Minecraft: The Building Blocks of Customer Engagement
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I envy my children. Their command and fluidity with technology and how they use it to be creative and collaborate with peers to create and do great things inspires this technology veteran every day. And they are just eight (twins) and seven years old, respectively.

Of course I am referring to their expertise and engagement with the game Minecraft – a game that, once you overcome the lack of impressive graphics and a tad bit of motion sickness, will teach you all you need to know about the most disruptive and transformative shift of control in managing, maintaining, and maturing customer relationships, ever. This evolution, from corporate to customer control of relationships, is known as customer engagement – and without it, your business will become vulnerable to competitors, disruptors, and yes, even those pesky Creepers.

Let’s take a step back for a second and forget about breaking blocks and crafting recipes and define the term customer engagement. Paul Greenberg, president of The 56 Group and the man who literally wrote the book on CRM, defines customer engagement as “the ongoing interactions between company and customer, offered by the company, chosen by the customer”. Let’s parse that into two parts: First the “ongoing interactions” aspect followed by the all-important “offered by the company, chosen by the customer” components.

For many, the term customer is awarded to a company or individual upon the purchase of a good or service. This label often continues throughout the durability or utility span of that product/service – when this customer returns back to the prospect or potential repeat customer pool. This type of customer lifecycle is based on a transactional view of the relationship, where a consumer turns customer only when a transaction is made or a new transaction potential exists. Routinely, organizations who employ a transactional view of relationships take focus on key moments of truth within a set of experiences optimized
to serve the customer in a reactive state. To embrace customer engagement principles, organizations must continue to offer strong process and policy needed to respond to customers, but must augment this approach by adding proactive and personalized options that a customer may not even know about to enrich their connection with the organization. It is with this purpose – the enriched connection – that a customer can truly begin to form a relationship with your company, your brand, and your products. It isn’t the sale, nor is it how great any one interaction or transaction is performed. It is how you show up each day in the eyes of the customer that matters.

Which takes me to the second part of the definition “offered by the company, chosen by the customer”: Customer choice. Choice is an integral component of most successful product strategies. Apple’s iPhone comes in a myriad of sizes, storage amounts, and colors; BMW offers the sporty 3 Series, the luxury 7 Series, and a mid-point 5 Series to cater to its diverse customer base. Even the airline industries offer classes of service to help those traveling for business and those traveling on a budget select the best seat for an upcoming trip. While choice is abundant when selecting products to buy, it is amazing how few choices or options there are when interacting with an organization outside of its core products and services.

Look no further than an organization’s customer service strategy to understand what I am talking about. Routinely, organizations will direct you to call their contact center during hours of operation convenient to the location(s) of their workforce, and provide you a number to dial in the event that you require their assistance. In this case, the corporation is in control of the customer experience, not the customer. Yet, with today’s digitally inclined customer, this is no longer deemed acceptable. In fact, soon you will find customers will explicitly select your company’s product and services based on the strengths of your engagement experiences and ecosystems around your products – and not just on the basis of product features alone. This is certainly true of the world of digital goods and services (like smartphones) as well as those industries where knowledge and experience become intertwined and augment the overall product experience (like financial services). So how do we transform our existing
businesses to handle the ever-growing needs of customers? Do we need to rethink our entire engagement strategy? How much will this cost, and how long will this take?

Not to worry, there are simple approaches each business unit can utilize to engage the modern customer. Which brings me back to Minecraft – a game, like working with customers, wrapped in a series of paradoxes. What is fun to build is just as easy (and fun) to destroy. You create, you construct, and you explore. You never win. And it is breathtaking. So what can Minecraft teach us about customer engagement? Let’s explore.

First and foremost, the fundamental principles of business cannot be ignored. Unlike the goal of Minecraft – which is to have fun – the goal of business is to make a profit. This cannot be understated. Elevating an engagement strategy within your business must fall within these parameters. However, each group in the organization – from marketing to products to customer service to IT – must play a role in transforming the enterprise.

Many organizations operate on the belief that the primary roles of marketing teams are to define the brand and to drive sales transactions. This is how companies think, not customers. Customers believe the role of marketing is to deliver compelling, convenient, and personalized choices that are worth their time, money, and decisions. They also increasingly believe that brands are defined by the experiences created to support their use of a product or service more so than the compelling features or identity put forth by an organization.

Think again about Minecraft. It’s certainly not the only game out there – there are other choices. And yet more than 10 million people around the world have registered and played this game. Even more shocking – the reported marketing budget for Minecraft is close to $0. How is this possible? Because Minecraft re-wrote the rules of engagement for gaming. Rather than expensive marketing and advertising campaigns, Minecraft leverages earned media and community engagement to fuel its impressive growth. Now let’s face it, not all businesses will
operate like Minecraft. Not every product will become a phenomenon. However, the rules of engagement-centric marketing require that we think beyond the world of targeted advertisement and campaigns and move towards a world of personalization and preference. It is in this area where CRM systems thrive – and yet so few marketers use CRM data in favor of marketing applications and services. Marketers must move beyond the “or” found in this dilemma (CRM or marketing app) and move to a new form of solution where the interplay between interaction, identity, and intelligence is one. Marketing must also evolve beyond the funneled focus of a product selection and expand its focus on use, utilization, and true customer connection with the product or service being offered.

Product teams too must evolve in an engagement-centric world. Outside of a few rare cases, there are few opportunities today for organizations to compete solely on the basis of product differentiation. Today’s marketplaces are fraught with aggressive and agile competitors that will adapt, reproduce, and remix even your most valuable features. And that’s just fine; it’s the modern reality. Where do we go from here? Let’s go back to the blocks again to gain perspective.

Minecraft is not a difficult game to play – you move, you build, you jump, and you build some more. It is within this framework that gamers have created automobiles, aircraft, and yes, even digitally-accurate replicas of the Taj Mahal. None of these designs have been provided by developers on the Minecraft team; all have been made by gamers themselves. In this case, the product has become a paintbrush where user engagement and empowerment have fueled digital creation. But beyond the product is an ecosystem of content, video and challenges online designed to help users optimize their experience by learning, growing, and developing on and with Minecraft. The same content of earned media above has driven convergence across product usage combined with community engagement that further enhances the overall experiences for gamers. So how does this apply to your business? It starts with thinking differently about products themselves. While the features and attributes of products will always
be thought of a great characteristic, it is the experiences driven through, around, and with products that make lasting impressions with customers. One common area where lasting impressions are made is in how your customer service teams support your products and services. It is also in this area that we pay so little attention to our customers, and yet we can have the biggest impact.

Imagine if you will the best customer service you have received lately. I’m not talking about the extreme cases (good and bad) that happen to other people – but the one that happened to you. For me, it was a scenario where I had ordered a product online, but a package had not been delivered as scheduled. I was perplexed. From my smartphone, I pulled up the order confirmation email sent to me by the company, which contained two options to engage – call them toll-free or begin a chat with them right then and there. Being a digitally inclined customer, I selected the chat session, immediately connected with an informed and knowledgeable service professional, and was amazed when the company admitted making a mistake in stating that the package had already been delivered. My engagement was simple, it was convenient – and yes, the company even took accountability for their error. Amazing. The fact that I received a hand-written apology and a coupon for making a new purchase after the fact heightened my experience, but it did not define my experience.

Minecraft, too, has transformed its customer service through the use of digital content and communities. From their self-service help center to their use of community champions and experts that both create digital content and staff the Minecraft Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels, gamers are routinely engaged throughout their journey to assist in answering questions, complaints, and to gain additional advice and help in playing the game. It is always on and always staffed – not just by employees, but advocates who spend their time, energy, and activities dedicated to making the Minecraft ecosystem thrive. And while some of the service tooling is offered directly by the Minecraft team, others – including fan and community engines – are not. Usually this would make the IT team cringe, but again the
principles of choice and control must evolve for IT teams to succeed in a world optimized for customer engagement.

IT teams must incorporate similar thinking to modern marketing media. The current consumer and enterprise technology landscapes are converging, which means that technology teams need to adapt how applications, experiences, and information are exchanged both inside and outside your organization. IT teams need to embrace the fact that not all data and systems will be owned – rather, information can be earned and processed from outside sources. In a world centered on Customer engagement, IT must work to harness this information and create new forms of consistency and personalization with data in mind. It is in this area where we need to continue to see innovation transform and take shape, but also where IT organizations can drive new purpose and value for the experiences that need built and developed. It is also in this area that IT must play a vital role, not only to create the engaging experiences for customers, but also to provide the level of data, insights, and information required to business professionals across lines of business needed to fuel new growth and opportunity.

Much like Minecraft, the next wave of business will be an open canvas for us to innovate on behalf of our customers. It’s going to be fun to see new customer-centric innovation and customer engagement take shape. Let’s get crafting.