

## **Capitalizing on customer (in)experience**

by Jim Barnes, Chief Customer Strategist, BMAI

We're all focused these days on the customer experience and with good reason, but there is very good evidence that increasing customer inexperience may represent an opportunity for companies to step in and help customers accomplish things.

At the end of the day, customers need to get things done. Ted Levitt, many years ago, made the cogent observation that nobody ever went out to buy a quarter-inch drill. What's needed is the hole; the drill is merely a means to the end. More recently, Clayton Christensen has written eloquently on the jobs that customers hire products (and services) to get done. In other words, the life of the customer is full of minor day-to-day challenges -- getting dinner for the kids, getting the dining room painted, taking the car in for service, finding a dress to wear to Cousin Jane's wedding.

Increasingly, customers are finding it difficult to complete many of these relatively straightforward tasks; I suspect there may be three reasons for this. First, they simply haven't got the time in their busy schedules to do it themselves. Second, they have absolutely no idea how to do it. And third, businesses often put barriers in the way of customers that prevent them from achieving what they set out to do.

There are many opportunities for businesses to help customers free up time to get things done. Some Lexus dealers will collect a customer's car from her home and bring it back when service is completed. Kraft Foods makes available recipes on its website that allow busy customers to create dinner from what's in the fridge.

But, it is the increasing level of customer inexperience that may represent the best opportunity for companies to behave as partners in letting the customer accomplish what he or she wishes to get done. Increased specialization of labor and access to labor-saving products and services mean that many customers simply do not have the skills necessary to do many of the things that their parents did routinely.

Some companies have spotted this deficiency and are helping their customers either acquire new skills or compensate for their absence. Home Depot and other retailers will help customers learn how to lay ceramic tile or build a treehouse for the kids. A British egg company that emphasizes its happy, free-range chickens, realizing that some consumers literally do not know how to boil an egg, now offers through leading retailers two-packs and four-packs of perfectly boiled eggs, shelled and ready to serve ([www.thehappyegg.co.uk](http://www.thehappyegg.co.uk)).

The increased application of self-service technologies creates yet another opportunity for companies to help some of their customers learn how to use these technologies effectively. While many customers embrace automated checkouts and self-service kiosks, a certain percentage are intimidated by the technology and simply avoid it. If businesses are to realize the cost savings and other benefits associated with the introduction of such technology, they will have to address the customer's inexperience in dealing with it.

Interestingly, it is customer inexperience that creates opportunities for companies to step in to create positive customer experiences. The reaction is often "thank you for that; I couldn't have done it without your help."

Think about what your customers **CAN'T** do for themselves and then help them get it done. They'll thank you for it.