincerity will be when businesses can confidently meet their promises and truly upscale customer experience. At TM, for example, we promise our customers that we will restore unifi service downtime within 24 hours, the first of its kind in the telecommunications industry. We believe such a gesture shows our customers that their inconvenience is not taken lightly, and that their time and loyalty is of significant value.

WHERE IS CX HEADED IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS?

From phone support to conversational AI-enabled chatbots, CX has made great progress over the past five years. I believe that the next five years will be about *anticipating* customer needs, and delivering hyper-personalised, human-centric services even *before* customers request for them.

Building a robust data strategy will be a pre-requisite to actualising this vision of proactive CX. Additionally, customers will want frictionless end-to-end journeys. The very human quality of partnerships and collaboration will be crucial to orchestrate these ideal journeys - ones that will delight our customers and exceed their expectations.

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