Building a Culture of Customer Success: The Ultimate Guide

Featuring President Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, Sir Richard Branson and more.

by **Kindra Cooper**

CCW CUSTOMER
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Introduction

Customer experience is all about human relationships: understanding what people want and need and how to deliver it. Throughout the industry events we've hosted and attended as well as one-on-one interviews we've conducted for podcasts, articles and white papers, we've heard some incredible insights from a range of inspiring thought leaders both within and outside the CX world. From President Barack Obama to Sir Richard Branson, Oprah Winfrey and more, here are the best stories and advice on employee culture, leadership, experience design, digital transformation and branding.

Chapter 1: Employee Culture

Intro: Progressive companies are cultivating work environments designed to honor the 'happy employees equals happy customers' trope. To take it a step further, front-facing employees are also brand ambassadors because they're the ones delivering the experience of your business every day to your customers, so establishing a culture around brand values is crucial. It sets a precedent not only for how employees treat your customers but also how they feel about their work (are they proud of their job or do they experience Monday blues on a Thursday?).

Additionally, companies are seizing on the new wave of EX consciousness by designing employee-facing software in accordance with human-centered design principles so that it's more user-friendly and intuitive, or launching side-along products that help employees use existing legacy software more easily.

A leader's job is to hire people who are smarter than them

Hiring the sharpest minds and delegating accordingly empowers workers to make decisions on the leader's behalf, so that the leader can focus on the high-level vision.

At the X4 Experience Management Summit in Salt Lake City, Utah, Obama discussed the challenge of making tough decisions after taking office in the midst of a global financial crisis, when the economy shed 8.7 million jobs from 2008-2010 and the automobile industry collapsed.

Throughout the fray, Obama says he learned two crucial things: being comfortable with making decisions in scenarios where "there's no such thing as a 100 percent solution," and two, ensuring he had access to all the information, data and perspectives before taking action.

Image Source: *Qualtrics*

> " In each situation the last piece of this that was most critical was having the confidence to have people around you who were smarter than you, disagreed with you or had perspectives that were different from yours so that you had confidence that you weren't engaging in groupthink. "

— President Barack Obama

Read more: [President Obama on Why a Leader is Only as Good as His Employees](#)

First impressions are important

At CCW Vegas, former Marriott Hotel GM Charles Ryan Minton stressed the power of online reviews to make or break a business, hence the importance of investing in the frontline employees who shape the customer experience. Even for product-led companies, most reviews are centered around CX rather than just the customer's opinion of the product itself, so it makes sense for the business to invest in empowering those workers.

"We're trusting our brand reputation to individuals that make minimum living wages, in a lot of cases $9-12 an hour," said Minton. "Doesn't it make sense that we would want to make sure that these folks are having a good experience at work. Isn't that a given?"

It's also important for managers to use a new hire's first day to stoke their enthusiasm and set expectations, rather than having them watch a boring orientation video. About half of all workers who left their jobs in 2018 did so within the first 90 days, which is why proper training and onboarding is so crucial. Minton starts by laying out his expectations in a document from the get-go, like his first general manager did with him.

"He brought me out to the lobby and he handed me a two-page document, and it had 27 bullet points on it of his expectations," he recalls. Requirements ranged from "We are going to be the best quality Marriott in the brand" to "I value your quality of life outside of work so I'd rather you work 50 hours a week instead of 70."

Read more: Marriott Hotel Former GM on 4 Ways to Build an Unforgettable Employee Culture

Authenticity is an expectation

The rise of CX automation is concurrent with an industry-wide hunger to build more "human-centric" relationships with customers - two movements that seem contradictory at face value but make perfect sense in the context of predictive and proactive customer service.

"While technology is a critical piece of the customer experience, it's funny that the disruption today is good old-fashioned relationships," says John Dijulius, founder of CX consultancy The Dijulius Group.

Consequently, today's contact center jobs are less rote and repetitive than the CS departments of yesteryear, where a surly agent regurgitates a script in a monotone or selects from a library of canned phrases.

" As people are using technology and opting in many cases for self-service, when they need a human it's even more important. With tweets and chats, you need to also sound human in the tone of your chat and your tweet and your bots. "

— Jeanne Bliss, CCW Advisory Board, founder and president of Customer Bliss

Image Source: Qualtrics

EX design

Workforce management practices, flexjobs and UX-adherent employee-facing tools are further signs that more and more companies are highly conscious of the employee experience and its effect on retention and CX.

Virgin Group's much-vaunted employee culture emphasizes work/life balance by offering unlimited paid vacations, but unlike other supposedly progressive companies where the "indefinite vacation days" perk includes some unspoken caveats, company founder Sir Richard Branson said that if an employee wants to take two months off, they can. It goes without saying that working from home is well-embraced at Virgin. Additionally, the company has a well-publicized reputation for hiring ex-convicts.

" People respect that, they get the work done and they give back 100 percent in return. Just by treating people as adults the company will get everything back from those people. "

— Sir Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Group, author, philanthropist

Read more: Richard Branson on Differentiating Your Business - Start With a Personal Frustration

Chapter 2: Leadership

Intro: "Radical candor," leading with empathy and open-door policies are just a few of the leadership schools of thought being eulogized by thought leaders. Crucially, all three complement each other, but what do they look like in practice?

In an age of science-based happiness, today's leaders are encouraged to constantly pursue self-improvement and in turn cascade those practices down to the workforce by modeling the right behavior. There's also a thirst among consumers of leadership and self-help literature for narratives about "breakthroughs" — epiphanous moments which are often painful but transformative.

Image Source: Qualtrics

Importance of validating and appreciating others

Media mogul Oprah Winfrey has spent over two decades interviewing people from all walks of life, including members of the Ku Klux Klan and a Charlotte bank executive who brutally murdered his twin daughters. At the X4 Experience Management Summit in Salt Lake City, Winfrey shared how she learned throughout the course of her career that people, no matter how rich or famous, are thirsty for validation.

"At the end of every interview of everybody I ever talked to, in one form or another, they all say this: 'Was I OK?'"

Winfrey looked beyond the words and understood them to mean: *Did you hear me?* and *Did what I say mean anything to you?* It has been instrumental in her ability to induce her guests on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* into sharing the most intimate details of their lives.

> **"** I live my life so that the person who does the most menial job gets the biggest gratitude. I live my life understanding that the biggest mistakes open you up to the greatest lessons. And that when you are open to the lessons, you only grow stronger, have more fire, more life to offer the rest of the world. **"**

— Oprah Winfrey

> **"** Your legacy is in every life you touch. **"**

— Oprah Winfrey

Read more: [Oprah Winfrey Shares the Biggest Revelation of Her Career](#)

Breaking through your own self-imposed barriers

Freedom of speech is under siege and "Insta-culture" perpetuates the wealth gap by creating the often false impression that you have less than your neighbor – be it money, free time, good looks or mastery of flattering camera angles. We as a society need to wake up to our own hypocrisy and self-interest.

These were some of the admonitions from actor and philanthropist Ashton Kutcher at the X4 Summit in Salt Lake City, Utah, as he paced restlessly across the stage in a silver suit. The problem, according to Kutcher, is that we don't take responsibility for the world's problems, because we're too busy grappling with our own fears.

Image Source: Qualtrics

> " The real breakthrough is breaking through yourself. It's breaking through the thing that scares us or makes us believe we're not responsible for creating change, that we're not the one that's responsible for the things that are happening in the world...like global warming or the nuclear arms race or the sexual exploitation of children. "

— Ashton Kutcher

Read more: [Ashton Kutcher - "The Biggest Breakthrough is Breaking Through Yourself"](#)

Image Source: *Qualtrics*

Painful experiences can be transformative

A near-death experience can change your life forever, but only if you let it. At CCW Vegas, HBO's VP of sales strategy Carla Moore discussed how, after experiencing a near-fatal highway collision, she stepped back and re-evaluated her entire life.

The morning after the accident, she was sitting on her sofa, legs in bandages, the refrigerator empty, her totaled car gone. "I said to myself, *Girl, what are you doing? Better yet, What are you going to do next?*"

The first 10 years of her career had been "steady, but not particularly meaningful."

"I got caught up in the corporate rat race; an endless, mindless, self-defeating pursuit of promotions," she said. Outside of work, she wasn't fulfilled either. Moore was "morbidly obese" at over 350 lbs, unhappily single and verging on her 40th birthday.

"Here I was at HBO making big, bold decisions by day and coming home consuming volumes of food and in tears every night," she recalled.

Within a few moments, she hobbled up, grabbed a sheet of paper and scrawled down the four things she wanted most in life. 1) Lose 100 lbs; 2) Run a 5K; 3) Reactivate her community service and civic and church duties; 4) See Rome.

A few months later, when she stood in front of the Colosseum during a two-week solo vacation to Italy, she realized that for 20 years she had ached for those four things, and within one year she'd achieved them all.

" We already possess the power to change our very own lives. Living the life you've imagined is about choosing it. "

— Carla Moore

Read more: [HBO's Carla Moore on the Crash that Changed Her Life](#)

Chapter 3: Experience Design

Intro: It's no secret that Millennials and Gen-Zers spend most of their budget on intangible experiences over physical goods, but it's forcing product-led businesses to rethink their entire business model while intensifying competition among service businesses from airlines to live event promoters. Even those in the live events business like the NBA are using data insights to implement real-time feedback mechanisms.

Here's why every company needs to experience-ify

At a recent keynote at the X4 Experience Management Summit by Qualtrics, Sukhinder Singh Cassidy, president of the eBay-owned online ticket retailer StubHub not only stressed why it's crucial for companies to "experience-ify" but proposed three frameworks for businesses to do so:

1. **Business model innovation** - delivering a whole new type of experience through your business

2. **Service innovation** - providing a value-added service that complements or increases demand for the product you're selling

3. **Content innovation** - providing value-added content that complements or increases demand for the product you're selling

> " One of the most unique things about being a live experience company is the opportunity to have a unique skew every single time you interact with a customer. So the opportunity to give people experiences itself is a differentiator, because every experience is unique. That is the magic of experiences. "

— Sukhinder Cassidy Singh, president of StubHub

Read more: [StubHub President on 3 Ways Product-Led Companies Can "Experience-ify"](#)

Image Source: *Qualtrics*

Why experience companies need to get better at experiences

Monitoring real-time feedback during live events and adjusting the experience accordingly (also in real-time) is a new capability afforded by social media, mobile surveys and live chat. Monitoring customer behavior is crucial for the NBA, which has the unique position of hosting a live experience mostly for remote consumption.

Fewer than one percent of NBA fans worldwide ever set foot in an arena, and for those that do, waning attention spans and the constant distraction of the smartphone have presented NBA officials with the following challenge: how to provide a great live experience even when consumption is fragmented. According to NBA commissioner Adam Silver, the typical viewer watches a 2.5 hour game for just 48 minutes.

"We collect minute-by-minute insight. Why are [people] tuning out? Is it that the commercial breaks are too long? Is it that the halftime is too long?"

These insights have galvanized the NBA to make major changes to the game format. For instance, the basketball league changed its timeout rules for a smoother, shorter viewing experience. Silver also discussed the use of high-definition cameras and playing up the "human" moments of the game to create a more emotional experience for the viewer, such as the moment LeBron James broke down in tears after surpassing his idol Michael Jordan in the NBA scoring list.

Beyond collecting data on viewer behavior through surveys, analytics and social media, Silver said it's also important for companies to be physically present with customers, because data doesn't reveal the entire reality.

" Before becoming commissioner I used to be the CMO and I spent a lot of time in my office, and I realized there is no substitute for experiences...for being out in the field with your customers, for sitting in the stands of an NBA game just talking randomly to whoever's around me. That aspect's really important and it merges with the data. "
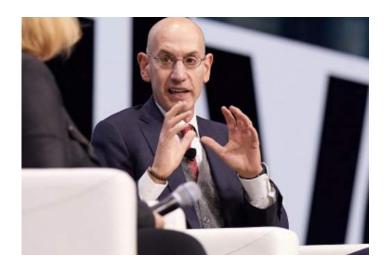
— NBA commissioner, Adam Silver

Image Source: Qualtrics

Experience design is crucial for companies to remain innovative

Amazon innovated its way to becoming the world's largest e-commerce company not by inventing online shopping, but by designing value-added services that make purchasing items online superlatively easier. Companies that offer a better value proposition or a more convenient experience than their competitors are poised to come out on top, hence why experience design is a crucial philosophy that should be embedded in company culture.

> " Innovation is giving the customer what they need before they know they need it," says Borsic, who spoke at Experience Design Week. "Some of our most innovative work is not our most high-tech, but it's rather that it's entirely original. "

— Meghan Borsic, Head of UX Research & Design for Consumer Electronics at Amazon

But remember that experience design must be user-led, so it can't be templated based on what a competitor is doing or an archetype of what an "innovative" company should look like.

> " It's the idea that firms should let users drive innovation as opposed to attempting to push innovation out from a lab, for example. "

— Meghan Borsic, Head of UX Research & Design for Consumer Electronics at Amazon

Listen: [Podcast - Innovation at Amazon with UX Designer Meghan Borsic](#)

Designing products customers will love

The founders of Uber and Segway started with an identical mission: to transform transportation and increase the interconnectedness of cities and people by counteracting the silo of the private car. While one company is worth $50 billion and pioneered a whole new industry for ride-hailing services, the other was widely ridiculed for designing an overpriced scooter nobody wanted. What sent these similarly motivated brands on inverse trajectories? Product market fit.

While this buzzword is most bandied-about in startup circles, any customer-centric organization should be obsessed with designing products their customers love. What makes customers love a particular product? It has to solve a real problem, like how Uber provided an alternative to a taxi industry that offered a customer experience that was unpredictable and unpleasant.

" Make sure that you understand your customer's pain. if you can solve something that removes customer pain, you have a chance. If you're not solving any kind of pain — it's possible that you simply have a nice-to-have product. "
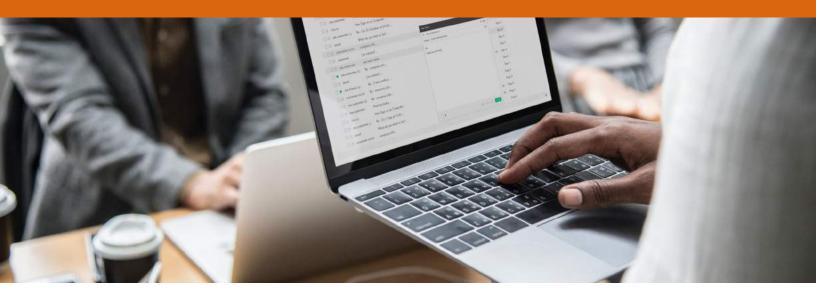
— Jocelyn Miller, former product manager at Amazon and Google

Product market fit is determined by indicators like how much customers spend with you, whether or not they talk about your brand and leave positive reviews, and if the company experiences consistent growth.

Read more: Product Market Fit - How to Design Products Your Customers Will Love

Chapter 4: Digital Transformation

Intro: A truly digital company redefines the customer experience from start to finish. This is because providing an omnichannel experience is rooted in organizational structure and not simply a matter of purchasing new CRM software that displays all your customer interactions in one place. For instance, insurtech companies are using emerging technologies, business model innovation and UX design to make their products more customer-centric and change the perception of insurance as a "necessary evil." Contrary to popular misconception, digital transformation is about using technology as a conduit for a more human-centered experience instead of simply digitizing to cut corners or "look good."

Listen to what the data is telling you

Data can reveal unexpected insights into who your customers are, how they use your product, and how they interact with you at numerous touch points throughout the customer journey. However, it's important to remember that surface data doesn't always reveal the entire truth.

When CMO Julie Lyle was contracted by Prudential Asia, the data revealed that the primary purchaser of its insurance policies was 45-46 year-old men. The company had been spending most of its advertising spend on reaching those customers, but it wasn't effective. Looking at the data more closely, Lyle saw that while the purchaser was typically male, the person *driving* that purchasing decision was his wife.

Prudential shifted 40 percent of its marketing budget towards a series of Prudential-branded music videos on financial literacy targeted at children, with the assumption that the mothers would see it while they sat with their kids to watch TV. Prudential Asia went from representing just 23 percent of global revenues to 56 percent in two years.

> " Data should be truly guiding you forward and helping light and illuminate the decision-making process, not the decisions you've already made and the bias you already have. "

— Julie Lyle, former CMO at Barnes & Noble and Walmart

Read more: How to Use Customer Data Insights to Build a Better CX

Technological innovations in traditionally low-tech industries

It's easy to see grocery stores as legacy retailers whose fluorescent lighting and inherent unsexiness defy call-to-arms for digital innovation, but the Walmarts, Krogers and Costcos of the world that stock largely homogenous goods at low prices are clamoring for the loyalty of the discount shopper. These retailers are mining data, buttressing their ecommerce and mobile presence, and exploring user-centered design.

> " I think it brings a unique focus back to, yes, we have business goals and at the end of the day we do need to deliver to our shareholders, but the way to do to that is to deliver to our customers and meet their needs. "

— Kimberly Busdieker, CCO at Kroger Personal Finance

In fact, this data is such a competitive edge for the company that it established a dedicated consumer insights firm, the Cincinnati-based 84.51°, to study its more than 60 million customers and feed those data insights back into every Kroger division.

Meanwhile, Kroger just announced a partnership with Microsoft to build the connected grocery store of the future built on the software giant's Azure cloud platform. The two pilot stores — one in Monroe, Ohio, and Redmond, Washington — will exploit video analytics tools to notify store associates of items needing restock, as well as a digital shelving system that displays complete nutritional and dietary info as well as digital ad space for CPG brands.

Busdieker says it's these little conveniences that garner repeat customers. "Investing in that robust suite of digital and in-store experiences is critical to meeting more needs and making a connection with customers," she says.

Read more: [Customer Centricity in the Grocery Business According to Kroger CCO](#)

Chapter 5: Branding

There's an onus on brands to be socially conscious, provide rewarding employee experiences and put their customers first. Many legacy brands have struggled to stay afloat in the ecommerce landscape because they've failed to stay true to their brand identity or adapt to changing consumer tastes as they seek to transform digitally.

The best brands solve a personal problem

Businesses that solve real customer pain points are the ones most likely to defy the 90 percent startup failure rate. Branson famously said: "There is no point in starting your own business unless you do it out of a sense of frustration," an epithet he seems to have honored. He launched Student magazine at age 15 in protest against the Vietnam war and founded Virgin Records in order to sell records at lower prices than the "High Street" outlets.

His hugely successful airline, Virgin Atlantic, came about after Branson was bumped from a flight to the Virgin Islands and told he was scheduled on another flight the next day. "I had a beautiful lady waiting for me on the Virgin Islands, so I was damned if I was going to wait," he chuckled.

Branson decided to charter his own 747 from the airport. "I borrowed a blackboard and I just wrote 'Virgin Airways, one-way $39,' went over to all the people who got bumped and flew my first plane." Mulling over the incident afterwards, Branson realized that airlines' habit of bumping people from overbooked flights was a sign of poor customer service — ergo, a business opportunity.

With no background in aviation, the record company owner called Boeing asking to buy second hand 747s. Three decades later, the fledgling airline [beat out its top rival, British Airways](#), by being voted Europe's best long-haul carrier by airlineratings.com.

> " Because we came in with a completely unique product and the wonderful staff were really proud of what they were doing, even when British Airways did everything they could to [erode] our business...the airline just grew and grew and grew. "

— Sir Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Group

Read more: [Richard Branson on Differentiating Your Business — Start with a Personal Frustration](#)

Image Source: *Qualtrics*

Brands, like people, need to know who they are and stick to it

The recent bankruptcy of legacy retailer Sears is a prime example of the internal war brands face over how to go digital while staying true to their brand identity. Sears performed all the functions of Amazon long before the Internet: shipping items ordered from a mail-order catalog to homes across the country.

But when the tables turned and Sears found itself losing market share to Amazon, Sears forgot about two things: who it was, and who its customers were. A "meat-and-potatoes, good ol' America kind of brand," Sears "had this great history that they didn't use to their advantage," said Ali Craig, host of the reality TV show, *Fix My Brand*, where struggling small businesses undergo a "branding makeover' under her tutelage.

Furthermore, Sears did nothing to educate its customers that it was more than just the go-to place for power tools or appliances, but a one-stop shop for the whole family, like Target

Lots of longtime brands exploit our thirst for nostalgia, like Dannon reuniting the cast of *Full House* to sell Greek yogurt, or Old Navy featuring 90's boy band the Backstreet Boys in a recent TV ad.

Sears could have capitalized on its brand legacy of 132 years by appealing to consumers' thirst for nostalgia, like Christmastime in the 80s when kids would spend hours poring over the Sear toy catalog. Or how its novel home delivery service brought mass-produced items to rural homesteads and small towns across the country for the first time.

Furthermore, the retailer neglected to provide an enjoyable shopping experience. Poor inventory control inconvenienced the customer when items were not in stock, and its poorly maintained stores featured broken escalators, empty displays and wan lighting, showing its lack of commitment to creating a great shopping experience for its customers.

"

Using your history to your brand's advantage is something that most retailers aren't doing, which is kind of ludicrous when you're looking at what is it that people are wanting. There's a reason why pumpkin spice is still a trend 14 years later. It's because it reminds us of the holidays and our heritage. "

— Ali Craig, Brand Strategist

Read more: [The Sears Bankruptcy and a Flawed Customer Experience — Interview with a Brand Strategist](#)

About Kindra

Kindra Cooper is a digital writer and editor for CCW Digital, the global online community and research hub for customer contact professionals. In her role, Kindra writes daily articles and produces podcasts on customer experience, design thinking, UI/UX, brand strategy and more. Her reporting has appeared in various print and web publications covering politics, arts & entertainment, business and architecture.

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