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Leading Stellar CX

The Power Of Customer Forums & Tips For Successful Set-Up

Written by Gem Jones BA (Hons) CXAD (Dip)

Surveys alone don’t build loyalty and advocacy

I spend a lot of time talking to client companies about getting closer to the customer, empowering and encouraging employees to really get to know their customers as people, because as vital as surveys and metrics are, quantitative data will only tell you so much.

Being face to face with your customer, and receiving unsolicited feedback, allows you to pick up on the emotions and feelings around their interactions with your brand, elements that they rarely communicate in a survey or online review, especially if they are a B2B customer.

However, it can be difficult to maintain a regular physical presence with all customers, beyond the field sales function. Let’s face it, few companies can afford to have people just milling about waiting to chat to customers. Our teams are busy developing, sourcing, manufacturing, marketing, selling and delivering our products and services. Therefore, voice of customer feedback often gets restricted to scheduled surveys, and qualitative feedback that is shared by customer facing teams often goes unrecorded and frequently gets missed out of strategic decision making. Even if you’re fortunate enough to have a CX function in your business, running a Voice of Customer (VOC) initiative, they can often be restricted in their reach to customers by budget constraints and a mis-guided leaning towards CX being a predominantly customer service responsibility.

So how can businesses regularly hear the whole voice of the customer, build strong advocates outside of the brand and use this customer insight to not only to review current performance, but also to develop new products, services and strategies for growth?

Well for me, a hugely over-looked opportunity is customer forums.

The Power Of The Customer Forum

Customer forums can significantly enhance the wider customer experience in a business by creating a platform for interaction, support, and engagement.

In an era where our customers appear to have endless choice and access to fast online comparisons, scepticism runs high. Brands face a constant challenge of how to truly connect with their audiences, whether that's B2B or B2C.

Traditional marketing and customer service approaches often focus on telling rather than listening — flooding people with information, features, and statistics in the hope of persuasion. But as David McRaney reveals in his book "How Minds Change"*, human beings rarely change their minds because of facts alone. Instead, belief and trust grow through empathy, shared experience, and authentic conversation. For businesses, that insight has profound implications. It suggests that engaging customers in open forums and communities can be one of the most powerful ways to deepen trust, increase engagement, and foster loyalty.

So why is this?

Belief Is Social Before It Is Logical:

McRaney argues that our beliefs, including the opinions we hold about brands, are tightly bound to our sense of identity and belonging. People buy not just products, but stories and communities.

A customer forum offers exactly that: a social space where people can interact with others who share similar needs and values. When customers see that a brand genuinely listens, learns, and responds to its community, the brand becomes part of their identity and not just a company they buy from.
Brands like LEGO and Apple have cultivated loyal communities where customers feel seen, valued, and heard. The brand's credibility comes not from advertising, but from the authenticity of the conversations that happen among passionate users.

From Monologue to Dialogue:

McRaney's research into deep canvassing, a method of persuasion based on active listening and empathy, shows that people are more open to change when they feel respected and understood. The same principle applies to customer relationships.
Customer forums transform brand communication from a monologue into a dialogue. Instead of pushing messages, companies can ask questions, listen to stories, and invite feedback. This creates a sense of psychological safety, which creates deep trust.
When customers feel safe to share praise and criticism, they perceive the brand as transparent, responsive, and human. That emotional connection drives engagement far more effectively than promotional content ever could.

The Power of Curiosity and Shared Storytelling:

McRaney highlights that curiosity, not confrontation, drives meaningful change. In a customer forum, curiosity takes the form of genuine engagement: asking why customers feel the way they do, what motivates them, and how they use your product in their projects or daily lives. Encouraging customers to share their personal stories of how your brand fits into their world creates emotional resonance. Stories build belonging and belonging builds loyalty.
A great idea to build forum engagement and spread the word is to celebrate customer contributions. Spotlight forum members, feature their insights, and acknowledge their influence. These gestures reinforce the message that the brand's story is co-created rather than dictated. In B2B, acknowledgement from larger brands for smaller business customers in the supply chain is highly valued, as these customers appreciate the kudos the association with a larger, well-known brand gives them.

Empathy and Identity: Builds Trust

When a brand interacts empathetically in a customer community, it communicates that it values people over transactions. McRaney's work reminds us that belief change happens when both sides feel understood, rather than when one wins the argument.

In customer forums, empathy can take tangible forms:

- Responding thoughtfully to frustrations, rather than defensively
- Acknowledging mistakes and explaining solutions transparently
- Inviting customers into the innovation process

Such actions humanize the brand, which helps to turn bland corporate identities into trusted partners.

From Engagement to Loyalty:

Loyalty isn't simply about repeat purchases; it's about shared meaning. When customers feel they have a voice and their input shapes the brand's evolution, they develop emotional ownership.
Forums give businesses a continuous feedback loop, not just about products, but about values, tone, and customer aspirations. This ongoing dialogue sustains engagement long after the initial sale and transforms casual customers into advocates.

Advocacy Grows From Successful Customer Forums:

Another significant benefit, I have witnessed firsthand from forums, is the growth of advocacy amongst this customer group. Feeling so deeply involved, committed, and respected by the brand creates deep mutual trust and your customers become huge advocates for your brand. These loyal customers, begin to feel a real 'ownership', as they are part of your community and the upside of this is that they will start to publicly support or defend your brand when it faces criticism, negative reviews, or controversy.
They often respond on social media, forums, or review sites before the company's PR or customer service team even intervenes. One particular installer forum that I was involved in setting up many years ago, comes to mind here. We would frequently get into the office to review the previous evening's comments only to find our forum members had already responded to a late night comment on our page, either defending the brand or promoting our services and people as being the best! That kind of peer advocacy is proven to be far more powerful than any paid for brand advertising. A study by Neilson showed that 92% of consumers trust recommendations from friends and peer groups more than any other form of advertising. Seeing real customers defend a brand is more authentic than a corporate response. Those quick customer responses can reduce the spread of negative sentiment and buy your social/PR team crucial time for the brand to respond strategically.

This positive vibe emanating from your customer base encourages other loyal customers to participate and feel part of a supportive community and reinforces the emotional bond between the brand and its advocates.

In short, these "defender" customers act as authentic brand ambassadors, improving both reputation and trust and encouraging organic growth of your customer base.

Top Tips For Stellar Forums:

1. **Create spaces for real dialogue.** Build or nurture online forums where customers can talk freely and ensure brand representatives participate as listeners, not just moderators.
2. **Don’t neglect face to face opportunities.** Regularly bring customers together for social events and training and make sure you offer a good regional spread to avoid customers having to travel too far. Dulux do this very successfully with decorators, who not only access their academy for development of new skills and product testing, but also for social events such as BBQs and sports events. This offers a chance to feel part of a real community of like-minded professionals, with the brand at it’s heart.
3. **Lead with empathy.** Approach every interaction with curiosity and respect; never dismiss feedback or criticism.
4. **Foster identity and belonging.** Encourage customers to share stories and connect with each other, not just with you. Encourage forum members to bring along a peer or even family and friends to events. Peers may become new customers and forum members, whilst involving family and friends shows you care about your customer as a person, beyond their spending with you, which will further build trust and loyalty.
5. **Be transparent and accountable.** Authentic responses build long-term credibility.
6. **See your community as partners.** Collaboration, not control, is what builds loyalty.

In Summary:

Transformation happens through connection, brands that listen deeply and engage empathetically in customer forums don’t just manage relationships, they nurture communities. In those communities, trust grows organically, engagement becomes effortless, and loyalty becomes a natural outcome of being heard, valued, and understood.

*Book reference: How Minds Change by David McRaney 2022

Get In Touch

Expert advice from founder Gem Jones BA (Hons) CXAD (Dip) Stellar CX

Combining over two decades of business expertise and experience within large manufacturing organisations with formal CX learning, our founder Gem Jones developed the Stellar CX Senior Leadership Programme to help businesses de-code CX and overcome the challenge of developing a CX strategy that is highly relevant, achievable and cost effective, whilst maximising opportunities to grow customer loyalty, acquisition and lifetime value.

If you'd like to know more about the programme or Stellar CX consultancy services please get in touch.

Info@stellarcx.co.uk or select a call to suit your diary
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