

No Space for CRM

Supporting customer, not product

Background

Our last paper explored the research evidence behind the changing nature and 'role' of voice. We positioned 'voice' as increasingly occupying a different 'space' than self-service, automation and Internet channels. We provided evidence that explained how organisations need to provide both ubiquitous 'access' but also provide 'deep support' through voice based interaction, demonstrating through research that 'voice' increasingly occupied a more complex and emotionally-based space, one that is actually likely to become more (and not less) important to building brand trust as automated channel access increases.

This paper moves on to challenge the current service model that is producing a more transactional and less emotionally aware interaction and sets out the challenges on creating such an experience.

'No Space for CRM'

Investment in systems has moved on to investment in automation, which in turn has led to the term of 'self-support'. As automated channels increasingly provide the transactional convenience demanded on a 24-7 basis, a new, more emotionally-based interaction is expected through 'voice'. This both heightens the importance of the voice-based channel but also provokes a challenge as to how to respond. Two questions immediately arise from this, is the dominant model of operation still appropriate or is there potentially a different way of thinking?

Getting at the truth is difficult and complex but in essence it may be as fundamental as our models for customer service being completely outdated by changes in social structure and consumer behaviours. If this is the case then only those organisations prepared to radically rethink their 'relationship' with the consumer are going to be able to meet demands for improved service. Most organisations are content to make small incremental changes but always remaining within the current way of thinking or paradigm.

How might we characterise the current mode of thinking? Firstly it is essentially transactional; it sees the relationship between the customer, product or service and organisation as a series of transactions or events. Each event can be to some extent choreographed and systematised. At its best, the use of transactional histories and demographic data creates at least some appearance of a direct and authentic relationship with the customer. At its worst, the customer is little more than a transaction being processed by some impersonal machine. However the difference between these two outcomes lies in the quality of implementation rather than any difference in underlying thinking or philosophy. This model is built upon a fundamentally static, product led world-view. The various elements of the transaction are seen as reducible to discreet and consistent 'pieces' that can be addressed as relatively autonomous parts of the transaction. It is not the customer that is being serviced or supported it is the product!

The evidence for questioning this account is now overwhelming. The level of customer dissatisfaction is now so high as to be telling even the hardest of hearing that something is not quite right. Intuitively, if not explicit in our corporate behaviour, we are aware that the transaction based, product centred, production line model leaves something to be desired. Why are we aware of this? We are aware because we are involved as individuals in the enormous social and behavioural changes that have been occurring during the last 30-40 years, changes that have significantly increased in pace during last decade. These changes have seen the development of the individual as an autonomous, consuming entity. An entity whose identity is defined less by fixed social positions and more through consumption and actions. An entity that lives in a constant 'stream' of media messages, receives more information than can be



'processed', is significantly cynical of organisations and institutions, yet is increasingly able to manipulate systems. An entity that is 'time-aware' and increasingly available for contact 24 hours a day. This contact allows the maintenance of many often competing and varied social networks; often these networks are maintained through virtual contact interspersed with periods of more intense physical contact. What begins to emerge is a picture of the individual as highly mobile, living in an increasing fluid world of emergent and fragmentary relationships (this is not to denigrate the strength or importance of relationships, some will endure longer than others) where disposability goes 'hand in hand' with commitment.

Against this background the fixed, product transaction led CRM model begins to look hopelessly inadequate. It is replaced by a view that sees the relationship between product/service and consumer changing depending on fluid variables such as location, time, previous experience, significance to individual, in other words the context or 'space' in which the consumption and use takes place becomes just as much a 'feature' of the consumer/product relationship as the attributes of the product. Indeed the relationship between user or consumer and product/service is often so complex as to be constantly producing novel unforeseen relationships and uses. As our current models are built round product we play little attention to 'spaces' that consumers occupy and move through. Yet the characteristics of these spaces significantly modify behaviours and emotional responses/receptability to product or service. Most CRM systems assume that use or consumption is taking place in some hygienic other place that bares a remarkable similarity to the ideal operating environment (contrast the 'controlled' environment of the retail shop with the online or mobile support call) for the product or service.

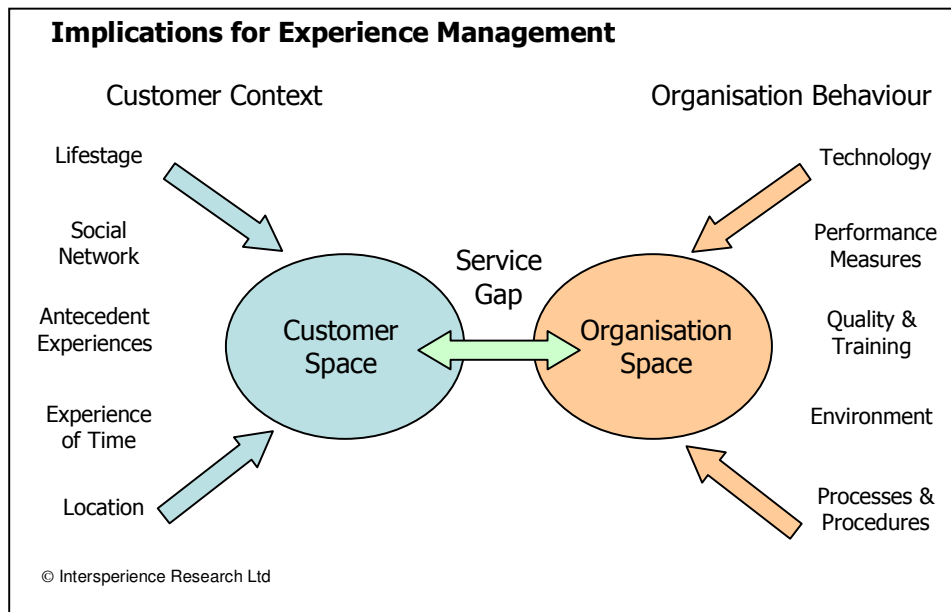
Fixity has gone forever. However the opportunities for the individual that such fluidity and mobility possess also bring challenges. We have already mentioned that we receive more information than we can possibly handle, managing multiple social networks combined with physical mobility can itself be disorientating. As we move from one space to another our requirements and needs change, indeed on occasion spaces merge or intrude upon one another, for instance the work related mobile call received in a personal space. Increasingly we need support and assistance. But it is the individual that requires that support not the product. The support that is required has to be relevant to the 'space' occupied by the individual, it must take account of immediate circumstances, acknowledging that the product/consumer relationship is a part of and modified by this occupied space or context. This represents a fundamental shift in thinking where fluidity and mobility is acknowledged within service, the product becomes secondary and understanding and supporting the space or context of the consumer becomes central- in this model there are few absolutes but there is the opportunity to build authentic consumer relationships.

Implications for Experience Management

The foundation of this new approach is appropriateness, which is judged at an individual, human level. It is not judged by the face value of the action, but is judged in spirit, by the time and the moment. It is about what seems authentic to the individual, not what is said to be authentic to the outside world. In a service setting, it is the context of the moment that influences the customer's needs and expectations and therefore judgement of the relative success will be based on the appropriateness of the advisor's actions, judged by the context of that moment; *"The excellence of a gift lies in its appropriateness rather than in its value"*[Charles Dudley Warner, Eleventh Study, 1873]

The diagram below conceptualises the concept of space and emphasises the importance of 'context' in creating appropriate, authentic dialogue. Appropriateness is not fixed, it is dynamic and fluid, dependent on the moment. Each service encounter should be recast as an 'episode', a part of an evolving relationship that is made up of many inter-related episodes. Some of those will be automated and some will be 'voice'-based. The latter provides a unique opportunity to co-

exist with the individual and to share an experience. For this to truly support the individual, every attempt must be made to move from 'organisation space' into 'customer space'.



The organisation behaviour is characterised by the current, over-riding command and control philosophy, whereas the customer space is characterised by the fluid dynamics that define the individual, have led up to the current episode and characterise the immediate situation. As the customer spaces become increasingly fluid, dynamic and harder to predict (for all the reasons outlined at the beginning of this paper), the context of the customer space becomes increasingly important – the need to understand the person, to recognise and reflect the history of the relationship and to 'tune' into that specific situation all become the critical factors. Our own research completed earlier in 2007, demonstrates that out of all of these, 'antecedent experience' and situation (incorporating task, location, time and mood) are the most critical factors in influencing experience.

Our response needs to be based on a fundamental shift in philosophy. We must recognise that episodes occupy very different spaces – from extremely transactional to highly emotional. And that as we open up new forms of contact, such as automation, the range of episodes that 'voice' needs to occupy will increase, requiring a far more fluid and flexible approach. The systems, processes, procedures and measurements all need to be far more flexible and 'tuned' to better fit the context of the different customer episodes that exist. Our knowledge of these episodes must be based far more on understanding the customer, rather the current mode of assumption. We need to rethink the support given to advisors – providing deeper insight into the context of the customer and far more variety in the training to educate people of how to recognise and change behaviours. Our approach to efficiency, questioning and explanation needs to not only be a lot more flexible but needs to be rooted in the customer situations and not borne of process, systems or control mechanisms.

If we are to create experiences that are far more 'emotionally aware' and less transactional in nature, we need to recognise the individual, putting 'reciprocal exchange' at the top of the agenda, far and away above systems, processes and procedures. The unique characteristics of 'voice' enable us to truly co-exist with the customer, albeit for a few minutes. At the heart of that moment, there needs to be recognition that each party needs the other and is prepared for mutual exchange – of time, involvement and understanding. The philosophy of our approach



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needs to fundamentally shift from being 'command and control' to 'reciprocal exchange'. Instead of thinking resolution, think mutual exchange; instead of thinking process, think situation.

"Let us make a special effort to stop communicating with each other, so we can have some conversation" [Judith Martin, Miss Manners]

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