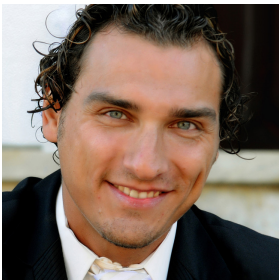




Customer Contact Week gathers leaders that span the customer journey, from marketing to operations to customer care. We talked with three leaders speaking at CCW NoLa to discuss some of the keys to delivering great customer experience, challenges on the journey, and their personal meaning of world-class service with speed and efficiency.

Speakers Featured:



Johnny Russo  
Associate Vice President, e-Commerce and Digital Marketing  
Mark's (Mark's Work Wearhouse), a Canadian Tire Company

Session:

ALIGN THE CORE: How a Day in July Turned Vendors into Partners and Started a Digital Transformation



Gene Lunger  
EVP Retail Operations  
Ashley HomeStore

Session:

CLOSING KEYNOTE: Disrupted, or Disruptor? You Decide



Hui Wu-Curtis  
Senior Director, Customer Care Strategy  
Choice Hotels

Session:

FINANCIAL LEADERSHIP: Demonstrate Efficiency

Q. Our theme in CCW New Orleans this year is focused on delivering world-class service with speed and efficiency. In the context of your work, what does speed and efficiency for the customer mean to you?



Johnny Russo:

For me, it's about speed and agility in servicing the customer's needs. That could come in the form of how quickly we respond to an issue; how efficient we are at solving it at first touch - while remaining consistent with our brand tone, yet still with a personal human touch, independent of channel (stores, online, social, call center, etc); it's also the speed of shipping out an order as quickly as possible.

On the Digital Marketing side, we like to try new things. We don't love mass communication (who does?) we like relevant communication. From the digital media we buy, to the preference center we launched (enabling newsletter subscribers to opt down in frequency of email received), we don't want to inundate our customers with our shopping messages. We're also trying to be better at communicating non-sale messages, and focusing more on pairing up looks, new site features that make the browsing experience better, or our Click & Collect solutions.



Gene Lunger:

I am responsible for comprehensive retail operations so let's cover the in-store experience, order fulfillment and service after the sale:

1. The shopping experience needs to be relationship based and consultative, with points of inspiration designed to stimulate the shopper. The checkout process has to be smooth and fast. Everything they need and nothing they don't. The team the guest interacts with sees their role as ambassadors of the brand, and consultants for each guest.
2. Fulfillment/distribution means giving the guest what they want, in the time frame that they expect, with zero defects. This represents a win-win best case scenario for both us (clean efficient deliveries) and for the guest with no wasted time or additional follow up needed.
3. If service is required after the delivery, the guest should have options – whatever is in their best interest and respectful of their time. Clear communication and follow through to the point of completion.



Hui Wu-Curtis:

For Choice Hotels, it is about being bold, innovative and quick to market with solutions. Everything that we do evolves around the customer in mind; valuing their time and effort when dealing with our organization. We are working on ensuring that we remove customer obstacles for a seamless experience. That is where our focus lies for our immediate and long term strategy.

Q. Tell us a little more about your speaking role at CCW New Orleans and how it relates back to your current focus areas. What makes you passionate about this topic?



Johnny Russo:

This session might be a bit different, since my title or position is not necessarily Customer Service or Customer Experience. However, leading the Digital Marketing and Ecommerce team for one of the largest apparel retailers in Canada, we obsess about customer needs. So I believe my session will touch not only how to do things for the buying customer, but also your internal team members (think about it, they are your customers as well), not to mention our external vendors or agencies; they are an extension of our team, and so we refer to them as our partners (again, they are customers as well in the broader sense).

Being in the retail industry, I'm passionate about change. I hope I'm one of the leaders working to bring change to older legacy thinking (we've always done it this way) and technology by acting fast, thinking faster, and being iterative in our approach (small mistakes will be made, and fixed even faster). Retail leaders of today need to not fear change, but embrace it. And I am passionate about solving retail's issues, or at least playing a small part to do so. I sit on a few boards and associations – I like to collaborate with like-minded people who share a passion for disrupting and bettering processes and technology to create a more fruitful customer experience.



Gene Lunger:

Disruption is a dominant business concept and trend in light of the de-materialization and de-monetization of innovative software based companies. Retail disruption is heavy this year, with 30+ brands closing over 7,000 stores (more than in 2008 Great Recession!) At Ashley, we are eyes wide open to the home furnishings industry, evolving technologies, and are set on disrupting ourselves in the quest for continuous improvement within our space. The importance of the Guest Experience in brick and mortar retail is more important than ever. Innovate, or be commoditized.



Hui Wu-Curtis:

Many of us who have worked in the customer contact space are already wildly excited about customer experience. It provides us the landscape to really innovate and humanize that experience with company and consumer. Since we are the channels with the highest customer touch points, WE should be the advocates of CX for the rest of the organization. That starts by building better insight from our millions of transactions in our contact centers to feed other internal departments such as the website, mobile teams, content and marketing, etc.

Q. What CX milestone at your current organization would you say you are most proud of? Why?



Johnny Russo:

Implementing Scrum sessions. We started doing this in June 2017. How does this impact our customers? Well, each Scrum session we undertake involves a technology, service, or strategy that improves the user experience for customers, be it live chat, testing chat bots, getting ready for Black Friday, launching a referral marketing program, etc. We needed a better way to launch more customer programs with better agility and efficiency, with way better communication. Scrum has helped us achieve that.



Gene Lunger:

Our Innovation Lab in Tampa is a test-bed for all of our emerging technology. Our in-store testing of Virtual Reality 360 degree shopping experiences in our Tampa Ashley HomeStore has shown us how impactful VR and AR will be to our future. A new distribution initiative in 2017 is Local Customer Care (LCC) At our Retail Distribution Centers this is a team and process that scrutinizes any order requiring a re-delivery or exchange to ensure that we have clarity on the issue and can assure a solution the second time out.



Hui Wu-Curtis:

We are in the beginning stages of our CX transformation and was recently named as one of the finalist in Loyalty360 awards for Operational Excellence. I am very proud of our teams' efforts with this recognition along with our progress in truly moving the needle with NPS. We are building a customer-centric culture where everyone at all levels, is empowered to provide solutions and feedback on things that impact our CX.

Q. In your view, what is the biggest challenge when it comes to customer contact and customer experience?



Johnny Russo:

We all talk about personalization. And we all stress the fact that we need it. But are companies and brands going about it in the right way? Or at all? If you don't have the right content and the right contact strategy (from content to media to timing to roadmap, etc) and you don't have the right, agile technology powering your personalization and growing with you, personalization will fail. So the greatest challenge over the next few years is not the need for personalization. It's getting it right!



Gene Lunger:

The greatest challenge we face is rapidly evolving guest expectations. A person's last "great service experience" becomes tomorrow's minimum expectation. Due to the size and fragile nature of furniture, it is more challenging to distribute and service specifically in the "final mile". Blending technology platforms to ensure we have inventory managed across the globe to ensure a seamless delivery process is complicated due to our size (30m pieces of furniture delivered annually).



Hui Wu-Curtis:

It has always been the ability to quantify what we do in terms that resonate with the executive team. Building out metrics that truly have a strong correlation with driving loyalty and profitability for the company. Customer contact and CX is a critical component to every organization but we have done ourselves a disservice in functioning in a silo and being an after-thought vs a strategic partner to other parts of the organization. My biggest challenge is turning what we do to a true business driver and positioning our capabilities to strategically drive increased awareness and profitability for the rest of the organization

Q. There are so many technological advancements spurring transformation in both customer contact and customer experience. Which technology currently excites you the most? Why?



Johnny Russo:

For me and my line of work, I think Chatbots, if done well, and virtual reality, are the ones that excite me.



VR in particular (which can also stand for Virtual Retailing) can be the next evolution of making online shopping easier and more fun. We lose that sometimes. Online shopping shouldn't be stressful. The checkout process shouldn't scare you. And items not fitting properly shouldn't impede a purchase, especially if you can be up front and state your amazing and easy returns process (you do have a good one, right?)

So imagine if we can work on a solution that allows you to be 99% sure that the clothes you are about to buy will look good on you and fit just right? Not that's something to be excited about. Coming from someone who loves to shop online, I know any doubt can alter confidence in the purchase decision (i.e. lead to an exit rather than a conversion).

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Gene Lungert:

Augmented and Virtual Reality are incredibly exciting for both the online channels and the in-store shopping experience, visually enhancing a guest's design understanding and options. As we implement iPads for mPOS, Salesforce and Microsoft D365 we will sunset existing legacy systems and bring speed and relevance into the guests sales interaction and checkout process.



Hui Wu Curtis:

The biggest buzz in the market today is with Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Chatbot. I am most excited about how these new technologies will interplay with omnichannel and more importantly, how this new digital landscape will force the evolution of contact centers. Undoubtedly technology will shift and redefine how we do the work in contact centers so we have to better understand how this all fits into our service and delivery model.

Q. Can you share a fun fact about yourself?



Johnny Russo:

Sure. I have represented Team Canada at the World Ball Hockey Championships on 4 occasions, winning gold twice and silver once. People are often surprised that there are organized leagues and events for ball hockey, but there are. And some current and former NHLers have taken part in them as well.



Gene Lunger:

Although born with congenital birth defects requiring open-heart surgery as an infant, I was able to play multiple sports in high school and Rugby for The University of South Carolina. As a rock climber and mountaineer since the 80s, I've stood on top of Mount Rainier and the Grand Tetons, enjoyed large scale expeditions in the Alaskan range, and have climbed technical rock all over the US... Never let the doctors tell you your limits.



Hui Wu Curtis:

One of my bucket list items was to run a half marathon. I did it a few years ago at the Grand Canyon Half Marathon where it rained, snowed and sleeted the night before and during the race. True marathoners said that it was the roughest conditions of any marathon they have ever ran. Needless to say, I survived (and finished) and can confidently say that it was one of the worst life decisions I have ever made.

Q. Anything else you'd like to share with our CCW audience?



Johnny Russo:

I know I may be coming at this from a Digital Marketing and Ecommerce perspective, but I am pretty certain that my session will have key takeaways you can initiate right away to drive change and adoption (and disruption!) in your organizations. Looking forward to meeting you all.

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