



'The Four Pillars'

Developing
a
'bonded' business to business

Customer Experience

Abstract

For us at Springboard Commercial Solutions the business to business (B2B) customer experience is all about;

“Understanding the experience expectations you are creating as an organisation with your customers and how they manifest themselves as real experiences across all the touch points and all levels of contact as the business relationship develops”

This paper is an investigation into the Business to Business experience (B2BE), how it differs from the Business to Consumer experience (B2CE) and the core elements of a bonded Business to Business experience.

Much of what is written/espoused from conference platforms about Customer Experience relates to the business to consumer domain. This we believe emanates from the largest budgets being within the B2CE sector. Across the board in the territory of B2B E there is limited genuine hard evidence based research and correlation to academic theory. This draws into question the validity/value of much that is written or spoken on the subject in relation to the B2B sector.

Within the B2B sector the absolute number of customer relationships may be fewer, but they are far more complex. They often include multiple contacts at differing levels across a large number of touch points.

Customers themselves are becoming more vocal, sophisticated and demanding around what they expect. Consolidation brings with it leverage and an ability to become more demanding of the supplier base

We gathered data from three sources; Practical Experience Insight from senior managers engaged within the business to business sector, using structured interviews, literature review and published research on business to business experience.

Within the B2B sector, professionals are often the key experience interface. They may develop a far more rational and detached approach to the delivery of expectations through the experience. They are also acting on behalf of the organisation or a third party to achieve business goals, objectives or meet specific needs. This means they require something they can depend upon to support their position and de-risk any decisions they make. Potentially the product /service will drive downstream value, it will therefore require reliability, consistency and reassurance that this can be achieved either on a one off basis or time and time again.

Within a B2B relationship contact will typically be more frequent across more touch points and may potentially involve many individuals from various functions. The relationship offers a multitude of contacts and complexity with expectations around an organisations ability to understand their needs and deliver against those needs.

An area that emerges within the B2B relationship and its impact upon the experience is joint working and co-creation. The experience is enhanced through formalised strategic management of the relationship through a strategic business unit or similar arrangement. Above all, it's the continual contact across multi level, multi functions and joint working / co-creation that differentiate the B2B experience from the B2C. Expectations are often implicit with B2B customers demanding a certain experience package as part of a tendering/contract process and to actively monitor progress vs their experience key performance indicators.

Within the paper we were able to uncover a layered approach to the B2BE. The involvement of professionals, with a rational and detached nature to expectation management and experience, also come through in terms of the key factors at each level.

However, before embarking upon the pursuit of a bonded experience with every customer it is important to understand your importance within the overall B2B relationship. The pursuit of this level or experience places value into the experience that is difficult to realise with the level of value you gain. In essence, segment your customers first and be clear where and with whom to develop experience at the appropriate level.

At the base level it appears that the key drivers revolve around the buyer(s); procurement teams expectations that you can actually undertake business with each other. The experience of doing this will indicate to them if you can or cannot fulfil this base level. It's all about; reliability, consistency, dependability, problem resolution, appropriate contact, choice and flexibility.

Once an organisation has achieved the delivery of a consistent experience meeting the base expectations, we have identified key areas that enhance the B2BE. These coalesce around; co-creation of value, strategic understanding, and contact at all levels across the organisation, working within strategic business units, flexibility and pro-activity.

Finally, the relationship moves into what we refer to as a 'bonded experience'. We identified that nearly all the research points to trust as being at the centre of the bonded experience. However, we have also identified supplementary areas that support trust at this level to develop a bonded experience; communication, interdependence and integrity, as we believe Trust alone isn't sufficient.

< It's not so much the relationship or the way customers are managed that differentiates as this has become broadly similar. It's the experience developed through the relationship that makes the difference >