Customer Obsession

Idea In Short

In the old consulting days, it was perfectly acceptable and sufficient to successfully deliver your client engagements. However, this is hardly adequate anymore! Customers expect you to anticipate their needs and orchestrate meaningful interactions that create real value for them. Customer obsessed consultants delve much deeper into understanding the why their clients are interested in their services.

customer obsession is the 1st among the Leadership Principles that Amazon uses its every day, whether discussing ideas for new projects or deciding on the best approach to solving a problem.

> Leaders start with the customer and work backwards. They work vigorously to earn and keep customer trust. Although leaders pay attention to competitors, they obsess over customers.

During the last few years, customer obsession seems to gets more and more attention. Customer obsession is often linked with Jeff Bezos of Amazon. In his 2016 letter to his shareholders, he outlined that the culture of an organization plays a vital part to be customer obsessed and therefore successful.

> If there's one reason we have done better than of our peers in the Internet space over the last six years, it is because we have focused like a laser on customer experience, and that really does matter, I think, in any business. It certainly matters online, where word of mouth is so very, very powerful. (Jeff Bezos, Amazon)

Similiarly, Nir Eyal wrote a Medium article about how customer obsessed Netflix is.

Customer obsession by an USPS employee

There is a story about customer obsession from an unlikely source - the United States Postal Service or USPS. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GKQ9kTnSg4&ucbcb=1 In the above video, the speaker shares his experience with an extraordinary postman named, Fred. Fred is so dedicated to his clientele that he aligns his work with their schedules, provides security options for their mail, and even retrieves packages that are wrongly delivered by other postal carriers. Needless to say, Fred is the postal professional we've all dreamed of. But, Fred doesn't do it for a reward. The USPS doesn't offer incentives for outstanding performance nor does Fred get any recognition for all of his hard work. When asked why he does it, Fred simply replied that he didn't want to waste any part of his day. Fred's story is the epitome of customer obsession. He shows a nonstop dedication to customer needs and a consistent willingness to go above and beyond for his clients.

Tips for consultants

It seems so simple, yet very few consultants work like Fred. It goes without saying that to be customer-obsessed, you don't want to sell your customers what you want them to buy, you need to listen to what they need. Purposefully look for ways to make your clients' day better each day and provide outstanding service. Slowly, your clients will begin to trust that you have their best interest at heart, which increases their likelihood of repeat engagements. According to the research firm Forrester,

> the only source of competitive advantage is the one that can survive technology-fueled disruption—an obsession with understanding, delighting, connecting with and serving customers. This means that effectively managing your company's relationships with those who buy your company's products and services has never been more important.

Understand the client situation

Your clients are faced with a myriad of challenges and opportunities they want to tackle. Your challenge, as a consultant, is to bring your expertise and ask the right questions to help them fully understand what is important to them and how to define success. Make sure that the entire engagement team fully understands the client's situation and their challenges.

Include the client stakeholders in discussions to brainstorm ways to tackle those challenges. The clients expect you to solve problems for them; early on, you may not even have a solution from your previous engagements. But, that's OK. Envision the long-term impact of your recommendation on your client's success and explore alternatives.

Stay engaged

Ensure your clients are your number-one priority. Ensure that your clients have a voice back to your firm through Net Promoter Scores, Post-Engagement Surveys, etc. Even post-engagement, maintain your client relationship by inviting your clients to webinars, annual speaker series, quarterly knowledge sharing events, and networking opportunities. If your firm publishes white papers on emerging trends, share those artifacts with your clients. Such minor gestures and activities go a long way in your consulting career.

Be honest

Client expectations are a moving target, so being clear about the game plan from the project kickoff and throughout the engagement. Such clarity helps keep everyone aligned, avoid any misunderstandings and allows for a symbiotic relationship to develop. Establish a dialogue about expectations, outcomes, and measurement from the start. You want to help your customer understand how you're holding yourself and your firm accountable through their experience, and how you'll be transparent about it along the way. If you're honest with them, they'll be honest with you—and you'll both get the results you were seeking.

Build trust

Building trusted and sustainable relationships does not happen overnight. Establishing a lasting rapport with clients goes well beyond quality in delivery. Longevity and success relies on a humble and authentic investment in client stakeholders' own personal success. You accomplish that, first and foremost, by being honest and by delivering what you said you would, when you said you would. Be reliable, credible, and empathetic. Above all, recognize that this process takes time; trust isn't engendered overnight.

When required, challenge them

Don't be afraid to challenge your customer (respectfully, of course). In some situations it's

important to flex your expertise and explain why you're suggesting a specific course of action. You'll have conversations with your clients that challenge their way of thinking and challenge your model and their model at a level most clients would describe as surprising. Sometimes, clients don't get that kind of frankness or honesty with others they work with. The caveat to all of this: It has to come from a place of caring and sincerity. The trust has to already exist.

Measure your successes and improvement areas

You can't fix what you don't know is broken. Send out an annual client engagement survey that evaluates your clients' satisfaction with your firm in various thematic areas, such as delivering results, understanding their business, etc. It's not about achieving a certain score, but rather about identifying where you and your firm can perform better and provide additional value to your customers.

Listen and act on feedback

That means not only analyzing the aforementioned surveys and applying what you learn from them but also involving customers in your work. Invite senior clients to your firm's annual leadership meeting. The voice of the customer should become part of the overall company strategy and help to guide the firm forward. If your clients rate your firm‘s performance below a certain level, invite them to meet with your firm's leadership and the engagement team that worked with the client to share additional feedback and perspective. Use this feedback to add checkpoints into the entire consulting methodology, so the engagement team can ensure it's meeting, if not exceeding client expectations from start to finish.

Summary

The stakes are high in this new business reality. The challenges are immense, but so are the rewards for those consultants who successfully navigate these changing dynamics.