Newsmaker Q&A: Customer experience now a busy two-way street

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Back in the old days, when a majority of companies actually made things, customer relations could be something of an afterthought.

Product development, production, sales and distribution - those were the hubs of corporate activity, profit generation and career advancement.

Often, the all-but-forgotten folks in customer relations did little more than send form letters, refund checks and make-good coupons to disgruntled (read: former) customers.

Now, however, customer relations is front and center at many companies - especially those where the customer experience *is* the product.

Take Cincinnati-based **iSqFt**.

Although it's one of the fastest-growing players in the construction industry, **iSqFt** doesn't *build* anything. The company uses the Internet to give general contractors, subcontractors and suppliers access to digital blueprints and specs for thousands of projects up for bid nationwide.

"We don't have warehouses full of inventory, and so our product and our service are all the same," said Dave Conway, CEO of **iSqFt**, which has grown from four employees to 365 in the past decade.

"It's kind of cheesy, but I call myself the 'customer-experience officer' - not the chief executive officer, because our whole business is about the customer experience."

VIDEO: iSqFt in the news

In this era of social-media ubiquity - when customers armed with Twitter, Facebook and YouTube can make or break a company - creating a positive customer experience is critical, said Michael Bills, executive in residence at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

Bills discussed the evolution of customer relations with Mike Kallmeyer, host of ONN-TV's*Ohio Means Business* program. An edited excerpt:

Q: Consumer experience - that's what it's all about these days?

A: Absolutely. In fact, I don't think it's cheesy at all for (Conway) to say he's the chief customer-experience officer. It is sort of the foundation and cornerstone of how brands are interacting with their consumers today.

Q: Looking back, companies might have simply been blasting their customers with ads and e-mails and whatnot. It's not that way anymore, right?

A: At the advent of social media, say, 36, 48 months ago, a lot of the conversation was about how we utilize databases - data mining, e-mail lists - but, today, those are really dynamic. If you have a viral solution from a social-media perspective, consumers can populate that with amazing speed.

So it has less to do with traditional customer-relationship management, and more to do with customer-experience management. The difference is really quite simple but also really profound.

Customer-relationship management tends to deal with (point-of-sale) data - historical sales data about how a consumer interacted with your brand - whereas customer-experience management is really about understanding how the consumer embraces, or doesn't embrace, your brand, your product, your services - in real time, in their lives - and understanding what they want from you.

Q: And in that experience, you say you have to be concerned with two things: transparency and openness. What do you mean by that?

A: Well, the idea of transparency is really about sort of recognizing that this is a two-way dialogue and that there are perspectives and perceptions of the brand that consumers have - real or imagined, fair or unfair - and that they're going to express those, regardless of whether you participate in that conversation.

So, this is really about saying, you know, 'We understand that there is this perception.'

A lot of folks initially, from a social-media perspective inside organizations, wanted to minimize the amount of negative criticism on their blogs or on their social-media applications, but they're increasingly understanding that it not only gives validity to the positive output, but also allows for them to recover from any sort of negative customer perceptions.

Q: You, of course, teach and preach all of these things at Fisher. Whether it's a student or a business or whoever it may be, how does someone keep up with the changes, because things could be different a week from now?

A: Yeah, well, in fact, they *will* be. A new application, a new social-media solution - (there are) dozens of those, seemingly, every day. So it isn't necessarily about populating or pursuing all of those routes, because you sort of exhaust all your internal capabilities - not only financially, but human-capital-wise. It's more about making measured strategies to understand where you can focus and where you can get the biggest bang for the buck.

Q: Talk about the concept of *overinformation*.

A: There are a lot of futurists, a lot of folks in this space, who are talking increasingly about the need for consumers to filter information through actual filter mechanisms - and about utilizing social media as one of those filters, based on what their friends, their family and their colleagues are interested in and how they get this information.

Brands need to understand that, increasingly, this information is not only filtered by the consumer, but by their friends and family, and they need to start to create an ecosystem of information that's based purely on (those people's) world views - on how they think, what they like, what they don't like.