

Build a Customer-Centric Culture to Lead Through Uncertainty as a Tech CEO

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8 July 2022

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Published 8 July 2022 - ID G00768143 - 17 min read

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Initiatives: Business Performance Management for Tech CEOs

Don't assume that a customer-centric culture occurs naturally. Tech CEOs who successfully build customer-centric cultures execute a customer-first strategy based on empathy, inspiration and measurement.

Overview

Key Findings

- The new way of hybrid work in office and home has changed customer communication preferences and how tech companies need to communicate with customers.
- Cost containment initiatives and resource eliminations have disconnected customer engagement strategies and have created lower-quality customer experience.
- Tech CEOs speak about being customer-centric, but don't know how to drive real results using metrics and measurement to create a customer culture shift.

Recommendations

Tech CEOs looking to improve business performance management and customer acquisition through a customer-centric strategy must:

- Improve the customer experience by inspiring all employees to support a customer-first culture.
- Adapt to how customers want engagement by listening, applying empathy and changing their digital approach.
- Measure the maturity and progress of a customer culture shift by incorporating and monitoring tracking metrics.

Introduction

Tech CEOs are facing even greater challenges to keep and renew customers during this period of extreme economic uncertainty that has resulted from over two years of the pandemic, current worldwide turmoil, inflation and recession worries.

In the 2021 Tech CEO Survey, ¹ Gartner found that retaining existing customers is only second to acquiring new customers as the most pressing issue to be solved. Maintaining company culture with a remote and hybrid workforce is the No. 1 pressing issue for employee-related initiatives.

In particular, guaranteeing the livelihood of the business is paramount, especially when respecting customer priorities and preferences. This tension is very real for all sizes of business, but it is having a deeper impact on smaller startups that do not have the resources to survive long periods of diminished cash flow. Figure 1 illustrates the key focus areas of a customer culture shift.

Figure 1: Key Focus Areas of a Culture Shift

Key Focus Areas of a Culture Shift



Source: Gartner
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Gartner

Customers are seeking easier, more efficient and more effective communication methods, support and engagement. This can mean offering services and tools the customer can leverage that are relevant to the current circumstances that better serve them, even prior to offering the technology. It is up to the tech CEO to build an entire company customer culture that offers a great customer experience.

Analysis

1. Demonstrate Customer Centricity From the Top Down

Change comes from leadership, and a CEO's first task to create a customer-centric culture is to build broad buy-in from leaders, managers and individual contributors about the mindset of customer centricity. Teams need to understand the importance of building on the foundation of "customer first" to create better outcomes for the entire company.

Not surprisingly, culture plays a large role in the success, or failure, of a company. Everyone in your organization must have a shared understanding of your customers and their role in working together to consistently execute on the customer centricity.

To shift from being product-centric to customer-centric, organizations must ensure the customer is at the center of every decision.

A customer-centric focus works to develop products that resolve customer needs and create satisfied and loyal advocates, supporting greater lifetime value and retention. Encourage employees to ask questions such as:

- How will this affect our customers?
- Will customers feel more satisfied and act with more loyalty and advocacy?
- What need does this solve for our customers?
- Is this good/right for our customers?
- What will our customers think of this?

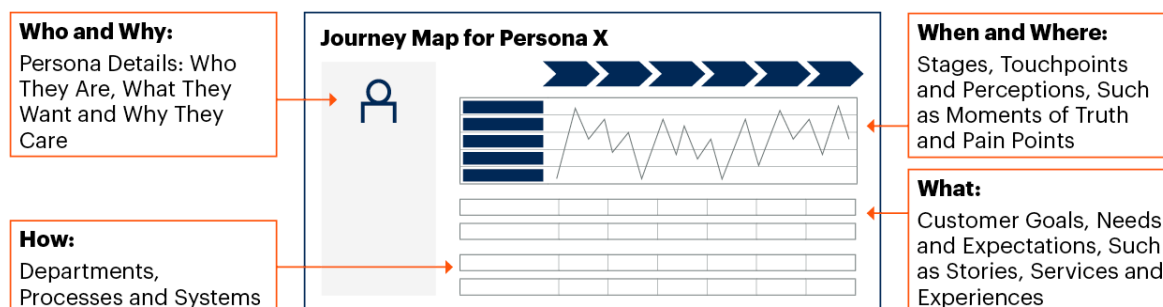
2. Get All Employees Engaged in Supporting a Customer-First Culture

Tech CEOs must work closely with their employees, especially customer-facing employees, not just to "think about our customers," but also to begin "thinking like our customers."

Tech CEOs must understand the experience from a customer's point of view. The common approach is to perform touchpoint analysis (often as part of a "journey mapping" exercise). This analysis helps organizations focus improvement opportunities on the exact moments that matter most within the span of a customer's lifetime relationship (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Every Customer Interaction Counts

Every Customer Interaction Counts



Source: Gartner
722140_C

Gartner

3. Become Team-Driven, Rather Than Leader-Driven

In a mistaken effort to achieve customer success, tech CEOs often focus on employees following prescribed rules for consistency of execution, ruling out variability which is believed to be detrimental.

Companies that drive greater-than-average growth are more team-driven, rather than leader-driven. They are motivated and empowered to enact change, rather than being in a rule-based environment that requires tech CEOs to drive and coerce organizational change.

- **Do not overemphasize strict rules over customer-specific decision making.** Doing so makes it harder for employees to offer better customer service, creating an opposite effect causing the customer experience to suffer as a result. The tension between compliance with rules and exercising common-sense judgment can create an adverse customer experience.
- **Delegate better.** Gartner has advised emerging technology providers that have stalled, noting that a significant proportion share a single common obstacle to their growth — a tech CEO who is too hands on and regimented in their approach to leadership. See Think Like a High-Growth Company — How Top Tech CEOs Grow Faster.

4. Improve the Employee Experience

Gartner found that, during the pandemic, employees have higher engagement and are more optimistic about their organization's success, they have more energy at work, and their pride in their organization has increased, as referenced in Employee Engagement Implications of COVID-19. Tech CEOs should use this as an opportunity to reenergize employees around a companywide, customer-centric, focused approach. Employee experience and customer experience are inextricably linked.

Tech CEOs and their leaders must develop company and employee strategies to continuously improve the employee experience to truly create a better customer experience.

- Some companies are developing strategies around employee experience (typically within their HR function). These efforts tend to be broadly focused. Analysis of the specific experiences of frontline employees indicated that a vast majority do not feel they are being equipped for success.
- The pathway to becoming customer-centric is to become more customer-facing-employee-centric. The easier tech CEOs can make it for their employees to succeed in their interactions with customers, the better the experience they will create.

5. Adapt to How Customers Want Engagement by Listening, Applying Empathy and Changing Their Digital Approach

Gartner reviews thousands of client messaging and engagement models annually through our research and advisory services. From these interviews, discussions and industry research, it is clear that most companies struggle to use empathy in their go-to-market efforts. In Gartner's 2020 technology buying behavior survey, 65% of respondents agreed with the statement, "we are more likely to expand or maintain a relationship with a vendor when we've developed a bond with them." ²

Given the potential for a continued economic crisis, companies are demonstrating how to apply empathetic measures, as opposed to sympathetic measures, that prove more successful. Empathy authentically supports the needs of buyers, strengthening relationships and reducing churn, positioning the company ahead as economic recoveries commence.

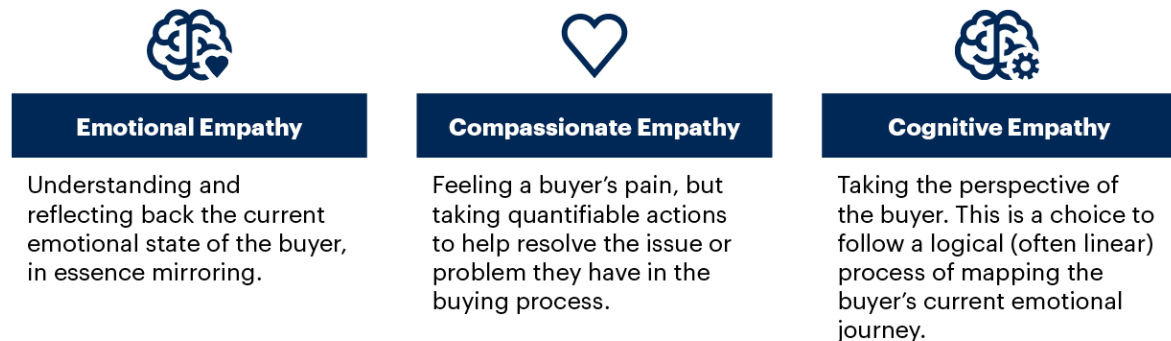
Empathy is all about targeting sales and marketing to match the "in-the-moment" state of the buyer.

Do Not Tell Your Customers About Your Products First — Market and Sell Using the Science of Empathy

There are three types of empathy. Figure 3 describes each — emotional, compassionate and cognitive empathy. ³

Figure 3: Three Types of Empathy

Three Types of Empathy



Source: Gartner
733423_C

Gartner

Each of the three types of empathy allows for more meaningful engagement with buyers by drawing them closer to you emotionally:

1. **Emotional empathy (avoid telling your customer)** — Emotional empathy is the most common type and is easily applied by most marketers and sellers. The concept is to mirror the buyer's existing state.
2. **Compassionate empathy (know your action for this moment)** — Compassionate empathy is the application of feeling the buyer's pain, but with the critical step of providing and taking action to serve them.
3. **Cognitive empathy (provide real-time hyperpersonalization)** — Cognitive empathy is not what most people actually associate with empathy. However, this is a key step, as it is the process of logically and sequentially mapping the current state of the buyer's feelings.

Customer empathy requires a dramatically heightened awareness of the customer's immediate needs and underlying motivations. It means having a good grasp of the frustration that company communications can inflict on a customer, with well-honed instincts that are able to spot when customers are confused or on the wrong track.

6. Communicate to Meet Customer Expectations

Along with empathy, tech CEOs must adapt to how the customer wants to interact. Economic crises accelerate the way customers think, consume information and make decisions. They no longer want to be told how to think or be told what they want. Instead they want to engage in a two-way dialogue arriving at decisions through their own process, not by feeling forced to change or act or be threatened any more than current economic climates are.

Tech CEOs, therefore, need to develop the processes that enable this two-way dialogue, giving extra consideration to the methods by which they impart information that matches what the customers want (such as email, phone, live chat, social media and so on). According to Under30CEO, "Research by HubSpot found that 62 percent of customers enjoy customer service communications over email; another 48 percent prefer it over the phone. Forty-two percent want it via live chat, 36 percent like contact forms, and another 36 percent go through social media routes. To effectively reach every customer, you need to be prepared to use these different channels."

Tech CEOs should evaluate their current customer communication strategies and adapt to the medium that customers prefer, ensuring that communication effectively translates into an improved customer experience.

7. Move From Aspirational to Actionable

Reaching a mature level of customer culture requires a top-down/bottom-up, customer-centric culture that influences the day-to-day actions and decisions of employees at every level. Customers work with tech CEOs and their teams to co-create the experience as they prefer it. In a mature model, employees feel empowered to do the right thing to improve their customers' experiences without asking permission. Leaders embrace and manage more risk to improve the customer experience.

Table 1 shows a set of customer-centric activities, actions and outcomes across various company roles.

Table 1: Take Action Now to Create a Better Customer-Centric Culture

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Across the Company	
Create a culture of “customer-centricity.”	A holistic, companywide strategy that becomes a part of the company culture.
Involve the entire company with customer activities.	Ask every department how they can contribute to better customer success.
Remove silos; encourage cross-organizational teamwork.	By sharing information and ensuring all constituents share the full picture of the value they provide to customers.
Sales and Marketing	
Build customer confidence.	By assessing current content and sales strategies against tactical “do and don’t lists.”
Actively track customer metrics.	Like new signups, conversions, usage, satisfaction and advocacy, on a real-time dashboard accessible to all members of your organization. This will help emphasize and encourage greater effort to win and retain customers.
Use personas to drive personalization.	Pay careful attention to emotional needs across the buying journey.
Augment existing segmentation and persona work.	By understanding how the different states drive customers to engage.
Eliminate cliché messages.	Stop contributing to the deluge of sympathetic information and content that is misaligned to the buyers’ emotional state.
Customer Success	
Help customers achieve their strategic objectives.	By providing the necessary elements to develop a compelling business case that enables customers to secure funding for technology investments.
Tie value to every customer interaction.	Focus on the customers’ specific needs — especially as those needs adapt to changing circumstances.
Executives	
Lead from the top.	By getting to know customers better — this also allows the executive team to quickly anticipate challenges that customers will be facing in times of uncertainty.
Every executive should have customer interactions.	Make virtual video visits and build customer relationships with key accounts.

Source: Gartner (July 2022)

Tech CEOs must agree to apply the same amount of rigor to the customer experience as they do to managing profit and attached key metrics to manage progress and customer success. The customer experience is seen as a key enabler of business success and the primary means of competitive differentiation — a concept wholly supported by management, employees, partners and other stakeholders.

8. Measure the Maturity and Progress of a Customer Culture Shift by Incorporating Metrics to Track and Monitor

Tech CEOs should establish metrics and measurements that track employee engagement and allow employees to have broad authority to take independent action to improve the customer's experience. An established cultural norm must exist throughout the organization to put the customer first in all business and operational decisions (see Note 1).

There are many customer experience metrics that can be tracked. Find the significant key performance indicators (KPIs) that are suitable to your organization and metrics that are available to track.

Evidence

This research is based upon a wide variety of primary and secondary data sources, including inquiries with technology providers, published financials, survey data, personal observations and provider interviews. The positions outlined and opinions expressed were formulated over an extended amount of time to ensure that scenarios were able to play out and hypotheses could be validated. All assumptions, conclusions and recommendations have been tested and refined in conjunction with members of Gartner's research community. This is to ensure that they comprehensively and objectively describe the major and minor trends impacting today's technology market, their impacts upon the provider community and Gartner's recommendations regarding how they should be addressed.

¹ **2021 Gartner Tech CEO Survey:** This survey explored the pressing mission-critical priorities that tech CEOs of startup and emerging tech providers have identified and will be focusing on in the coming year.

This study is aimed at learning more about the key aspects of tech CEOs' strategy going into 2021, key challenges, and approach to navigate economic downturns and disruptions.

Results from this annual survey will help drive the research agenda priorities, and this study will further assist with prioritizing research for 2021.

2020 Gartner Tech CEO Customer Acquisition Survey: Results presented are based on Gartner's survey to understand how tech CEOs manage their customer acquisition tactics and sales initiatives.

The primary research was conducted online between July 2020 and August 2020 among 226 respondents in North America (U.S. and Canada), Western Europe (France, Spain, U.K.) and Asia/Pacific (Australia, China, India).

Eligible organizations operate in the high-tech industry (applications/software, communications services, hardware, IT services and semiconductors), with anticipated enterprisewide annual revenue of up to \$250 million (or equivalent). All organizations focus on businesses and government/nonprofits as their primary customers (including B2B, business-to-business-to-consumer [B2B2C], business-to-business-to-business [B2B2B], government/nonprofit).

Qualified respondents from these organizations have the title of CEO, managing director, owner, COO, C-level executive of operations or equivalent, chief strategy officer (CSO), chief risk officer (CRO), or C-level executive of sales or revenue (or equivalent).

Disclaimer: *The results of this study are representative of the respondent base and not necessarily the market as a whole.*

² **2020 Gartner End-User Buying Behavior Survey:** Results presented are based on a Gartner study conducted to further understand how technology subscription purchases are bought and renewed. The research was conducted online from November 2019 through December 2019 among respondents located in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Germany, France, Australia and Brazil.

Respondents were required to work within organizations with more than 100 employees and \$50 million in revenue, in industries other than those deemed “high tech.” The 1,509 respondents were involved in vendor evaluation/selection for new purchases and involved in vendor review for renewals for at least one of the following categories — of note, categories could be combined to satisfy this requirement:

- On-premises software via subscription model
- Software as a service (SaaS)
- Managed services
- Other technologies (hardware, services, among others) using a subscription model

Respondents were also required to work within organizations that had made a new technology subscription purchase or renewed a technology subscription agreement in the past two years.

Respondents were asked about their purchase and renewal processes, including contract specifics, renewal considerations, the impact of customer experience and advocacy on decision making, general awareness generation, and what factors impact purchase decisions.

Note: *The results of this study are representative of the respondent base and not necessarily the market as a whole.*

³ See also [There Are Actually Three Types of Empathy. Here's How They Differ — and How You Can Develop Them All](#), Inc. and Daniel Goleman.

⁴ [4 Ways to Provide Better Customer Experience During Uncertain Times](#), Under30CEO.

Note 1: Examples of Commonly Used Customer Experience Metrics by Category

Table 2 shows customer experience metrics by category (from [How to Manage Customer Experience Metrics](#)).

Table 2: Customer Experience Metrics by Category
(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Employee	Quality	Customer	Loyalty and Customer	Advocacy, Reference,
Engagement		Satisfaction	Retention	Brand and Reputation
Commitment to mission and vision of the organization	Accounts opened with sufficient documentation and written information	Average basket size	Customer lifetime value	Brand credibility
Current job understanding	Accuracy of verbal information	Average call duration and call abandonment rate	Adoption of new products	Brand influence
Employee abandonment	App failure rate	Average time taken to respond to email, text, voice call, tweet, chat or voicemail	Attrition rate	Brand perception
Employee churn	Average data usage of app per device	Average service answer	Average customer tenure	Brand recognition
Employee engagement in brand advocacy	Average queue time	Average time to call duration	Average order size	Brand relevance
Employee Net Promoter Score (ENPS)	Average screen navigation time per user	Bounce rate (navigate away without clicking on website)	Customer peer community participation rate	Brand value
Employee peer trust score	Average viewing time	Call average handle time	Customer retention	Customer referrals
Employee perception of work conditions	Browsing latency	Call average duration time	Customers at risk	Net Promoter Score
Employee promotions by organization	Call back next action failure rate	Call initial response time	Customers "bump to defect"	Number of brand advocates
Employee recognition and rewards by organization	Claims denial rate	Call response rate	Discretion rate	Number of reference customers
Employee satisfaction	Completeness of order	Call satisfaction	Dominant customer level	Patent advocacy index
Employee sentiment score	Content visual quality	Calls resolved after escalation	Dwell time time on website	Percentage of customers as advocates
Employee willingness to volunteer for work outside formal hours	Customer data quality	Cart abandonment rate	Frequency of interaction	Percentage of new customers receiving recommendations from advocates
Opportunities for career growth and development	Defect fix backlog	Complaint acknowledgment rate	Lapsed customer rate	Price sensitivity
Organizational score on Glassdoor	Emergency room wait time	Complaint resolution rate	Loyalty program enrollment	Reputation scores
Retention of senior leadership	End to end transaction times	Customer improvement score	Loyalty program participation	Social network participation
Relationship with direct supervisor	Fill rate	Customer complaint rate	Number of repeat orders	Social network sentiment scores
	First time fix rate	Customer complaint volume	Product or service upgrade rate	Social network "likes"
	Incidents rate	Customer service agent knowledge	Product or service usage	Trust rating
	Inventory accuracy	Employee helpfulness score	Products per customer	Word of mouth referral
	Legal noncompliance events per year	First call free contact resolution rate (FCR)	Purchase frequency	
	Mean time between failure (MTBF)	Foot traffic	Recency of interaction	
	Mean time to repair (MTTR)	Mystery shopping scores	Renewal rate	
	Network quality of experience (NQOX)	Number of support requests	Repeat purchase rate	
	New account setup error rate	Organization satisfaction	Revenue per customer	
	Number of dropped sessions	Overall customer satisfaction	Revenue preservation	
	Number of rated downloads	Overall problem resolution time	Share of wallet	
	Number of network outages	Process handoff rate	Total customer numbers	
	Number of security breaches	Process handoff rate	Use of multiple channels	
	On-time delivery rate	Product returns		
	On-time shipment	Product review ratings		
	Operational effectiveness rate	Product satisfaction		
	Patients leaving without being seen	Product value		
	Pricing accuracy	Redress occurrence		
	Process adherence	Routing call to correct agent		
	Product or service defect or failure, or error or bug rate	Satisfaction with customer service agent		
	Product or service reliability	Satisfaction with salesperson		
	Product recall return rate	Service satisfaction		
	Product uptime	Social ratings and review scores		
	Quality of experience	Social sentiment score		
	Right first time	Store experience		
	SLA compliance	Time to authenticate		
	Search speed	Time to resolve		
	Shipping defect, error or failure rate	Usability completion time		
	Signal strength	Usability task time satisfaction		
	Simplicity rating	Value for money score		
	Streaming download speed	Customer effort score		
	Streaming latency			
	System downtime interruption			
	Frequency index (DAFI)			
	Time to launch service	Value of data privacy regulatory fines		
	Warranty claims per product			
	Website response time			

Source: Gartner (July 2022)

Document Revision History

Build and Keep a Customer-Centric Culture During Uncertain Times as a Tech CEO —
8 December 2020

Recommended by the Authors

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

Tech CEOs Need Everyone ‘Selling and Marketing’ in a Startup via Employee Advocacy and Social Media

How to Manage Customer Experience Metrics

Implement Customer Experience Initiatives to Drive Retention and Growth as a Tech CEO
How Does My Customer Churn Rate Compare to Gartner High Tech CEO Benchmarks?
Improve Customer Retention by Embracing Product Adoption Strategies as a Tech CEO
Turning Customers Into References — A How-to-Guide for Tech CEOs

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organization	rate			
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Search speed	Time to resolve
Shipping defect, error or failure rate	Usability completion rates
Signal strength	Usability task time satisfaction
Simplicity rating	Value for money scores
Streaming download speed	Customer effort score
Streaming latency	
System Average Interruption Frequency Index (SAIFI)	

Time to launch service
Value of data privacy regulatory fines
Warranty claims per product
Website response time

Source: Gartner (July 2022)

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