

BUILDING CUSTOMER-FOCUSED Organizations Within Your Enterprise

BY SIDRA BERMAN

Much has been written about the late Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, including his eccentricities, business failures, comebacks, and ultimate managerial genius.

But what I have always found most interesting about Jobs was his ability to marshal his organization to focus first and foremost on its customers—starting with what the customer wants and then figuring out the solution on how to deliver it.

Case in point: At the turn of the 21st century (the Wild West days of the nascent Internet), the music industry was being decimated by piracy, particularly from file-sharing startups such as Napster. Jobs struck a deal with the major music distributors to sell individual songs and albums at consumer-friendly price points and deliver the music through Apple's new iTunes service, with software added to prevent piracy. But the key to the success of iTunes was that Jobs built customer-focused organizations within Apple to research and understand what the customer wanted. The answer was "1,000 songs in my pocket." And thus, Apple created the first iPod, which, of course, morphed into the iPhone, iPad, and myriad competing smartphones and devices that connect, entertain, and make our mobile workforce possible today.

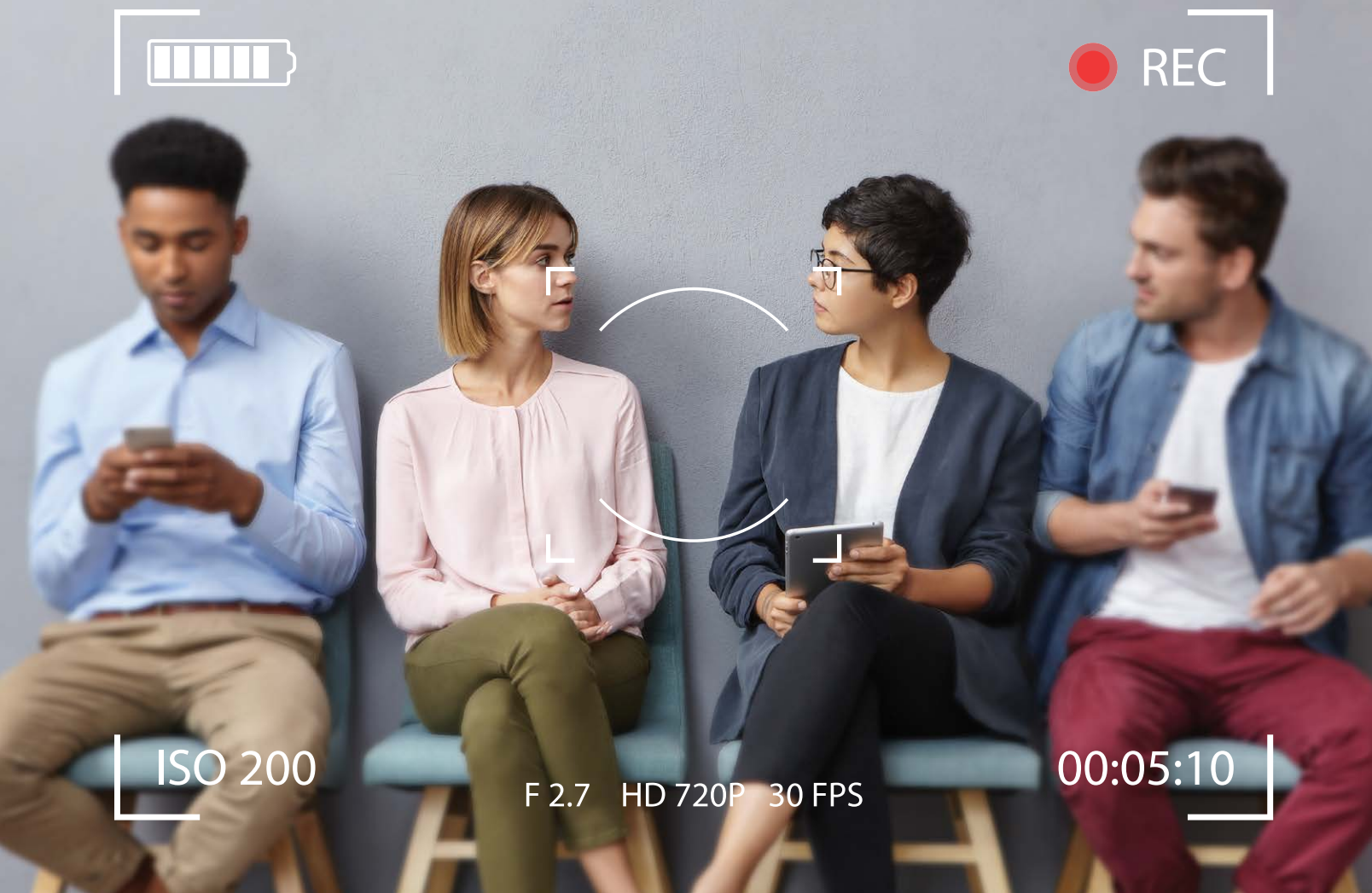
By most estimates, three out of four American workers now work at least part of the time from remote locations, including home offices, automobiles, shared offices, and airports, enabled by rapidly evolving smartphone

technology. Every enterprise with a significant mobile workforce faces the challenge of managing the mobility component—purchasing, deploying, and maintaining mobile devices, vetting and negotiating contracts with wireless carriers, managing the way employees use their devices, compensating employees who bring their own devices (BYOD), and switching devices on or off as employees come and go. On top of that, expensive cybersecurity is needed to protect enterprise data from being compromised by a lost, stolen, or hacked device.

In a nutshell, the mobile workforce has created a significant new segment of the telecom expense management (TEM) market.

GIVING BACK—PAYING FORWARD, THROUGH SHARED KNOWLEDGE

My organization, Tangoe, provides telecom and technology expense management solutions that enable today's mobile workforce. As the chief marketing officer, one of my most important responsibilities is building customer-focused organizations to work with many of the world's top brands, as well as lesser-known enterprises, struggling to manage their mobility programs, rein in telecom and technology



expenses, and find new ways to “work smarter” with today’s fast-changing technology.

My top initiative has been building a Center of Excellence, where everyone within our enterprise interacts with not only our customers but also our prospects in the industry. The COE provides training courses and certifications designed for participants of all knowledge and experience levels, in topics including inventory management, expense management, and usage management. It offers courses on soft skills, providing professionals with best practices to maximize their efficiency and effectiveness within their organizations. The courses also offer in-depth insight from industry experts and provide participants with real, applicable takeaways for how they can improve the management of technology within their business.

The COE is focused squarely on our customers, yet it is open to anyone in our industry as a way of promoting knowledge within the profession. As the largest TEM provider by a factor of 4X, we can share knowledge, give back, and pay it forward to customers, prospects, and third parties including the mobile carriers (Verizon, AT&T, etc.) and device manufacturers (Apple, Samsung, etc.). This initiative keeps our product lines and

operations keenly focused on what the industry needs. From what we learn through the COE (as well as other proprietary research and development), we can build solutions that make our customers’ day-to-day lives easier.

Other tried-and-true customer-focused organizations that we have built include user groups and advisory councils to gather regular, direct input from customers. Whenever a client visits our headquarters, we make sure that all relevant executives onsite have lunch or meet with the customer to better understand how their departments can contribute to the customer’s success. We strive to communicate with every customer how our investments in dedicated teams, advanced technology, and service improvements are designed to help clients reduce costs, improve productivity, and deliver predictable results.

As a result of this outreach, our teams have found that customers want automation that improves managed services and that investments in advanced technology will reduce manual errors, thereby lowering customers’ overall technology costs. We have invested heavily in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and robotic process automation to achieve the automated processes that underpin our customer success initiative.

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BUILDING OUT ONLINE USER GROUPS

How do you successfully create customer-focused organizations within your organization? Buy-ins are the basis. It's easy for executives, managers, and employees to get wrapped in day-to-day responsibilities and just give these types of initiatives lip service. But interacting with humans forces you to put your to-do list aside and focus on the big picture. Is this product, or initiative, going to move the needle for our customers?

There are three goals you need to address:

- Are you building the right product? Does it meet the basic needs of most customers? Does it have a unique selling proposition?
- Does your product or initiative have the potential to expand your market share? Will its benefits to your customers outweigh your capital and operating costs and contribute to your bottom line?
- Is the product/initiative customer-centric? Or is it driven more by egocentrism within your own organization?

If it doesn't add value, it's not worth doing. If it adds value, it can be a game changer for you and your customers.

ARE YOU TRAINING YOUR EMPLOYEES TO BE CUSTOMER-FOCUSED?

If you want your organization to be customer-focused, you must train your workforce to be truly customer facing and centric by making sure you have researched and determined the needs and wants of your customers. For example, most customers want uninterrupted service and a fast response when there is the inevitable interruption. Are your employees trained in how to operate during a service outage? Are they skilled at working with affected customers in a calm, methodical manner? Can they be trusted not to panic?

Run simulations in your training programs. If an employee panics or exhibits undue anxiety, he or she should probably not be on your customer-facing team.

Once your team is working with customers, it is also important to monitor their interactions, keeping an eye out for budding problems or issues. Some customers will be more difficult to work with than others. Are your employees up to the task of dealing with the difficult customer? If not, they either need additional training or need to move on to something else.

Train all of your customer-facing employees in the elements of common courtesy and common sense. They should be polite and businesslike in most cases. They should respond to a customer's "thank you" with "you're welcome"—not "no problem" or, worse, "NP." They may ask a customer how his or her day is going, but *not* if they sense the customer is antsy or not wanting small talk.

Finally, reward your top customer-facing employees with bonuses and awards—and let the entire company know about their successes. This recognition will also help incentivize other employees to step up.

BUILDING YOUR CAREER AROUND CUSTOMER SUCCESS

For a manager tasked with customer-focus, it pays to take on progressive on-the-job experiences along with continuing education to move your career trajectory upward. I began my career about the same time Steve Jobs was saving the music industry. Early on, at GE, I had various roles requiring cross-functional leadership, obtaining executive buy-in and working with counterparts in Asia and Europe. In five years at GE, I learned customer-focus techniques that buttressed my marketing roles over the next decade, moving into increasingly responsible roles until I was recruited as part

of the new management team at Savi Technology as chief marketing officer.

Our mission there was to rebuild the company from a hardware defense contractor into a Big Data solutions company serving the needs of the Fortune 1000. Building an agile, customer-focused marketing team was a strategic imperative to the company's successful transformation. I was assigned the task of establishing the value proposition, key messaging, awareness among target markets, and competitive differentiation while developing the necessary sales tools, event programs, analyst and public relations, and partner support.

What I learned through all these experiences is that nothing is more important than going on several customer visits every quarter. You're never smarter than your customers—listen to them and build relationships with them. And be sure to listen to people who aren't your customers and understand why they are not.

TAKE YOUR SHOW ON THE ROAD

Never think that you will wear out your welcome by reaching out to customers. They will know and appreciate that you care. Recently I organized a series of road shows in 10 cities with top executives from Tangoe. We designed it to be convenient for customers and prospects to come learn and share best practices and critical trends across technology and cloud expense management. The one-day events also provided an opportunity for customers and prospects to network with their industry peers.

The key point of customer focus in each road show was a presentation and interactive discussion of proprietary research. We commissioned the analyst firm IDC to survey 600 companies with 1,000 or more employees in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. The effort confirmed the rapid changes occurring in TEM and the industry of service providers. It also predicted that the need for TEM solutions will increase dramatically due to the impact of next-generation technologies such as the Internet of Things, 5G cellular, and others. Each member of our executive road-show team addressed how the IDC report findings could challenge each customer present and mapped out ways our managed services will help them meet the challenges.

SOME BEST PRACTICES IN BUILDING CUSTOMER-FOCUSED ORGANIZATIONS

How many times have you seen or heard a claim that someone's new system of billing, including a rate or price increase, is being made "in order to serve you better"? Or, after enduring an excruciating wait on hold just to get a simple question answered—filled with promotion after promotion—being asked, "Would you like to hear about our new credit card?"

In building customer-focused organizations, there are some best practices that should be observed, and most of them are found in avoiding the most common mistakes of customer relations. Here are a few that I've found are essential:

- **Always treat your organization's customer-facing employees well.** They, in turn, will treat customers well. Disgruntled employees are a risk to your customer-focused organizations. Have the backs of your employees—be fair in disputes with customers.
- **Keep the promises made to customers.** If a delivery was not made by a promised date, make certain the customer receives a sincere apology, explanation, and compensation. Promises broken are relationships broken. Don't make promises you can't keep.
- **Utilize automation in positive, productive ways.** Nobody wants to jump through 15 questions and answers before a customer service representative gets on the phone. Make it easy to cut through the annoying automated voice and get right to the representative. And if it's a busy time, have an option that insures a prompt call-back.
- **Never be defensive about your products or services.** Customers want results, not excuses.
- **Ensure that your organization's social media presence is closely monitored.** Social media is a great marketing tool, but it can be a double-edged sword when you have a problem with a product or service. Never delete negative comments. Always respond with a positive solution.

WHAT'S AHEAD IN CUSTOMER-FOCUSED ORGANIZATIONS

Automated technology is expected to make more big strides in the next 5 to 10 years. Management practices in building customer-focused organizations will progress as well. Customer relations will remain a constant imperative for executives, managers, and employees. The customers will always be humans, not computers or intelligent robots. They want the services they are paying for and the focused attention of the humans managing the services.

Organizations built on direct human interaction with customers will, I believe, always have a large edge over those that add too large a dose of automated technology. You should use the technology to be more efficient, but remember that nothing replaces a conversation with a live human. ^{AQ}

Sidra Berman is the chief marketing officer of Tangoe Inc., responsible for all of the company's marketing programs, including global go-to-market strategy, market analysis, lead generation programs, branding, digital, and overall positioning.