The Customer Room

Grow Your Business by Improving Customers' Lives

JEANNE BLISS

If you're in the fray of silo-based reactivity to customer issues, the Customer Room will help to emancipate you from those fire drills.

The Customer Room is the glue that unites a leadership team to focus and improve customers' lives to earn the right to growth.

Building a customer room to step leaders and the organization through your customers' lives and walk in their shoes monthly, quarterly, and annually is one of the most robust actions you can take to align leaders and drive customer-driven action. It engages leaders personally in customers' lives and unites them to make decisions. It establishes an accountability forum that transcends most governance meetings on the subject, where projects are reported but engaging in under-standing and improving customers' lives is not always built-in.

The Customer Leadership Executive needs to be a sleuth, uncovering and navigating agendas and factors that slow down and can threaten the work, especially if some leaders question its connection to business growth (when we really feel like we're pushing that rock up the hill).

This means facilitating one-company building, development, and understanding of the entire customer journey, versus the silo-based journeys that are actually internal processes called "journeys" (such as the sales process, marketing acquisition process, etc.). It includes focusing the organization on priority one—company experiences—and on changing the conversations from silo-driven conversations to collaborative conversations about customers' lives, and their experience across the journey they have with your organization. Over time, this will evolve leadership language to drive performance along the customer journey, driving accountability to journey stages, not only down silos.

Culture must be proven with decisions and operational actions that are deliberate in steering how a company will and will not treat customers and employees. The role of the Customer Experience Executive (CCO, CXO, etc.) is to work with the leadership team in building the consistent behaviors, decision-making, and company engagement that will prove to the organization that leaders are united in their commitment to earn the right to customer-driven growth.

By telling stories of experiences that occur to customers across journey stages, you can personalize customers' lives so that leaders and your organization care about the people behind the scores, metrics, and data.

In reality, the way that most customer conversations are held is in a report on project plans focused on improving survey scores or showing a project plan with red-yellow-green dots. This does not engage leaders; as many of my clients say, "People just sort of tune out during my report." Yet the sales conversations are robust and spirited.

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My recommendation is to build a Customer Room to unite your leadership on three components:

1. Experientially, to establish empathy for customer's lives.

2. Financially, to connect experience performance to business growth.

3. Operationally, to unite leaders in focusing on the critical few priorities rather than every silo independently selecting and working on a multitude of projects.

As a result of building a customer room, accountability changes from silo and project performance to customer life improvement. Your customer journey framework provides a disciplined one-company diagnosis into the 'why' behind customer asset growth or loss. And it leadership rigor is established in understanding and caring about priorities in customers' lives (The real power in journey mapping.)

You can use your customer room to drive monthly, quarterly, and annual accountability. We have found it to be one of the most robust actions to align leaders and drive customer-driven action. It engages leaders personally in customers' lives and unites them to make decisions.

Build Your Customer Room, and Grow By Improving Customers' Lives

The customer room is a tangible depiction of your customers' journey with you. It is where you bring leaders together regularly, to tell the story of your customers' lives. The power of the customer room is the visual storytelling, because it is set up as an experience—a way for your leaders and organization to step through customers' lives.

Here's how to engage leaders to care about customers' lives...
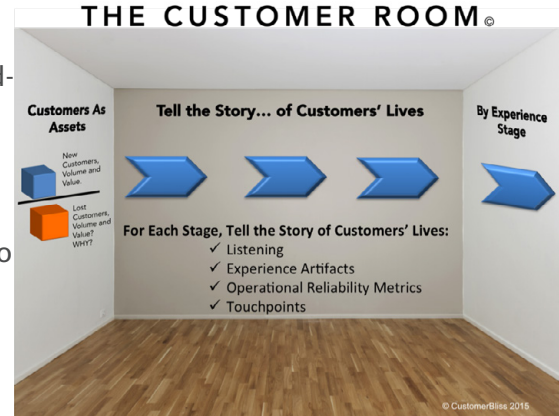
Conversation 1 | **Connect the Work to ROI.** Ask, "Did we earn the right to customer growth?" This is where you present the visual depiction of customer as assets—the outcome of the growth or loss of your customers and their few key behavioral actions showing growth or diminishment of engagement and bond. This is where leaders prove that they care about the "why" behind whether customers stayed or left.

Conversation 2 | **Breed Caring about Customers' Lives.** Create empathy for your customers. Do this by walking through the current experience to know what customers are going through. By stage of the experience, show the story visually with what they experience, what they hear, and how customers react. Here you assemble information built from multiple sources of listening organized by stage of the customer experience. Make this active and visual by also showing screenshots, the paperwork customers have to fill out, and videos, and playing recorded calls— make executives try to do what you require customers to do so they step through the life of the customer.

Conversation 3 | **Unite Leaders in Focus, Prioritization, and Commitments.** Unite leaders to select experiences for improvement or innovation. Once you walk through the stages of the customer experience and identify emerging priorities, leaders collectively and in a united manner select which experiences they will add as priorities to be addressed.

This does three things:

1. It establishes focus on the critical few versus the many silo-based projects that come out of a 'customer experience' focus sent out to the organization to independently interpret and begin acting upon.

2. It starts to eliminate "volunteer fatigue" from special projects. We have exhausted the middle of nearly every organization I work with due to the volunteer task forces that are assembled to work on customer experiences. This is usually done alongside every other special project that has been layered onto what has already been planned for the year.

3. It establishes a reliable cycle of accountability for the teams you task to improve customer experiences. Use your customer room to have the teams report back each month following this simple path:
   - Month 1: Current state of selected experience is presented
   - Month 2: Identify root cause issues and current metrics.
   - Month 3: Recommendations for actions and budget.
   - Month 4: Begin actions.

Please consider this a straw man, as the cycle should be accelerated or lengthened depending on the complexity of the customer issue or experience redesign. The power is the clear path given to leaders for selecting focus areas and to the assembled teams assigned to tackling them.

It creates recognition and a rigorous process for leaders to unite in selecting high potential folks for these teams. It puts a big spotlight on these teams to have the opportunity to present to leadership. And it gives leaders the opportunity to reward teams on their work.

Today, in most organizations, teams tackling customer experiences are assembled without proper leadership advocacy and alignment at the initiation of the work. As a result, they feel like beggars seeking the attention, resources, and commitment from leaders for their actions (usually layered on their regular work load).

The customer room process, when continued as a regular part of leaders' commitment to customer-driven growth, energizes both leadership and the organization, and continues the momentum required for transformation.

Here are the outcomes of establishing the Customer Room Experience with Leaders:

Leaders Unite in One-Company Prioritization

Current Prioritization: In general, silo-based operations are not working in line of sight to one another to build complete end-to-end customer experiences. Silos often go separately to the (well-intended) survey dashboard where they dissect data question by question (rather than by customer journey). Here silos individually cherry-pick projects and priorities by driving actions they believe will drive 'lift' on survey question scores that can be attributable back to them. This drives the prioritization of many projects all coming from different silo based points of view. All these projects give a false positive that customers' interests and needs are being focused on. Projects overlap, as they are often assembled with silo-based prioritization.

Future Prioritization takes a one-company approach as leaders traverse the customer journey on a monthly, weekly and annual basis to select the few impactful priorities versus the many silo-based priorities. Customer listening and operational process information is assembled across the customer journey to provide an updated and regular view at emerging priorities. This informs leaders of the key strategic priorities that they must unite on to improve.

Capacity Starts to Be Addressed & Managed

Currently, in most organizations, when new cross-functional teams are assembled to react to squeaky-wheel customer issues, they tax already busy people. The reactive and uncoordinated nature drives the feeling that this work is not part of the real work. Fatigue, exhaustion, and feelings of "Why are we doing this?" ensue.

Intelligent capacity creation is an important benefit of building out this engine with leaders. Every time I meet with a client, I ask how good they are at building their "stop doing" list. That question is almost always greeted with laughter. And here's why: there's no common framework for deciding what stops and what doesn't stop. It becomes a lobbying effort for projects, driven by subjective decision-making based on who does the best "sell" of why the project should stay or go.

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Complete Customer Experience Solutions are Created

Current accountability to customer-driven priorities might run along the lines of "Billing-related survey scores are low. Jim, you run billing, take a look and then report back to us what needs to be fixed." Sound familiar? Jim takes a well-intended look at the processes to see what is out of alignment with his team's point of view. They work on a few things. In the next meeting, Jim reports out that they've taken care of their issues.

Here's what's challenging with that approach. First, fixing "billing" from the billing department standpoint does not necessarily elevate or improve the customer's billing experience. The experience can be disappointing for a host of reasons. Maybe the billing cycle was not explained clearly so there is misunderstanding. Maybe the terms on the form have too much jargon (which may not look like jargon to the well-meaning billing team). The list goes on and on. Second, the old-fashioned report at the executive weekly meeting pushes us back to project plans with red-yellow-green dots. The emphasis is on "did you get it done" rather than "how did you improve the lives of our customers."

Squeaky-wheel issues lobbed to operational areas or cross-functional teams to "take a look at" are inconsistent in rigor and process. What success should look like is not clearly understood

or agreed upon. When the silos work on something from their area, success may be the reduction of an inside-out metric. In general, there is not a regularly understood set of actions and outcomes when "take a look at it" is requested. And more to the point, the "take a look at it" cycle by its very nature is reactive.

Future accountability occurs because leaders agree in unison where the focus should be. That is a result of the rigor that comes from building a customer room. The information and storytelling of the customers' lives turn them into priorities. They agree in unison what resources each will contribute to investigate and solve the end-to-end experience.

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When Customers Lives are Improved, Customer-Driven Growth is Earned

Over time, as leaders work through the Customer Room experience, it will become clear to the organization that the work of your company is to earn the right to growth by improving customers' lives. Leadership plans, investments, and the order of how products are built, services are established, and people are supported will be guided by the commitment to honor and grow customers as assets. Actions will prove that a united leadership team is deliberately steering the company in the direction of supporting customers' lives. ▣

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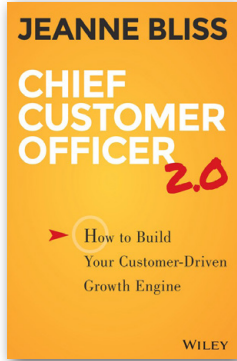
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Jeanne Bliss pioneered the Chief Customer Officer position, holding the role for over twenty years at Lands' End, Allstate, Coldwell Banker, Mazda, and Microsoft. Since 2002 she has led CustomerBliss, a leading customer experience transformation company where she helps companies achieve customer- driven growth. She is a worldwide keynote speaker, and co-founder of the Customer Experience Professionals Association. Jeanne Bliss is the bestselling author of *Chief Customer Officer: Getting Past Lip Service to Passionate Action* and *I Love You More than My Dog: Five Decisions that Drive Extreme Customer Loyalty in Good Times and Bad.*

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