

7 skills every CX interviewer needs

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Our feelings and emotions are intricately linked with how we make decisions. Unfortunately, too many companies fixate on NPS or CSAT scores and ignore their limitations. While these scores may give us the 'what' and 'how much', they are sorely lacking the fundamental 'why'.



Liezal Jonkheid, director and founder of the Consumer Psychology Lab. Image supplied

These scores are all about the business and performance measures, and not about the customer and their emotional reaction to their experience with a brand. To truly understand customers' experience, it's time to re-think how we measure customer experience.

A customer's experience (CX) of a brand interaction is shaped by their mindset at the time, expectations, fears, needs, wants, previous experiences, and even subconscious triggers, which all impact the actual interaction with the brand, through any touchpoint.

These reactions are also influenced by all the sensory elements customers encounter during their interaction with a brand. It contributes both to what they remember and to the clarity of the memory (recall). The intricate nature of experience means that it is always subjective and always carries emotive elements – conscious or subconscious.

So why is this so important when it comes to measuring customer experience?

To stand out in a highly competitive market environment, customer experience has become the only true differentiator. When CX is designed, rather than left to chance, customers experience brands as consistent, and they are able to connect to the brand and the interaction emotionally.

Exceptional experiences boost customer loyalty – they stay longer, they buy more and more often, and they become powerful and convincing word-of-mouth advocates for the brand.

This is where the CX survey, and how the customer's experience is collected and measured, matter. Customers need a safe, authentic space to share their stories, rather than being boxed into structured surveys with simplistic 'yes/no' and 'scales of 1-5' answers.

Often the number does not provide the opportunity to explain the rating. They need to have the opportunity to weave their recollection of the event in their own words. The customer conversation is the opportunity to ask and unpack the impact of their experience.

Having conversations with customers can provide far deeper, authentic insights into what drives CX, that comes straight from your customers' own experience, rather than being led by pre-defined Q&A type forms that leave little room for hearing from a customer's true vantage point, and typically miss the subtle cues and opportunities to delve deeper.

To make these fertile customer experience conversations possible, CX interviewers require very specific personal traits and skills. The Consumer Psychology Lab unpacks the 7 critical skills that every CX interviewer must master if they truly want to help businesses gather valuable insights into what drives CX and how to improve it.

Important skills for CX interviewing

1. Connect

Most direct marketing calls start with "You are speaking to x, how are you doing today?"

To break from the associated invasive approach to selling products or services not required, the introduction has to be different, authentic, and transparent so the person can process the information and reason for the call right upfront. From the moment the conversation starts, the customer should know they are speaking to a professional CX interviewer.

Top CX interviewers establish a connection in the way

- they introduce themselves to the customer.
- position the reason for a call with a real interest to hear the customer's experience, in their own words, at its core.
- they respond intelligently and appropriately throughout the conversation by probing, listening and providing a safe space.

2. Probe

One of the most important skills for CX interviewers is curiosity. The ability to ask questions with a natural curious approach, and the ability to reflect on a response and think about what it means, are the traits of mastery.

To conduct successful experience conversations, CX interviewers should be

- familiar with a typical customer journey with the relevant brand.

- clearly understand the purpose of the interview (i.e. the brand's objective for the survey)
- able to ask open-ended questions (why, how, tell me more, etc), rather than closed questions, requiring a mere yes or no response.
- able to use silence effectively to encourage conversation.
- confirm understanding of the information by validating (and summarising) what was heard.

3. Listen actively

To get the most from a conversation about a customer experience, an interviewer must become exceptional in active listening, by

- listening attentively – this means not interrupting and consistently providing cues that they are present, i.e. following the conversation and processing the content rather than formulating the next question, by using phrases, like: mmm, I hear you...
- summarising and paraphrasing to validate the accuracy of the story's content
- responding appropriately by using empathy (appreciating customers' view of the experience without judgement).

4. Have empathy

Empathy is generally defined as the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. When CX interviewers master empathy as a technique, customers feel safe, understood, heard and validated.

5. Encourage storytelling

Nobel prize-winning psychologist and economist Prof Daniel Kahneman explained that the experiencing self does all the living by going through a succession of moments, but it is the remembering self that keeps the memories.

When we make decisions, our remembering selves are in control. What customers remember and how that made them feel, gives us insight into their future decision-making. Every customer has his or her version of how the interaction took place.

The interviewer's role is to offer a safe space where customers can share their personal view of every touch point with the brand. They must have the skill to identify and delve into moments that really matter to each customer.

6. Deduce the emotional impact

The story provides cues about how the customer was affected and sees the brand subsequently. CX interviewers unpack and understand the customer's willingness to:

- convince others (share their stories – advocacy)
- forgive (forgiveness)
- tell others (recommendation)
- return or buy more (loyalty)
- trust in brand/company/product/people
- strength of the relationship.

7. Remain neutral

Great CX interviewers exude a non-judgemental approach underpinned by empathy. Customers should feel safe enough to say it as it is, knowing that the interviewer will not take sides. The interviewer should also not come across as cold or unmoved by the stories shared.

While they are not in the position to agree with the content, they can and should validate the customer's perspective and emotions. The professionalism to never compromise the client nor make a customer feel unjustified by taking sides, hold the key to the most effective and valuable CX conversations.

When companies and brands are genuinely focused on fixing moments of misery and creating more moments of magic for their customers, it requires quality conversations with customers to truly understand what drives the experience.

And it is all underpinned by the level of mastery of the CX interviewers whose skills and experience in this complex field will determine the quality and authenticity of the conversations and data you gather from your customers - the outcomes of which will ultimately define the design of your customer journey and - experience.

Mastery of these seven critical CX interviewing skills gets you the reliable, relevant, honest and actionable feedback you want and need from your customers to define and entrench your organisation's true competitive advantage.

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