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THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE**WHAT IS CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE?**

Customer experience has become a very commonly used phrase in recent years. It is “in”, so to say. Everyone has an opinion about it. Customer experience can mean very different things in different situations and to different people, e.g. when:

Visiting a department store to buy new clothes. Going to the dentist. Going to a movie or a concert. Buying a new car. Going to the barber. Calling for an ambulance. Staying at a hotel. When a Search Consultant makes a sales call to a potential Client. When a Candidate goes to an employment interview in a Search Firm.

We have a customer experience in any person to person encounter, whatever it may be about. Even the police when giving a fine for speeding, pay attention to creating a good customer experience, despite the circumstances. I am sure that a friendly, polite and respectful policeman/woman makes all the difference and has a significant impact on how we feel about this fine and the police in general, should we happen to be this “customer”.

Everyone probably has their own definition of what customer experience means and that is their privilege. How any given person perceives his/her customer experience is not only depending on the party creating the customer experience. It is also affected by the personality, values, goals and expectations of the person in question.

So, why is the customer experience so important? Well, the customer experience affects how we feel, and it may impact on our future actions big time. In our everyday life I feel we tend to have a kind of basic default value for our customer experience expectations and if that level is fulfilled, we are satisfied. We get about what we expect, so we don't pay any more attention to it. It is business as usual. However, we all know what happens when we have had a very positive or a very negative customer experience.

If we have had a very positive customer experience, we are in a good mood and feel happy and appreciated. The next time we need the same service or product we tend to go back to the place where this positive customer experience took place.

When we have had a very bad customer experience, we feel disappointed and angry. The strength of our feelings is in direct relation to how bad our customer experience was. We likely don't go back to the place where this bad customer experience took place if we can find a better substitute.

A good customer experience and a bad customer experience have one thing in common. People talk about it a lot, to everybody. They want to share the good customer experience they had with all their friends. Likewise, they want to make certain no one else ever experiences the bad customer experience they had.

So, from a business point of view, creating a positive customer experience for their customers should be a high priority for every company.

In commerce, **customer experience (CX)** is the product of an interaction between an organisation and a customer over the duration of their relationship. This interaction is made up of three parts: the customer journey, the brand touchpoints the customer interacts with and the environments the customer experiences (including the digital environment) during their encounter. A good customer experience means that the individual's experience during all points of contact matches the individual's expectations.¹⁵ I feel this definition from Wikipedia is as good a general definition as any and it applies well to the Executive Search Industry too.

How a company delivers to its customers is beginning to be as important as what it delivers. When thinking about how to create a positive customer experience, most companies tend to think about touchpoints, the individual transactions through which customers interact with parts of the business and its offerings.

Companies try to ensure that customers will be happy with the interaction when they connect with their product, customer service, sales staff or marketing materials.

Focusing on the individual touchpoints may make us miss the bigger picture: the customer's end-to-end experience. Only by looking at the customer's experience through his or her own eyes - along the entire journey taken - can you really begin to understand how to improve performance meaningfully. We should develop a deep understanding of what really matters to our customers (all through the journey) and based on that try to improve the steps that make up that journey the best way we know how.¹⁶

Based on my experience, this is exactly what the Executive Search Industry is trying to do as well. The Industry depends on its ability to deliver to everybody's satisfaction. Striving to create a good customer experience all through the Search process is indeed a high priority for any Search Firm.

Quite another thing is, do they always succeed 100 %? I feel there are certain parts of the Search process where people sometimes may fail to understand the impact of their actions on the customer experience. There is a difference between meeting someone face to face or interacting with someone without meeting him/her in person.

WHO ARE THE CUSTOMERS?

We must first define who our Customers are in Executive Search. The “ecosystem” we call our Customers in the Executive Search Industry may be more extensive than many think.

All our Clients and all the Candidates we meet belong to this group.

I also like to include all the companies we have visited with a sales call but who gave the Search Assignment to another Search Firm. Companies that never became our Clients. Maybe they simply already had a good Search Firm that they were satisfied with. It may also have been the price or the personal chemistry, or the customer experience we created that made us lose the race. I am sure that every search professional can remember a few Client visits where everything did perhaps not go as planned. We should make sure we never lose any races because of a bad customer experience we created. These potential Clients are not lost forever. We just visit them again and now with a better performance.

In every Search Assignment, we reach out to Trusted Sources, often senior level executives. Some people are “just” trusted sources, without there yet being any other dimension to our relation. However, any one of them is a potential future Client or Candidate. Our Trusted Sources can also be previous Clients and Candidates or even present ones. So, I also like to include our Trusted Sources as our Customers. The customer experience we create here is very important. It has got to be a positive one.

Principally, from a customer experience point of view, in the Executive Search Industry, every person we officially interact with is a Customer. Every person we meet has the potential of becoming a future Client, Candidate or Trusted Source. Every person we meet is also indirectly a marketing media, potentially telling others about his/her experience with us.