

Isn't it ALL About the Customer?

By *Tim Young, Editor-in-Chief*

They've always been around. They've always been present.

They've been a part of the conversation, and maintaining their happiness has always been a goal, if only in theory.

"They" are the customers, and, if you listen to the chatter from CSPs and OSS/BSS vendors, alike, over the last few years, they've experienced a serious renaissance. Whereas keeping customers has always been a cornerstone of any successful telecom endeavor, we've never been so inundated with marketing pushes about keeping customers

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happy, thereby reducing churn and, if you're lucky, maximizing ARPU.

Every aspect of the OSS/BSS picture can, theoretically, impact the customer experience. QoS. Billing. Provisioning. Etc. At every point of contact, the CSP runs the risk of souring their relationship with the customer.

However, there was a time when a discussion of the customer led directly to a discussion about CRM (Customer Relationship Management) software.

And CRM is still essential.

However, there are those who, increasingly, believe



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that the focus of CRM is totally internal: A quest for CSPs to find out information about the customer that helps the CSP to market to or cross-sell to that customer. Which is a completely practical goal.

However, with each passing month and year, the CEM (Customer Experience Management) value proposition becomes slightly more alluring.

Ostensibly, the value of CEM over its more traditional cousin is that it takes a more holistic approach to maintaining a customer relationship. Rather than being driven exclusively by raising ARPU, CSPs can seek to get a better understanding of how the customer is having his or her needs met at every step of the existing relationship. That is key, because as service offerings become more diverse, there's always an alternative.

Furthermore, in the face of increasing competition and an economic climate that is causing consumers to examine every penny spent and eschew waste or customer dissatisfaction, the goal to raise ARPU should definitely never cause your company to run the risk of peeving your customers in a never-ending quest for the up-sell.

To paraphrase the soul and blues artist Johnnie

Taylor, "It's cheaper to keep [them]."

And while CRM can win you an extra buck or two, it doesn't do much to lower churn. CEM, however, can.

It can do this by providing a unified look at the end-to-end customer experience, when properly executed. In addition, the needs of the customer can be balanced against a view of the capabilities of the network. A CSP can understand what bottlenecks and inefficiencies can be resolved before they seriously hinder the experience of the customer.

The customer is already telling you what they need.

After all, customers churn because they're not happy with their service. We can keep them around by finding out what the problem is and how we can solve it. How do we get this information? Some CEM providers, like Arantech (which was relatively recently acquired by Tektronix), insist that they're already telling us.

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Are you being proactive? Or are you waiting for them to complain?

experience lifecycle, from service acquisition, through provisioning, usage, billing and support, they leave behind traces of transactional data in the existing business and operational support platforms that serve the customer,” says James Doyle, Arantech’s Director of Product Management & Marketing. “If an operator can acquire and aggregate this data, it provides a fingerprint of the customers’ actual experiences as they interact with the operator’s brand.”

You don’t need to ask the customer what they want or need. The customer is already telling you, if you know how to interpret the data that they are providing to you.

“It is around these principles CEM solutions revolve,” said Doyle.

Other CEM solutions providers, like DAX Technologies, employ slightly different approaches,

but all are focused around the idea that a holistic approach to analyzing customer need and behavior can be the key to understanding how to keep them coming back for more.

CEM providers offer, in short, “offer an effective means for accurately measuring the customer experience,” says Tom Magg, CTO of DAX. “In our current competitive market environment, this is increasingly critical – if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.”

And just how to measure that customer experience is a big part of the challenge. “Customer experience data is more difficult to measure than most,” says Magg. “It cannot be simply collected the way fault or performance data can be.” Therefore, CSPs must rely on approximation, estimating the overall quality of the customer experience, overall, “much in the way the Mean Opinion Score (MOS) projects the customer’s perceived quality of voice calls,” says Magg.

Back in 2008, IBM referred to this area as “the next frontier in Telecom service assurance.” And it has been.



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Furthermore, CEM ties directly to the concept of SQM (service quality management).

CEM and SQM are at the core of some of the catalyst projects that will be explored at the upcoming TM Forum Management World, and we're interested to see how the companies taking part in the event (BT and DMTF as catalyst CSP "champions", Aviat with Customer Experience Assurance resources, Amdocs on the MCE (Managing Customer Experience) and CRM side, Progress Software for data mediation and model harmonization, and Tail-f for QoS-centric resource activation) explore the interaction between the provider and the customer.

Fundamentally, we hope the catalyst and other projects like it can help CSPs to understand how to not only gain customers and maximize their revenues from those customers, but also retain customers for as long as reasonably possible. It's a "bird in the hand" approach, but it's an approach that has been overlooked in the past, and that can provide real value for the future.

The very existence of the catalyst demonstrates the importance of CEM for some CSPs. In addition, the acquisition of companies like Arantech demonstrates that larger vendors are well-aware of the growing need for and value of CEM solutions.

So how are you meeting the needs of your customers? Are you being proactive? Or are you waiting for them to complain?

As we enter another tradeshow season, I'm prepared to hear yet another barrage of messaging of how important the customer is. It's one bit of buzz I tend to believe and support. Perhaps a proactive move towards forward-looking CEM is one piece of the puzzle of making the customer experience as positive as possible.