Joining Strategy and Usability: the Customer Experience Methodology

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Summary

The customer experience methodology (CEM) is a business-oriented method of creating positive change to the customer experience of an online technology. Creative Good has measured improvements of 40% to 150% in its six years of using the CEM for its consulting projects. What follows is a summary of the CEM.

The CEM works solely in context of the client's business: its strategic goals, current resources (organizational constraints, timeframe, etc.), and competitive position. Customer experience improvement, after all, is about driving business results.

The CEM is less directed and less task-focused than traditional user experience research methods. For example, in a CEM project, usability tests are conducted in the form of non-directive "listening labs." CEM results are easy to measure, by comparing key metrics before and after a CEM project is conducted.

Project phases

The customer experience methodology (CEM) attempts to join usability with business strategy, thereby offering significant and measurable gains to any company or organization that adopts it. The goal of the CEM is to identify the key unmet needs of customers on a website, then meet those needs with a set of improvements that will generate measurable results.

A typical CEM project is comprised of five phases:

1. Business and site review
2. Listening labs
3. Customer experience strategy
4. Prototypes
5. Ongoing advisory work

Once the prototypes are implemented and the new site launched, the “after” metrics can be measured and compared to the “before” metrics, thereby quantifying the improvement of the CEM project.

Note: The word “business” is used throughout this paper to describe the client organization, whether for-profit or not. Most CEM projects have been conducted for for-profit corporations, but a non-profit or educational organization could use the same method and generate similar results.

Each of the five phases is described briefly below.

1. Business and site review

The first phase serves to set the context of the overall project. Few improvements of any significance can be made to a site without understanding how it fits into the business. (General heuristics, such as “a list of 200 things all websites should do,” can be applied to generate tactical improvements, but those are unlikely to generate the dramatic improvements that the CEM usually attains.)

The business review begins with an RFI (Request for Information), in which the client organization brings together all documents — corporate strategy, marketing plan, sales numbers, web traffic logs, annual reports, etc. — that help describe the business as a whole. Interviews with management, marketing, and IT also help to accumulate necessary knowledge to set business context. The goal of the business review is to understand the business and its goals, and how the website fits in.

The site review is a brief qualitative assessment conducted within the context set by the business review. It is not an exhaustive review of every page and aspect of the site but instead looks for the main “takeaways” that will inform the rest of the project. For example, if the business review shows that a leading product line is not performing up to standard, the site review will focus more attention on that product line than other aspects of the site that are not as strategically important. The goal of the site review is to begin to form a hypothesis about the strategic changes necessary to bring about significant improvement in the business metrics.

2. Listening labs

Listening labs can be described in many ways: usability test, market research, organizational change tool, online business improvement approach. Listening labs are neither focus groups nor task-based usability, though they do employ elements of each. They are

open-ended, qualitative one-on-one sessions that capture both strategic and tactical customer insights. Over the course of one or two days, a typical lab will test a total of six to eight customers in one-on-one sessions that last 45 minutes or longer.
One lab per major customer segment is typically enough to gain the insight necessary to create a customer experience strategy (see next phase).

Labs can be conducted in a facility or in the field. Facility-based labs allow the attendance of more observers, which is invaluable for organizational change. Executives, in particular, rarely get a chance to see customers using the site, so observing a listening lab can do a lot to get management buy-in for site changes. Field-based research sometimes offers richer customer context, which is especially helpful when the customer experience depends on the daily life or work of the user (as in a site, tool, or service accessed via wireless device, for example).

Whether in the field or in a facility, listening labs are designed to emphasize the behavior and actions of customers, not primarily their opinions. Opinions are important, but they must be grounded in the context of behavior. It is critical, therefore, to create a testing context where respondents interact naturally with the site with as little interference and direction as possible. General tasks or parameters may be set during preparation, but in general, listening labs do not focus on the highly scripted, task-based methods of traditional usability tests.

3. Customer experience strategy

Once the listening lab data is analyzed, the customer experience strategy can be created. This strategy should not be confused with corporate strategy, which dictates how an organization should structure itself, or behave, to achieve its goals. Instead, customer experience strategy is a brief, simple, direct summary of the change necessary to improve the customer experience. This strategy is directly based on the first two phases of the project: it is framed in the context set in Phase 1, and it is backed up by the direct customer feedback received in the listening labs of Phase 2.

The goal of the customer experience strategy is to create a “hook,” or defining idea, on which the prototypes in Phase 4 can be based. It also helps on the organizational level: by presenting the customer experience strategy to the client, any buy-in or acceptance of the strategy then makes it much easier to implement the changes later. It’s easier to sell one strategy, in context of business and customer data, than to sell dozens of site changes that have no data or context backing them up.

4. Prototypes

Phase 4 generates prototypes for the pages on a site that must change in order to fulfill the customer experience strategy in Phase 3. For a typical CEM project, 10 to 20 prototypes will suffice to describe the changes to a site. Since most sites are generated from a few templates, it’s not necessary to generate a separate prototype for each individual page on a site.
A prototype is a simple block diagram showing the location, relative size, and (where appropriate) wording of the major elements on a page. Some clients prefer to call them “wireframes,” since prototypes sometimes refer to designs that are nearly complete.

Prototypes can be generated in Visio, PowerPoint, AppleWorks, or any other draw program that can show blocks and wording in a variety of sizes. They need not appear with colors, graphics, or other decorative elements; that's for graphic designers to fill in during implementation.

The most important idea about prototypes is that they are the physical embodiment of the customer experience strategy. That strategy, in turn, is the summary of the work done in Phases 1 and 2. In a CEM project, each phase draws on the data of all previous phases.

After prototypes are delivered, some clients opt to conduct a second round of listening labs, to measure the prototypes' effectiveness as compared to the site measured in the first round of labs. A second round of labs can help predict the change in metrics once the new site, based on the prototypes, is launched. It can also help to suggest incremental improvements to the prototypes.

5. Ongoing advisory work

Once prototypes are delivered, it's up to the implementation team to actually make the changes on the site. This can take any number of forms, depending on the e-commerce server, content management system, or other backend running the website. This integration is of secondary concern to the CEM practitioner: of primary concern is whether the new customer experience, as described in the strategy and prototypes, is faithfully reproduced on the new site. Thus, the final phase of a CEM project is to advise the implementation team, at its request, on any issues or questions that come up.

Advisory work can continue even after launch. Customer experience work, after all, is not a one-time delivery but an ongoing process. A site needs continual monitoring and improvement to its customer experience, based on the changing needs of its customers and the changing business environment.

Results

Over a six-year period, the CEM generated measurable improvements in key metrics as high as 200%, in one recently reported project [1]. Typically the improvements fall within the range of 40% to 150%. Key metrics measured depend on the client, but in the past have included revenue, cost savings, conversion rate, customer or user acquisition rate, and retention cost.

References

[1] Tedeschi, Bob. Putting Tinsel Into Web Shopping. The New York Times, 18 November 2002.

[2] See metrics displayed with case studies here: http://www.creativegood.com/casestudies