

NEWS & VIEWS

the struggle is real



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The importance of clarity in achieving objectives and delighting customers.

Let's Start With a Story...

It's the Holiday Season and a man approaches a busy jewelry counter at a large department store. After peeking over his shoulder to ensure his wife can't see him, the man inquires about a golden necklace. The salesclerk is clearly excited about his choice and offers to gift wrap the necklace. Though in a hurry, the man wants this gift to be extra special, so he accepts the clerk's offer, with the caveat of "make it quick." The clerk behind the counter begins to wrap the necklace. Pulling out flourish after flourish and methodically placing each one in the bag until the bag is full of rose petals, thyme, cinnamon sticks, and a sprig of holly. The man, anxious that his wife will appear at any moment, asks the clerk to "please hurry." Still, seemingly oblivious to the man's request, the clerk pulls out another item: a "Christmas Box." The man, now completely frazzled, half-veils that he "does

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...and she says, "I don't want a Christmas box." The man, now completely helpless, says, "I don't want a Christmas box." The clerk freezes before responding with utter confusion, "...but I thought you wanted it gift wrapped?" The man stammers and begins to explain his intent, but quickly stops when he sees his wife approaching. Without another word, the man walks away, leaving behind the "gift-wrapped" necklace and an utterly confused clerk.

This scene from "Love Actually" featuring Alan Rickman and Rowan Atkinson, is a great example of how a seemingly simple experience can quickly turn into a disaster. Both parties had the right intention, both parties thought they were communicating their needs, yet the entire operation failed, leaving a frustrated customer and a confused store clerk. Luckily, there are Experience Architects who work with businesses to dissect what went wrong in these kinds of scenarios.

Dissecting the Struggle

Like every good story, experiences have characters involved, struggles to overcome, and resolutions to those struggles. Since we've already met the characters of our example experience, let's begin with the struggle. In the case of Rickman and Atkinson, the whole struggle began when "gift wrapping" entered the scene. Both the clerk and the customer had very specific mental images when they heard the term "gift wrap." The customer thought of a nice simple box with a bow, maybe a little note attached. The clerk, on the other hand, knew the process and work required to "gift wrap" an item at the jewelry counter. Both men approached the scene with very different schemas and their held beliefs about what quality gift wrapping should look like.

Clarity At All Costs

In addition to viewing the situation entirely differently, the man and the clerk also had different priorities. To our customer, purchasing the necklace without his wife knowing, was the top priority. For the clerk, creating a memorable experience was the top priority. The man had prioritized time, the clerk had prioritized presentation, and neither party communicated priorities clearly.

It needs to be said— prioritization has to be communicated clearly. If "ineffective communication occurs in a project, nearly 56% the project budget is at risk."^[1] This puts into harsh perspective the importance of communicating our priorities, objectives, and processes. Ultimately balancing quality, time, and budget are essential to project success, so our business can live "happily ever after."

But that's not how the world works. We all know there's more to life than a scene in a movie. There's a lot more to the story in the real world. In reality, there are still other customers with their own wants and need, there are revenue targets to hit and board members to report to. It's not realistic to say "balance all parts of your business, and you'll live happily ever after." We must work together to find a true resolution to the struggles we face so we can write the end to our story.

In today's day and age, the importance of intertwining and connecting both the physical and digital customer touchpoints of any business is of paramount importance. Imagine if the above story had begun with an online order or a "buy online pay in store" type of situation. This would have added even greater complexity to the already complex customer journey and reinforced the need to put the customer first in all decisions.

Fortunately, how this story ends is up to you. You could choose to see the problems, cross your fingers, and walk away. You could begin placing blame without looking into the issues being presented. You could even throw your hands up in frustration, walk out the door, and never be heard from again. But those options don't actually help your business grow and succeed, and they certainly don't lead to resolution. To truly overcome the struggles in your story you must dig deeper and create experiences that match the needs of, and exceed the expectations of, your customers and your business.

Though, we'll never know how the story ends at the Love Actually department store jewelry counter. We can be certain that the comically frustrating experience portrayed in the film wouldn't be something we needed to worry about if businesses and Experience Architects work together to find the balance between customers and business objectives.

^[1] Project Management Institute, "The High Cost of Low Performance: The Essential role of Communications", Pulse of the Profession, Executive Summary, May, 2013.

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