

Building a 360-degree View of the Customer

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Customers typically interact with many different departments or contacts in a company. To build the most effective and profitable relationship with a customer, it's essential for everyone in a company to have access to the full 360-degree view of customer transactions. Putting all customer details, purchases, contacts, inquiries, and service records on an intranet can provide sales and marketing teams with the essential information need.

What You Need to Know

Why Is a 360-Degree View Important?

The 360-degree view tells you how your customers are contacting you, browsing your Web Site, acquiring information, ordering products, placing service inquiries or making complaints. It brings together all this information to build a detailed profile and shows how well your sales, marketing, and communication channels match your customers' activities.

Is the 360-Degree View a Technology Issue or an Approach to Business?

Technology certainly plays a critical role because companies who want the 360-degree view must have a suitable networking solution that integrates all the customer information that is available in separate parts of an organization. However, it is also an approach to business which puts the customer at the center of the organization and builds a platform for quality customer service.

What to Do

Understand the 360-Degree Approach

Most companies have detailed customer records, but how many are aware of all the customer interactions that take place? Very few have a 360-degree view of the customer—that is a single view of all customer interactions. Getting a 360-degree view is essential for organizations that want to optimize marketing, communications, customer service, and product development. Used effectively, the 360-degree view strengthens customer retention and can increase customers' lifetime value and profitability. Looking ahead, companies with a 360-degree view can tailor products and services to meet their customers' long-term needs, confident that they have a complete picture.

The 360-degree approach underpins a number of important customer service initiatives:

- development of measurable goals, objectives, and tactics for every point of interaction customers have with your company
- establishment of company-wide business metrics, customer measurement, tracking, and reporting processes for all sectors, product lines, and points of contact
- customer interaction guidelines that span every part of your company that has customer contact

Make Customer-Facing Staff More Effective

Customer information is often scattered across several business systems making it difficult for customer service representatives to gain a 360-degree view of the customer when they are making contact. As a result, your staff waste valuable time navigating several applications to piece together a single view of the customer. They may also miss opportunities to make inbound customer inquiries more productive because they lack customer intelligence, such as a customer's inclination to buy certain products.

Networked computer solutions provide an efficient and effective method of creating a “single view” of the customer or of a process. The system integrates your other business systems on the desktop of customer-facing staff, providing them with a comprehensive view of the customer that can be used to simplify access to customer information and dramatically improve productivity, morale, and most importantly—your customers' experience.

Speed Up Response Times

A 360-degree solution enables you to consolidate customer data such as transaction history, payment history, and other information from separate applications and deliver a simple view that any staff member can use to provide the information a customer is requesting without having to navigate a maze of screens. Your customers want information and services fast. Providing your staff with a single view of the customer can have a significant impact on their ability to deliver superior customer service. By reducing the amount of time and frustration it takes to switch between multiple applications to handle calls, you are giving the staff greater flexibility, enabling them to spend less time interacting with systems and more time interacting with customers. Having full knowledge at their fingertips means that your staff can close each inquiry successfully without having to refer to other people or other systems.

Spend More Time with Customers

The ability to deliver a high-quality customer experience using a 360-degree view of the customer can be of major strategic value to your company. Having a single view of the customer right at the staff's fingertips means that you have a greater opportunity to cultivate a more meaningful relationship with that customer, either solving a problem or offering additional products or services that generate additional revenue. The 360-degree view enables your staff to increase customer satisfaction by engaging in knowledgeable conversations with the customer, confident that they have full up-to-date information available when they need it.

Offer Customers a Consistent Experience

The 360-degree view offers not only a consolidated view of the customer, it also provides your staff with access to information needed to meet customer-service demands and support Web-based customer self-service. The system can also guide your staff through processes such as cross-selling interactions, which allow you to introduce best practices into every customer interaction. The result is that customers will enjoy a consistent experience throughout your company.

This level of consistency also provides important productivity benefits for your sales and customer service operations:

- improved customer interaction and call quality
- reduced call time
- significant reduction in data entry errors
- reduced training time

Provide a One-Stop Facility

Customer service and sales operations based on a 360-degree view give you the opportunity to provide your customers with a one-stop shop—a single point of contact for all your products and services. This can be particularly useful if your company has a number of product lines sold through different departments or divisions. Customers do not want to spend their time being transferred between departments or trying to figure out for themselves who they should contact. Ideally, any member of your customer-facing team should be able to deal with any type of customer inquiry. It may be that certain inquiries have to be escalated or transferred to specialists, but this can be handled seamlessly without inconveniencing the customer.

Improve Customer Relationship Management

Increasingly, customers are making buying decisions based on more than the four traditional factors of product, place, price, and promotion. They are also influenced by variables such as service quality, recognition, and efficiency of customer support. With a 360-degree system in place, you may be able to strongly differentiate your company in these areas and achieve high levels of customer satisfaction.

The 360-degree view is an integral element of customer relationship management. Relationships with customers are not possible without understanding exactly who your customers really are, what they value, what they want to buy, and how they prefer to interact with and be served by you. Moving your customer relationships forward requires a deeper understanding of customer characteristics and behaviors, such as your customers' purchases and related spending patterns, their current potential value to your company, and other characteristics.

Identify Important Customer Segments

As well as providing a single view of the customer, the consolidated information available from a 360-degree approach can also help you segment your customers. By breaking customers into groups that differ in purchasing behavior, annual spending, product preference, demographic, and other characteristics, you can customize product offerings, service and support systems, order processing, marketing communications, and other significant customer interactions.

This is important because not all customers are equal. In most businesses, a small number of top customers contribute the largest proportion of revenue and profit. Therefore, you may wish to ensure a positive experience for your high-value customers across all parts of your company. The system should allow you to flag these customer accounts for special care at the point of contact, directing their inbound calls and e-mails to senior account managers, providing priority service, and making special offers. At the same time, you may wish to direct less profitable customers to use lower-cost automated services or self-service Web pages.

Overcome “Ownership” Issues

Creating a single point of contact for all customer inquiries is an important strategic objective, but to achieve it, you may have to overcome internal resistance. The 360-degree approach replaces separate functions such as call centers, help desks, customer service departments and sales offices, as well as individual account managers. People in these areas may feel that they have a strong relationship with certain customers and may be unwilling to give up “ownership.” You need to demonstrate the benefits of the 360-degree approach to all customer-facing staff and win their commitment to the new approach.

What to Avoid

You Rely on Technology Not People

The 360-degree approach is based on networking technologies that integrate information from separate departments and IT systems. However, it is the people who interact with customers who deliver the real benefits. They must be committed to the single point of contact approach and they must be able to use the full capabilities of the system in order to deliver prompt, quality service and recognize opportunities to win new business.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Seybold, Patricia B., and Ronni T. Marshak, *Customers.com: How to Create a Profitable Business Strategy for the Internet and Beyond*. Crown Business, 1998.

Web Site:

customers.com: www.customers.com