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Customer needs encompass the factors, requirements, and expectations that define a positive customer experience from the customer's perspective. Understanding and fulfilling these needs effectively is key to delivering exceptional service and building customer loyalty. People don't generally open their wallets to spend money without getting something in return. Even when making a donation, there's an incentive like feeling good or connecting to a cause. To be successful, businesses need to tap into unmet customer needs and offer solutions. That sounds simple, but how do you actually find out what's on your customers' minds? In this article, we'll go over different types of customer needs, how to identify them in your own customers, and some practical strategies for meeting them effectively. In this article: 17 main types of customer needs According to Ben Motteram, principal and CX expert, most customers have 17 basic needs when they interact with an organization. Friendliness is the most basic customer need, and it is associated with things like courtesy and politeness. Customers value warm, approachable, and courteous interactions with business. Friendliness fosters a positive experience and encourages repeat business. Example: A support agent who greets customers with a nice message, calls them by name, and engages in friendly conversation. Customers need to know the organization understands and appreciates their needs and circumstances. Empathy involves listening and responding to customer needs with compassion. Example: A customer service agent who patiently listens to a customer's complaint about a defective product and offers a sincere apology and a swift resolution. Customers expect fair treatment, including transparent pricing and equitable policies, as part of a customer-focused approach. Example: A retailer with a clear and consistent return policy that ensures all employees treat customers equally when contacting a support team to return a product. Customers appreciate having control over their purchasing decisions and experiences. This includes having the autonomy to make decisions during the purchasing process and the flexibility to manage their choices after the sale. Example: An online streaming service that offers customizable subscription plans, a 30-day free trial, and options to adjust, pause, or cancel the service. Customers want choice and flexibility from customers. They want to know there are options available to satisfy them. Offering multiple solutions that best fits their needs and preferences is key. A customer service agent handling a complaint about a defective product offers the customer either return the item for a full refund or receive a replacement product at an additional cost. Customers need clear, accurate, and comprehensive information to make informed decisions. Detailed product descriptions, reviews, and usage instructions are essential. Well-organized knowledge bases can significantly enhance customer satisfaction by providing easily accessible answers to common questions and issues. This allows customers to quickly find the information they're looking for without contacting customer support. Example: An online electronics store that provides detailed specifications, user reviews, and video demonstrations for each product, as well as a knowledge base with FAQs, troubleshooting guides, and how-to articles. Customers' time is valuable, and organizations need to treat it as such. To deliver on customer expectations, CX teams need customer service software that arms them with tools to respond to customers quickly and effectively. Example: An e-commerce company uses an AI agent, a sophisticated type of chatbot, to instantly answer common customer inquiries about order status, shipping times, and return policies. This allows customers to get immediate responses 24/7 without waiting for a human agent, saving them significant time and effort. In the context of customer support, functionality refers to the ability of agents, processes, and service tools to address customer needs accurately and promptly. This includes providing relevant information and offering efficient problem-solving capabilities to meet customer expectations. Example: A functional knowledge base on a company's website that is well-organized, easily searchable, and regularly updated. It contains comprehensive information on products, services, and common issues, allowing customers to quickly find answers to their questions and solve problems independently. Customers expect high standards in the service they receive. High-quality customer service can be characterized by: A knowledgeable and well-trained support staff. Timely and accurate responses to inquiries. Consistent performance across all touchpoints. Proactive problem-solving and issue resolution. Example: A premium airline known for its exceptional customer service. Passengers feel valued and supported at every interaction, from booking to post-flight follow-up. Customers seek to have their interactions with businesses. This includes easy access, simple processes, and time-saving features. Example: A telecommunications company that offers a user-friendly self-service portal that allows customers to check their account balance, pay bills, troubleshoot common issues, and chat with customer service representatives in real time, all without the need to make a phone call or visit a physical store. Customers look for products and services that provide good value for money, balancing costs and benefits. If you aren't providing customers with a valuable and positive experience, you risk losing them to competitors. Example: A cloud storage service offering scalable pricing plans based on storage needs, ensuring customers only pay for their use. Providing a variety of support channels allows customers to choose the customer service experience that best suits their needs and preferences. Omnichannel customer service empowers customers to interact with businesses in the most comfortable and convenient ways. Example: A company's tech support that offers an omnichannel experience with email, live chat, phone, and self-service options. An integrated ticketing system ensures efficient issue resolution regardless of the channel used, and customers can check ticket status in real time. Customers must trust that the brand will deliver on its promises and protect their personal information. Trust is built through consistent, reliable, and honest interactions. Customers need to trust that businesses will deliver on their promises and prioritize customer data privacy. According to our Zendesk Customer Experience Trends Report 2024, 70 percent of consumers won't purchase a product or service from a company they view as lacking security measures. In addition to quality support, good customer service is about providing a secure and trustworthy environment for customers. Example: A financial services company that implements a secure customer service platform with robust encryption, multi-factor authentication, and compliance features to protect all customer communications and personal information. To ensure inclusivity, customer support channels should be easily accessible to all customers, including those with disabilities. This means designing support systems that accommodate various needs and preferences, allowing every customer to receive assistance effectively. Example: A company that implements a comprehensive accessible customer support system that includes: A screen reader-friendly website with clear navigation for visually impaired customers. Live chat support with options for larger text sizes and high-contrast modes. Multi-language support for non-native speakers. Simple language options in knowledge base articles for customers with cognitive disabilities. By offering these diverse and accessible support options, the company ensures that all customers, regardless of their abilities, can easily seek and receive the assistance they need. Customers expect clear, honest, and open communication about products, services, pricing, and company policies. Example: A support agent provides detailed and easy-to-understand pricing updates, including a breakdown of charges. Customers are drawn to brands that offer innovative and cutting-edge products and services. This is particularly true in industries where the customer experience has traditionally been cumbersome or inconvenient. Businesses that embrace emerging technologies often have a competitive edge. Example: A fintech company implements an AI agent capable of autonomously handling complex tasks like replacing lost or stolen bank cards without the need for any human involvement. Customers often choose brands that align with their identity and values. Businesses that reflect customers' self-image and beliefs foster a strong emotional connection. This alignment should extend to the customer support experience, ensuring that every interaction reinforces the brand's identity and values. This consistency helps maintain the emotional connection with customers even during problem-solving interactions. Example: A trendy, youth-oriented tech company implements a chatbot for customer support that reflects its brand identity. It is programmed with a casual, friendly chatbot persona that uses emojis, GIFs, and pop culture references in its responses. This ensures that even automated support interactions feel on-brand. In the show *The Kitchen Nightmares*, Gordon Ramsay visits struggling restaurants whose owners are often blind to their customers' needs. It takes Ramsay's expertise and contrasting language with them that they have. Gordon Ramsay aims to help them to which is important. The way that you talk to your customer needs to impact the way that you serve them. Identifying trends early allows you to adapt before things escalate. Your customer service team is on the frontlines, engaging with your customers day in and day out. They're the ones fielding questions, addressing concerns, and getting an up-close look at your customers' expectations. So, why not tap into that first-hand knowledge? They can share valuable insights into what customers are asking for, what confuses them, and where the biggest areas for improvement lie. Listen closely, and you'll start to identify patterns in the customer experience that can inform your product roadmap. Customer service agents don't just handle support tickets—they often act as product experts, too. They become well-versed in how customers actually use your product or service in the real world. This context is invaluable for understanding the full customer journey and experience. Having an open line of communication with customer service shows that you value their perspective and that their feedback directly impacts the business. In turn, they'll be more motivated to provide helpful insights. It becomes a mutually beneficial feedback loop of continuous improvement. The most straightforward way to identify customer needs is to simply ask them directly. You can gather customer feedback through surveys, interviews, focus groups, or casual conversations. Surveys allow you to collect data quickly and easily from a large sample size. Use a mix of open-ended and multiple-choice questions. Interviews provide rich, qualitative insights by diving deeper into individual perspectives and pain points. Focus groups enable discussion and idea-sharing among small groups of customers. Whichever method you choose, ask the right questions to uncover their challenges, frustrations, goals, and priorities. More and more businesses are seeing the importance of being present on social media for customer service. Customers want to communicate with you like they do with friends and family—and that, of course, means social channels. Connecting with customers on their preferred channel also helps to create a more meaningful relationship. And it's an excellent way to hear real-time feedback from your customers about what they like (and what they don't!). If you start to see the same questions or issues pop up over time, it's a good clue that you have customer needs to solve. To meet your customers' needs, you need to understand what they're looking for at what phase of the customer journey they're in, from discovery to purchase. Customer journey maps create a visual representation of how your customers interact with your brand. It helps you see things from your customers' perspectives and gain insights about potential roadblocks and how to improve the experience. "The experience matters at every moment in the customer journey, and customers will judge any impediment along the way," said Harry Wray, customer success executive at Zendesk. "It's crucial to consider the experience from the customer's perspective to understand their needs." Let's explore five key strategies to ensure your customers feel heard, valued, and satisfied. Customers crave instant gratification. They want answers, and they want them now. It's no surprise that in our CX Trends Report, 51 percent of customers say they prefer interacting with bots over humans when they want immediate service. With AI agents—advanced AI-powered chatbots—from Zendesk, you can give customers lightning-fast responses and 24/7 support. Additionally, this frees up your human agents to focus on building customer relationships and provide that personal touch when needed. Have you ever experienced the joy of a stranger complimenting your outfit? It's a small gesture, but it's unexpected and personal and instantly brightens your day. Customers crave that same connection when interacting with your brand. Use your data to tailor your customer interactions to each individual. This could mean addressing them by name (but don't overdo it—unless you're in used car sales), referencing their purchase history, or suggesting products based on their interests. AI-powered tools can help you segment your customers based on various criteria, allowing you to create targeted communications and offers. They can also analyze customer behavior patterns to predict future needs, enabling you to provide proactive customer service. For example, if a customer frequently purchases a certain type of product, an AI system could trigger a personalized email with a recommendation for a complementary item. Or if a customer has been experiencing recurring issues, the system could flag this so that a human agent can reach out with a more comprehensive solution. While AI is incredibly powerful, it doesn't possess the customer service skills of human agents. In our CX Trends Report, 75 percent of customers see AI as a force for ensuring human intelligence, not replacing it. AI can handle data-heavy, repetitive tasks, while customer service agents focus on building relationships, solving complex problems, and providing emotional intelligence that machines can't replicate. For example, an AI agent might initially handle a customer inquiry regarding fraudulent charges on their bank card. It can gather details of the disputed transactions, cross-reference them against the customer's purchase history, and potentially identify patterns consistent with fraud. If the AI determines with a high degree of confidence that fraud has occurred, it can initiate the dispute process, temporarily freezing the card, and proactively ordering a replacement. If the situation is less clear-cut or the customer has further questions, the AI can seamlessly transfer the customer to a human agent, along with all the relevant information collected. This ensures a smooth customer experience while maximizing the efficiency of your support team. Blending AI with human expertise allows you to meet your customer service objectives more effectively, providing fast, accurate, and empathetic support at every stage of the customer journey. To truly meet your customers' needs, you must understand who they are, what they want, and how they interact with your business. Building comprehensive customer profiles is key to this understanding. Start by collecting data from various customer touchpoints, like website visits, purchase history, support interactions, social media engagements, and more. Use this data to create a 360-degree view of each customer. For instance, a customer profile might include: Basic demographic information (age, location, lifestyle, income). Purchase history and preferences. Preferred communication channels. Interaction history with your company. Feedback provided in surveys or reviews. Comprehensive customer profiles allow you to tailor your interactions and offerings to each customer's needs and preferences. For example, if a customer profile shows a preference for video tutorials, you could prioritize that content when providing support or product information to that customer. Again, AI can be incredibly helpful here. AI-powered analytics can sift through vast amounts of data to identify patterns and insights that might not be immediately obvious to human observers. These insights can help you refine your customer profiles and tailor your customer experience strategy accordingly. Get to know your ideal customer base better with our customer profile templates. The software you use should help you understand and anticipate customer needs, support your customer service objectives, and facilitate customer-oriented support. For example, Degreeed, an education technology platform, centers its customer needs by using customer service software that integrates with product, sales, and customer success teams. The team manages high ticket volume by analyzing customer feedback data from Zendesk. This data allows them to proactively identify issues before they worsen, drive new feature development, reduce support volume, and improve customer satisfaction and retention. Understanding and anticipating your customers' needs is no easy feat, but it's the key to unlocking lasting loyalty and growth. By implementing a customer-first approach, prioritizing personalized, proactive support, and leveraging the right CX solution, like Zendesk, you'll meet your customers' needs and exceed their expectations. Zendesk empowers you to: Establish personalized omnichannel service. Provide quick and efficient service with AI agents and automation. Solve issues faster with AI-powered insights and guidance. Provide real time workforce management that's fast and easy to deploy. Work smarter with powerful agent and admin tools. Offer a differentiated customer experience at scale. Deploy best-in-class service solutions quickly with low overhead. Explore how Zendesk customer service software can empower you to build lasting, meaningful relationships that transform your customer experience. The ability to correctly identify and satisfy customer requirements and expectations is not only advantageous but also essential for survival and success in the fast-paced world of modern commerce. According to a Salesforce study, 76% of consumers believe that businesses should be aware of their customers' needs and preferences. Understanding Customer Needs Fundamentally, the notion of customer demands pertains to the fundamental incentives that prompt consumers to select a certain good or service. Since these demands are what primarily impact people's purchasing decisions, it is imperative to recognize them. The needs of customers can be broadly classified into two categories: Functional Needs The most pressing and obvious requirements are functional ones, which result from particular circumstances or issues that a customer must resolve. 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tailor your offerings to suit their preferences. This may include personalizing products or personalizing marketing messages. Aim to create unique and memorable experience for each customer. Distribute feedback throughout your organization Feedback should not be siloed within customer service departments. Ensure that actionable insights are shared across all levels, from product development to senior management. This encourages a uniform focus on customer satisfaction. Create features based on customer feedback Use valuable insights from customer surveys to refine existing products and innovate new ones. Align product development with customer needs to ensure that new features truly resonate with and benefit them. Build feedback loops into every stage of the process Feedback loops are integral for continuous improvement. Integrate them into every stage, from product design to sales, so that you can consistently evaluate and enhance the customer experience. Identifying customer needs with Survicate Understanding and addressing customer needs goes beyond simply checking items off a list. It involves a careful balance of listening to your customers, analyzing their feedback, and responding with solutions that meet and exceed their expectations. To navigate this complex terrain effectively, Survicate offers powerful yet effortless software to conduct customer research. With Survicate, you can easily create, distribute, and analyze surveys to gather actionable insights. It will allow you to identify customer priorities and pain points, ensuring that their voices are heard. Try out Survicate with a 10-day free trial of the Business Plan. It allows you to explore all the features without any cost. Take this opportunity to connect with your customers on a deeper level. Start your trial now and enhance your understanding of your customers' needs. Whether you're a new entrepreneur, an established business owner, or an employee within a company, your success is often measured by how well you convince potential customers to purchase your product or service. Achieving this requires understanding your business's market and competition, its differentiating factors and value proposition, and, most importantly, your ideal buyer. Specifically, you need to know the motivations, goals, challenges, and desires that lead them to purchase a solution like yours. It's useful to think about this concept in terms of customer "needs." What does a potential customer need that leads them to your solution? Understanding that need can enable you to not only tailor your sales and marketing messaging, but inform your product research and development, customer service, and other aspects of your business. Free E-Book: So You Want to Be an Entrepreneur: How to Get Started Access your free e-book today. DOWNLOAD NOW What Are Customer Needs? A customer need is a need that motivates a customer to purchase a product or service. The need can be known (i.e., the customer can put it into words) or unknown, and is the ultimate factor that determines which solution the customer purchases. One effective way to determine and evaluate customer needs is by using the lens of "jobs to be done." Customer Needs as Jobs to Be Done According to the jobs to be done (JTBD) framework, championed by Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen, customers don't purchase a product; instead, they hire it to complete a certain job or task. In the online course Disruptive Strategy, a job to be done is defined as a "circumstances-based description of understanding your customers' desires, competitive set, anxieties, habits, and timeline of purchase." By this definition, a job to be done aligns with a customer need. With a keen understanding of customer jobs to be done, businesses can avoid disruption and identify new opportunities as they arise. Related: Jobs to Be Done: 4 Real-World Examples 3 Main Types of Customer Needs Customer needs can be broken out into many different varieties and categories. For example, a customer might need a solution that has specific functionality, falls within a set budget, or provides a certain level of reliability. Ultimately, all customer needs can be categorized into three main types: functional, social, and emotional needs. 1. Functional Needs Functional needs are the most tangible and obvious of the three main types of customer needs. Customers typically evaluate potential solutions based on whether they'll help them achieve a particular task or function. The product or service that best addresses their functional need is likely to be the one they purchase, or hire. Functional needs can be broad or extremely specific, depending on the customer's buying criteria. For example, a customer who's planting a garden for the first time might say, "I need a garden hose." Meanwhile, an experienced gardener might tailor their criteria by saying, "I need a hose that's long enough to reach my vegetable garden from my backyard spigot." Another customer who's dealt with the frustration of using a low-quality product might tailor their need differently by saying, "I need a high-quality garden hose that won't tear or kink from regular use." With this kind of insight into customers' functional needs, a company that manufactures garden hoses might develop new products, such as hoses that come in a range of lengths and don't kink. 2. Social Needs A social need is a customer need that relates to how a person wants to be perceived by others when using a product or service. While social needs aren't typically a customer's primary concern when considering a purchase, they can influence their final decision. Social needs are often more difficult for a company to identify, and vary substantially from customer to customer. By understanding various social needs, you can look for patterns among your users. If enough of your customers share a particular need, consider how it can inform your product development, sales, and marketing processes. Returning to the garden hose example, imagine the customer is a member of a gardening association. Members of this association have an affinity for high-tech gardening tools and regularly discuss new products they've tried. The customer may decide, either consciously or unconsciously, to purchase a hose with advanced features—for example, one that connects to a smart water controller—to bond with other association members. If, on the other hand, the customer is an environmentalist who's active in various communities, they might be more concerned about whether a hose is made from sustainable materials that their fellow environmentalists use. 3. Emotional Needs Emotional needs are similar to social needs in that they're typically secondary to functional needs. Whereas social needs refer to how a customer wants to be perceived by others when using a product, emotional needs refer to how a customer wants to feel. Returning once more to the garden hose example, consider the reasons why the customer gardens. If they find gardening to be a relaxing hobby, they may be more likely to choose a basic hose over a high-tech option. Alternatively, if gardening triggers memories of the customer's grandparents, they might opt for a brand that evokes that nostalgia. While emotional needs can be difficult to pinpoint, companies that identify those of their customers can use the information to tailor and optimize their product messaging. Identifying Customer Needs If you've never gone through the process of identifying customer needs, it can feel overwhelming. However, there are several strategies you can use to identify those needs. Reflecting on your experiences, observing others' behaviors, and conducting customer interviews are all effective ways to gain those valuable insights. By understanding your customers' needs and the jobs they hire your products or services to perform, it's possible to not just avoid disruption, but drive innovation within your organization and industry. Want to learn more about jobs to be done and other theories from Professor Christensen? Explore Disruptive Strategy—one of our online entrepreneurship and innovation courses—and learn how you can acquire the skills and techniques needed to organize for innovation and craft winning strategies.