



# THE CUSTOMER CENTRIC YOU

**STEPHEN HEWETT outlines some key ideas from his recently published book 'The Customer-Centric You'**



#### About the author

Stephen Hewett began his career as a pilot and then worked as an aviation company executive before joining The John Lewis Partnership, where he rose to become Development Manager, Research and Expansion. After 15 years at John Lewis, Stephen joined the business and information technology consultancy Charteris plc, where he is now Head of Business Consulting.

'The Customer-Centric You' is Stephen's first book. It is available from Management Books 2000, [www.mb2000.com](http://www.mb2000.com), from [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk) and from bookshops.

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More than thirty years of earning my living from trying to help people forge better relationships with their customers has convinced me that if we're to get better at dealing with customers in our professional lives, we need to improve how we communicate with and relate to people in all areas of our lives. The approach simply has to be holistic as well as sincere. We must continually refine our people interaction skills both in our personal lives and in our professional careers.

That great eighteenth-century literary gentleman and practical philosopher, the legendary Dr Samuel Johnson, pithily observed:

“IF A MAN DOES NOT MAKE NEW ACQUAINTANCE AS HE ADVANCES THROUGH LIFE, HE WILL SOON FIND HIMSELF LEFT ALONE. A MAN... SHOULD KEEP HIS FRIENDSHIP IN CONSTANT REPAIR.”

The use of 'friendship' in the singular is important. Johnson regards the man's own, outwardly-projected friendship as being what needs to be kept in constant repair rather than the friendships he enjoys. Johnson's aphorism is truly customer-centric. What applies to the friendship we extend to our friends also applies to our customer relationships.

#### What is a customer?

In order to think about all our customers in the way we should be thinking about them, we need a broader definition of 'customer' than the usual one found in the dictionary and employed in everyday speech. A suggestion for an alternative definition would be:

“A CUSTOMER IS ANY PERSON, ANYWHERE AND IN ANY CAPACITY, WHOM YOU WANT TO INFLUENCE TO WANT WHAT YOU ARE OFFERING HIM OR HER.”

This definition encompasses the people you care about in your personal life as well as your commercial customers. You offer the people in your personal life your friendship and affection, and you want them to want it and to offer you the same. As for the customers in your professional life, whatever you're supplying to them, you want them to want the very best iteration of what you can supply to them... until you can supply something even better.

This last point is particularly important: it's vital to know what benefit your customers are really getting from you, which is another way of saying that you need to know what business you are really in. If you do know that, it will be easier for you to make continual iterative improvements in your products and services, because you'll be making the improvements in the right direction.

#### What business are you really in?

André Heiniger, the former chairman of Rolex, was quoted in Mark McCormack's *What They Don't Teach You* at Harvard Business School as saying that Rolex was not in the watch business, but in the luxury business. Yet you don't need to be heading a major global brand like Rolex to be obliged to do some hard thinking and research about what benefits your customers are really getting from you. Many businesses don't entirely understand this.

For instance, we might consider typewriter companies in the years before the 1980s, when word-processors began to make a dent in the typewriter market before taking it over almost completely. The only typewriter manufacturer that survived to be big in selling word-processors was IBM. Most

organisations that specialised in selling typewriters failed to make the transition to word-processors because these organisations had not fully grasped what they were selling. They thought they were selling typewriters, but in fact they were selling machines that allowed customers to create, produce and print out documents. If the typewriter manufacturers had understood this, they would have jumped at the chance to sell word-processors.

Again, I'd emphasise that the new, broader definition I offer above of the customer is about you wanting to influence someone to want what you're offering them. Merely influencing someone to like what you are offering them isn't enough.

#### Liking or loving?

Extensive experience in the market research industry indicates that asking respondents whether they like a sample of a new product fails - or at least almost always fails - to predict whether a new product will succeed in the marketplace. The reason appears to be that just because we like something, it doesn't mean that we feel we simply must have it as a vital part of our lives. Likewise, when we fall in love, we feel so strongly about the person that we regard our lives as being in some deep, vitally important and glorious way incomplete without them.

Falling in love, and loving some particular product or service, may seem very different types of expressions of emotion, and while of course at one level they are, there are meaningful similarities. The difference between the affection we have for, say, our favourite food and drink brands, and for the holiday destinations we love, or for the restaurants where we most like to be... the difference between the affection we have for all those things and the affection we have for someone we love, is perhaps more a question of degree rather than the fundamental nature of what our affection's actually like.

An organisation that is truly customer-centric is doing everything it can to focus on the agenda of its customers. If an organisation wants to be customer-centric, it



needs to induce people to want what it has to offer them by correspondingly seeking to win their love, or at the very least their genuine affection, for what it's offering.

### Customer-centricity

If customer-centricity was something you could just install by loading a program or following a set procedure, everyone would have it. But the very fact many customers are frequently dissatisfied with the quality of the products they obtain and the levels of service they receive, proves that customer-centricity is very far from being something that everyone has. Ultimately, customer-centricity is delivered not by an organisation but by the people who work for it. And if those people are not passionate about wanting customers to love what the organisation is offering, the organisation is not going to be customer-centric.

The secret of customer-centricity is that everyone within any organisation must find within themselves the energy, discipline and imagination to see the world from their customers' point of view, and if necessary to adjust their behaviour towards their customers accordingly.

On the face of it, the secret of being customer-centric is straightforward. Putting it into practice, however, requires energy, discipline, imagination... and smart and incisive hard work. In short, putting the secret into action requires the right attitude. You have to want to care about your customers' agenda as if it was your own agenda, or your family's. This is not easy. We seem to be programmed by evolution to care mostly about our own agenda and that of our immediate family.

In my book, I quote The Independent columnist Christina Patterson's remark that I think summarises why customer-centricity is so important not only for the business world, but also for all of the human world.

“A SOCIETY CAN'T FUNCTION, OR AT LEAST IT CAN'T FUNCTION VERY WELL, WITHOUT THE REALISATION THAT PEOPLE OUTSIDE YOUR FAMILY ARE AS REAL AS THE PEOPLE IN IT. THERE HAS, IN RECENT YEARS, BEEN A GROWING EMPHASIS ON THE 'HARD-WORKING FAMILY' AS THE SEAT OF ALL THAT'S GOOD: PARENTS BATTLING FOR THEIR DARLINGS' RIGHTS AND NOW, GOD HELP US, EVEN CLUBBING TOGETHER TO START SCHOOLS. THERE'S A NAME FOR A COMMUNITY THAT PUTS FAMILY FIRST. IT'S CALLED THE MAFIA.”

### Inward or outward looking?

How right Christina is. As for organisations, whether they operate in the private or public sector, research that Charteris has carried out suggests that in many large organisations, only about 30 percent of activity is devoted to customers' interests. The other 70 percent? Well, it consists of the organisation's agenda - often simply internal stuff - rather than

activities that add value to the customer's agenda. The problem is that, as organisations grow, they tend to focus excessively on their own agenda.

Many of us have at some point in our careers helped to run a small business, or a semi-autonomous department of a larger business. Don't you remember the buzz you had when you went to work then (or now, if you still do)? Don't you recall the excitement on Sunday evenings of looking forward to getting to work on Monday morning and making a difference to your customers' lives? How often do these people ignore the customer's agenda? Not often, because quite apart from the inevitable pressing financial incentive to meet customers' needs, the physical and emotional proximity of the customer makes it much easier to generate customer-centricity than when one is working within a large organisation.

But unfortunately, as an organisation grows in size, its customers become increasingly remote physically and emotionally from the people who work at the organisation. This has been a problem since the earliest days of industrialisation. Also, when an organisation is becoming larger and more complex, it accumulates more and more of its own internal 'stuff' that it wants to focus on.

In our professional lives, if we take the trouble to reverse the usual percentage and to devote 70 percent of our energies to meeting our customers' agenda and only 30 percent to our own internal stuff, we will be customer-centric.

That insight is extremely useful in a practical sense, because if we are truly customer-centric, we will succeed in our professional lives, and very likely succeed to a tremendous extent. This being so, don't we all want, ideally, to be customer-centric?

And shouldn't we also apply the same thinking to our personal lives... at least if we aren't already?

Well, that depends on just how great you want other people to think you are!

