

ОБЩЕСТВЕНИ КОМУНИКАЦИИ И ИНФОРМАЦИОННИ НАУКИ PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION SCIENCES

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS WITHIN THE CONCEPT OF CUSTOMER DELIGHT

Dirk Menzel

University of Library Studies and Information Technologies

Abstract: *Within the Western European culture especially, emotions and emotional approaches seem to be banned from business life. This results in an analytical and fact driven focus of decision making and customer approaching processes. Increasing research on the human behavior and the reasons why one offer is preferred over the other is highlighting the importance of emotions. For the customer delight concept, in which the individual should be surprised, and a long-term, unique relationship is targeted, the emotional aspect is a key factor. This influences the set-up of the direct customer interaction, the leadership style and requires constant organizational learning.*

Keywords: *Customer delight, change management, emotions, leadership, organizational learning*

INTRODUCTION

Before further exploring the role of emotions within the concept of customer delight, it is important to briefly introduce the concept itself. Since the time that the supply became greater than the demand the companies had to fight for every customer to ensure their long-term business success. To support these activities, the marketing departments became more important and constantly gained more influence on business decisions. In consumer goods markets, market saturation, product interchangeability and consumers' information overload are constantly increasing. Marketing strategies therefore strive to achieve psychological market differentiation, e.g., by using experiential strategies. The customer approach becomes more personal and the communication is influenced by emotions (Kroeber-Riel and Weinberg 1996, 358). Driven by the ongoing digitalization and faster market and product developments the previous approach of customer satisfaction is constantly evolving towards a concept of customer delight. Here there is the need for more individual customer service and product features. Bösenner describes customer delight as an emotional mix of surprise, joy and excitement (Bösenner 2015, 36). Stepping back from an objective product performance focus there is now the need to ensure agility to fulfill subjective, changing, and individual requirements that are emotionally driven. This is something that must be learned before the companies can start implementing it within their organizations. To achieve this change, so stated Arnold in 2005, there is the need for recognizing and questioning the emotionality of our own worldviews because learning culture change requires a reflective approach to oneself (Arnold 2005, 11). The goal of customer delight creates a need for change in dealing with emotional demands and the professional learning within companies.

“The two primary emotions are love and hate” (Stanley-Jones 1970, 25). Emotions “play a central role in the significant events in our lives” (Lazarus 1991, 3). For this they have three main

functions: evaluation, behavioral preparation and communication (Sokolowski 2002, 376). As emotions are everywhere there is the need to incorporate them into future oriented, customer centric organizations, especially when those plan to achieve customer delight. That the rational perspective regarding the behavior of humans has a disadvantage was already stated by Stanley-Jones in 1970: “When the emotions and the intellect are in competition for control of the will, it is usually the emotions that win” (Stanley-Jones 1970, 31). Despite this there is a significant cultural impact on how emotions are treated and rated. Especially in Western culture emotions are considered as something wrong (Oatley and Jenkins 1996, 38). Based on Ulich is emotionality in Western industrial societies often viewed as a weakness, as immaturity or as a luxury that can only be enjoyed in special designated private spaces (Ulich 1985, 12). At this point it is important to state that similar situations may cause different emotions, based on the individual culture background of the respective person (Merten 2003, 120). “From a humanistic perspective, service experiences are socially constructed. The individual consumer’s unique values, actions, beliefs, motives, traditions, possessions, and aspirations shape their response to the service experience. Hence, a small detail that effectively creates a favorable experience for one consumer will not necessarily be effective for another consumer” (Bolton et al. 2014, 260).

Within the context of this reflection, the Western European culture will be considered. Regardless of this focus, there is always a link between the concept of customer delight and the emotional influence on the people and organizations involved. Based on this perspective the role of emotions, embedded in the customer delight approach, will be reviewed. The peculiarities of dealing with emotions are worked out and new requirements based on this will be pointed out. Beyond that potential needs for the future will be described.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive literature review forms the basis for this publication. This was carried out in order to further understand the role of emotions within the concept of customer delight. Emotion research can look back on a long tradition, while there is still relatively little knowledge on the subject of customer delight compared with this. Regardless, connections between these two areas of research are being sought. The literature examined goes beyond the economic perspective in order to be able to work out the emotional characteristics in particular.

RESULTS

Before elaborating the role of emotions, it is necessary to understand the general specifics of the customer delight concept. Once this is described the emotional impact and the resulting consequences will be highlighted.

Customer delight is the next step in innovation that started with customer orientation and later developed to customer satisfaction. “Customer delight is the reaction of customers when they receive a service or product that not only satisfies, but provides unexpected value or unanticipated satisfaction” (Chandler 1989, 30). Finn specified this in 2005 and conceptualized customer delight “as an emotional response, which results from surprising and positive levels of performance” (Finn 2005, 104). Customer delight can be understood to be a positive emotional state that is perceived far more intensely than pure satisfaction and leads to a strongly emotional attitude among customers (Gouthier et al. 2012, 212). Or, as stated by Becker, customer delight is an intensely felt, positive emotion of the customer, triggered by a particularly convincing service (Becker 2015, 28). This goes beyond the actual product benefit or a simple execution of a service request. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the demarcation between a satisfying or expected product or service and a delighting experience. “Delight is a bonus that ‘buys’ greater depth in the relationship and increased loyalty from customers” (Schneider and Bowen 1999, 42). In this context, it is important

to understand, that many delight factors have their origin not only in what is done, but above all in how something is done (Schüller 2006, 8). Reviewing the way how a service, which ideally ends with a delighted customer, is executed forms the transition towards the consideration of emotions in this context. Especially in this case, where a shift from objective evaluations to subjective evaluation standards, that vary from customer to customer. Additionally, customers might react differently in recurring situations based on their emotional state. This is the basis for the importance of taking emotional influences into account in the customer decision-making process. “Among the components of the consumption experience, emotional responses may occupy a unique position” (Oliver and Westbrook 1993, 12). For many goods, the additional emotional stimuli provided even become the primary reason for consumption or for choosing a particular brand (Kroeber-Riel and Weinberg 1996, 115). Or, as stated by Popli, who also reviewed the connections between delight and emotions: “High satisfaction or delight creates an emotional bond with the brand, not just a rational preference” (Popli 2005, 19). Emotional approaches play an integral role in influencing customer decisions (White and Yu 2005, 417). This is not only relevant for researchers and marketing managers. It will be more and more incorporated within the daily work of frontline employees, their managers, the executive leaders and within various professional learning program that should support this change process. According to a survey of 197 customer managers, emotional customer loyalty is the most important goal of customer delight management (buw Unternehmensgruppe/Center of Service Excellence CSE 2013). The goal is to create an emotional bond between the customer and the company (Gouthier 2013, 5). In summary it can be stated that “emotions are regarded as a powerful driving force in consumer decision making. Customers derive a great amount of pleasure when they are emotionally touched” (Bagdare 2015, 9). The concept of customer delight is the tool that connects the business needs with the emotional responds.

EMOTIONS

How the emotional responds are influencing the human interaction, how they can be influenced and why this is so important to ensure long-term business success will be described now. As emotions are human feelings, we are surrounded by them constantly. Despite that, emotions are difficult to define. “Everyone knows what an emotion is, until asked to give a definition. Then, it seems, no one knows” (Fehr and Russell 1984, 464). From Arnold's perspective emotions are “affective states that can arouse an impulse to action together with physiological changes” (Arnold 1960, 228). This impulse to act needs to be triggered if, e. g. you intend to delight the customer you are dealing with at this moment. Kleinginna and Kleinginna propose this working definition which shows the various aspects that have to be considered: “Emotion is a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors, mediated by neural/hormonal systems, which can (a) give rise to affective experiences such as feelings of arousal, pleasure/displeasure; (b) generate cognitive processes such as emotionally relevant perceptual effects, appraisals, labeling processes; (c) activate widespread physiological adjustments to the arousing conditions; and (d) lead to behavior that is often, but not always, expressive, goal directed, and adaptive” (Kleinginna and Kleinginna 1981, 355). This working definition expresses the complexity of scientific subjects which have a connection to emotional topics. Willingness to act is seen as the core of the emotion. If an emotion is generated, the associated willingness to act is also given higher priority (Merten 2003, 15). “Emotions are strong feelings that demand attention and are likely to affect cognitive processes and behavior. Some examples of emotions include anger, fear, sadness, happiness, disgust, shame, surprise, and love” (Yukl 2006, 201). Confirmation or disconfirmation as a customer response to a business exchange are highly emotionally influenced, even if the decision or reaction is expected to be purely rationally driven. According to Appelmann, emotions touch a person in a very deep, profound and not always comprehensible way (Appelmann 2011, 51).

To understand the complex ways emotions are influencing human behavior is key to be successful with the concept of customer delight. The focus of this concept is set on subjective ratings and therefore highly dependent on emotionally driven impressions and decisions. Staying with Arnold people learn and act in the context of their emotionality (Arnold 2005, 11). And by doing so, “we may not even be aware that we are reacting emotionally because we have misinterpreted our reaction or the conditions bringing it about” (Lazarus 1991, 18). This mostly unconscious emotional processes should improve our adaptation to the requirements of our living environment, they should inform us whether environmental events are important to us and enable us to react quickly to them (Merten 2003, 137). Plutchik sees emotions as non-linear (Plutchik 2001, 347). While the review of Oatley and Jenkins leads to the conclusion to describe them as initiated, processed and then expressed (Oatley and Jenkins 1996, 98). Simonov stated already in 1970 that “positive emotions also serve as a means of overcoming the deficiency of information experienced by the individual. In a sense, emotions are opposed to rational experience because logic alone is insufficient for the success of adaptive actions in a changing environment” (Simonov 1970, 149). By doing this, he highlighted the importance and influence of positive feelings in connection with a decision to be taken. In this context it is further important to understand the specifics of decision-making processes. “Decision processes are likely to be characterized more by confusion, disorder, and emotionality than by rationality” (Yukl 2006, 26). Referring to the initially mentioned Western European culture it shows the dilemma caused by this process which can be designated as uncontrolled, disordered, individually, and potentially unpredictable. Regardless of this it will become more and more important to understand the functionality of emotions and to make use of them while creating individual and delightful customer experiences. This requires also to accept that, compared to other psychological phenomena, the expression and understanding of emotions takes place primarily via non-verbal communication channels (Ulich 1985, 36). While understanding the need for mood-congruent processes in the sense that emotionally colored information that matches one's own mood is processed preferentially, i.e. more attention tends to be paid to such information (Steckelberg 2016, 164). This also underlines the need for a mental shift towards a more individual and less hard fact-oriented business approach, especially within the process design of direct customer interaction.

As emotion “is not produced by the brain” (Arnold 1970, 179) customer delight requires a different approach to achieve the desired effect. This is a collective task within an organization and requires a clear understanding of the requirements to achieve the desired future organizational state where agility and flexibility will become more important. Of course and in addition to the emotional aspect, the customer has to be inspired by the product or service itself (Pfaff 2006, 25). “The emotion system is reactive to immediate events and the current physiological state of the person. Thus a person's emotions fluctuate over time” (Diener and Lucas 2000, 333). As there is always an emotional coloration, every decision is ultimately an emotional decision (Schüller 2006, 6). Transferring this insight into the business environment where international competition and the overstimulation of the customer are increasing, the unpredictability of customer behavior will be the consequence – emotional criteria are increasingly determining consumer behavior (Becker and Schnee 2005, 29). The results of Schneider and Bowen “suggest that focusing on customer delight and outrage – emotions more intense than satisfaction or dissatisfaction – may lead to a better understanding of the dynamics of customer emotions and their effect on customer behavior and loyalty” (Schneider and Bowen 1999, 36). The power of emotions has been discovered by advertising and marketing specialists. Those are developing strategies to make use of the mentioned emotional influence within in the decision-making process. At some stages they try to use those findings to manipulate customers and their preferences (Merten 2003, 9). But this is not part of the customer delight concept. Customer delight is targeting to create real delightful customer

experiences, based on honest, individual, and flexible interactions that result in long-term, trustful relationships. That this achieves positive results in practice is expected from Lee et al.: “It is possible consumers would be much happier with choices based more on their emotional reaction. [...] Indeed, our results suggest that the heart can very well serve as a more reliable compass to greater long-term happiness than pure reason” (Lee et al. 2009, 185). In order to broaden the perspective, it should also be noted that internal organizational set-up and mind-set have to evolve in the same way. Customer delight requires a holistic organizational change approach, where also a specific focus is set on the responsible managers and their leadership behavior. “Until the 1980s, few conceptions of leadership recognized the importance of emotions as a basis for influence. In contrast, many recent conceptions of leadership emphasize the emotional aspects of influence much more than reason. According to this view, only the emotional, value-based aspects of leadership influence can account for the exceptional achievements of groups and organizations” (Yukl 2006, 5). The emotional influence and the potential impact of embracing this might offer new and unexpected opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The possibility to make delightful decisions within customer interactions need to be given to the frontline employees. While managers need to adapt to the new challenges and leadership requirements they need to become open-minded to change their leadership style. Related to those two key determinants and supported by an organization-wide focus on emotional aspects the concept of customer delight can be sufficiently supported in order to introduce it successfully. Besides necessary changes within the processes and leadership approach, an understanding for the importance of the emotional needs has to be developed.

The particularities of these challenges described in this publication must be analyzed individually and adapted to the company's specific situation. In combination with a prior assessment of the current situation, a plan, usually consisting of several stages, must be drawn up for the introduction of customer delight. In addition, special training courses for employees with customer contact and managers must be developed and implemented. In addition, intensive work must be done on the necessary understanding of the customer delight concept and the special role of emotions identified here. The diverse requirements associated with this multi-purpose approach require an organizational-wide commitment and an ongoing organizational exchange and learning at all hierarchical levels.

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РОЛЯТА НА ЕМОЦИИТЕ В КОНЦЕПЦИЯТА ЗА УДОВЛЕТВОРЕНОСТ НА КЛИЕНТА

Резюме: Особено в рамките на западноевропейската култура емоциите и емоционалните подходи изглеждат са отхвърлени в бизнес средите. Това води до аналитичен и ориентиран към фактите фокус на процеса на вземане на решения и подход към клиента. Увеличаващите се изследвания върху човешкото поведение и причините, поради които една оферта е предпочитана пред друга, подчертават важността на емоциите. При концепцията за удовлетвореност на клиента, в която индивидът трябва да бъде изненадан и се цели дългосрочна, уникална връзка, емоционалният аспект е ключов фактор. Това оказва влияние върху настройката на директното взаимодействие с клиентите, стила на лидерство и изисква постоянно организационно обучение.

Ключови думи: удовлетвореност на клиента, управление на промените, емоции, лидерство, организационно обучение

Dirk Menzel, PhD candidate

University of Library Studies and Information Technologies

E-mail: menzel.dirk@gmx.de