

## Injecting Extreme Customer Intimacy Into Your Project Team

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Title:	Injecting extreme customer intimacy into your project team
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Abstract:	<p>It is our job to ensure that our project team creates products or services that satisfy the Customer (with a capital C). For well over 30 years, I've personally been involved with struggling companies that "just don't get it" as well as thriving companies that "become One with the Customer" as part of their DNA.</p> <p>In Anthony Leaper's article "Enhancing Customer Intimacy," our role in leading customer-aware teams "is really all about showing your customer that he or she is the only one who matters at that precise moment—and that you understand, can even anticipate, what they want, how they want it, and when they want it. This kind of intimate knowledge of your customer's preference and habits starts with developing products and services that becomes the basis on a long-term relationship with that customer."</p> <p>Welcome to <i>customer intimacy</i>.</p>
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## Hints That Your Company Isn't Customer Intimate

Companies, and their supportive corporate culture, sometimes say one thing and yet practice another. Take, for example, the four core values of a leading energy company that was etched in stone and echoed in annual reports:

- Communication
- Respect
- Integrity
- Excellence

The company was Enron. As Daniel Denison, of Denison Consulting, states in his YouTube video, "just because they state them [corporate values] it doesn't mean they live by them."

Recently there was a discussion on LinkedIn entitled "Does anyone else share my frustration with CompanyX Support?" (I use CompanyX to shield the actual company referenced in the LinkedIn discussion.) The onslaught from angry customers echoing horror stories of dealing with CompanyX technical support was relentless. Here's some examples:

"I love CompanyX software, but I am AT WAR with any and all companies who have the arrogance to offer pathetic support."

“Long story short, I was transferred to five different people, lost the connection twice, was put on hold twice, had to download some stuff and reinstall it, etc.”

“Years and years ago, I remember getting help when I needed to call. The last time was no help whatsoever. I don't even bother any more.”

This is a symptom of many technology companies that have lost their connection with the customer. I got the distinct impression that these customers would instantly switch to a competitor that demonstrated better attention to the needs of the customer. Web sites like LinkedIn demonstrate the power of “unfiltered” social media: bad news travels faster than good news.

Many years ago, our management team traveled to meet the IT team of a growing retail chain at their headquarters. Their corporate headquarters wasn't impressive. Their building looked like an unmaintained brick high school (even the parking lot had potholes everywhere). But it was what was inside the building that was inspiring. The staff was very enthusiastic, happy, and eager to work with us. I noticed banners in the hallway stating one simple question, “What have you done for your customer lately?” As our meeting came to a close, we overheard the chanting of “customer, customer, customer” followed by rebel yells (well, it sure sounded like it) from a distant auditorium. This retailer believed the best way to serve their customer was to build a technical infrastructure based on technical excellence ranging from efficient logistics, order placement directly with the supplier (unheard of in those days), and fierce attention to product placement on store shelves.

So, who was it? It was Wal-mart headquartered in Bentonville, Arkansas. We were told that all of this smart technology contributed to provide merchandise to the customer that was always stocked and easy to locate in their stores. Ultimately, they'd win customer loyalty and profits should follow. (Those were the good old days, I guess.)

Nevertheless, it was yet an example of customer intimacy.

## Hints That Your Team Isn't Customer Intimate

One day, I happened to be walking by one of my best engineer's office. The phone rang, he answered it, and then he responded to the caller, “Let me transfer you to technical support.” He promptly slammed down the phone back in the cradle and chuckled to himself.

I couldn't believe it. He turned around and said, “It was just ‘some customer’ thinking I was in support. They'll call back if it was really that important!” Needless to say, I educated him that all of us have a responsibility to ensure that our customers are taken care of, even those of us in software development that don't have daily customer contact.

Another example situation that I've seen over and over again is deciding how to implement a specific feature when there's a huge difference in making it easier for either the customer or the software developer to implement. (It has been my experience that it takes more effort to create software that is easier for the customer to use.)

At a planning meeting I witnessed a software engineer resist developing a feature in a certain way even after the product owner argued, “but that's not what the customer wants.” You as the leader and team facilitator can force the issue, but most of us defer to an engineer's bias because it usually results in faster implementation and satisfies the person doing the work. However, short-sided employee focused decisions can have long-term negative customer impact. There is a huge risk that customers will eventually insist on a different, more customer-friendly approach.

Place that same software engineer in a room *with* an actual customer and by the end of the conversation, not only will the engineer agree to implement the feature the way the customer wants, but they will commit to an unrealistic schedule and put all of their energy into getting it done!

I bet most of you have witnessed this same phenomenon.

It all comes down to customer intimacy.

## So, What Exactly Is Customer Intimacy?

Probably the best definition I have found comes from the article “Customer Intimacy and Other Value Disciplines”:

“While companies pursuing operational excellence concentrate on making their operations lean and efficient, those pursuing a strategy of customer intimacy continually tailor and shape products and services to fit an increasingly fine definition of the customer. This can be expensive, but customer-intimate companies are willing to spend now to build customer loyalty for the long term.”

After a customer has acquired your product or service, customer intimacy doesn't have to end there. Some of the better technology companies follow up with more benefits (and not just pushing additional ways that a customer can give you money). This can be in the form of training videos, newsletters, tips and techniques, and even discounts on other products.

Brian Pearson, in his book *Loyalty Leap*, illustrates the relationship between customer intimacy and customer loyalty. According to Pearson, “Delivering a meaningful service proposition to the customer creates intimacy, and therefore a clear competitive advantage in the marketplace. Loyalty happens when you get everything right, and the customer is committed. This is a ladder effect.”

The Techsmith folks, developers of Snagit and Camtasia software products produce wonderful software products. They also publish a wonderful monthly electronic newsletter that I look forward to receive. This newsletter includes great tips and techniques in addition to new product announcements. I know that every Techsmith product or service will be of high quality, reasonably priced, easy to use, and will be wonderfully supported.

It all comes down to customer intimacy.

## Inspire Your Team To Be Customer Intimate

The *PMBOK® Guide* mentions the word “customer” in many chapters typically with an emphasis on either the procurement process or regarding satisfying customer requirements. Even with the latest fifth edition, best practices designed to enhance customer intimacy just isn't covered.

I prioritize three key characteristics to creating customer intimate products that should result in long-term value:

- Usability
- Availability
- Supportability

Let's examine each of these one by one:

### Usability

Years ago, I worked for a technology-driven company named Data General. I enjoyed working there – we built incredible products. Every time our arch rival, Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) came up with a faster, better computer system we were waiting with an even faster, better computer system. If you read the wonderfully heartbreaking book *Soul of a New Machine*, you'd get the idea that DG engineers made most of the decisions where they were useful to the customer or not. Not until I

worked with Chris Stone, who lead the marketing for DG's office automation software products, did I understand the importance of focusing on creating the best possible user experience over the mountain of advanced features we traditionally stuffed into the creation of hardware and software products. (Chris later became Novell's Vice Chairman/CEO Office.)

That drastic change from technology-centric to customer-centric design actually lead me to my next career opportunity leading software development at Software Publishing Corporation (SPC) where ease of use (remember Harvard Graphics?) and "the customer" was at the heart of every software product we built.

The best way to learn what is best for a customer is to involve the customer along the way during development. Utilizing Agile takes this approach to heart emphasizing customer-centric product development. If your customer can't be devoted to work with you, Craig Larman in his book, *Agile & Iterative Development*, emphasizes the use of "customer proxies." This is where you assign internal folks to play the role of the customer provided they have knowledge of the domain and customer requirements. So, who makes the best customer proxies? Technical support personnel certainly come to mind!

Ken Schwaber, in his book *Agile Project Management With Scrum*, endorses continued customer presence during a project's development specifically with Scrum:

"Once implemented, Scrum, practices facilitate collaboration between customers and development teams becomes the normal course of a Scrum project."

Ken mentions some examples where one of his teams switched away from interactive customer involvement to documenting requirements "the old fashioned way." The results shouldn't surprise you:

"We went from quick turnaround to lengthy, requirements-gathering phases. We went from, simple language to artifacts that were arcane and highly specialized."

### **Availability**

Making it effortless for your customers to use your software products whenever they want, wherever they want is next to impossible with software licensing schemes.

Unfortunately, more apps assume you are connected to the Internet in order to run. This is a problem. (Not everyone wants to have their working PC or Mac to be connected to the Internet!) This could be due to company policy or simply a precaution to avoid malware threats. Yet, if your software being developed assumes connectivity, you're begging for customer frustration. For example, making your app's user guide accessible only from an Internet location may be convenient for you, but it would be impractical for your customer without an Internet connection.

Referring to the CompanyX LinkedIn rants I mentioned earlier, licensing issues crept into the discussion impacting the availability to use licensed software that the customer purchased:

"I could not use previously purchased ProductY on my new computer because I failed to "uninstall" it from my former computer before it unexpectedly crashed and died. Then they gave me a hard time as I had no more valid serial numbers available to use- Back in the day I remember 3 uses- then down to 2- now they claim 1 and that's it or buy another one!"

"Some of the most annoying experiences an CompanyX customer can experience is attempting to reactivate an installation after either a hard drive failure or upgrade, where deactivation was either overlooked or impossible. Attempting to resolve issues like this can involve an enormously frustrating degree of interrogation that could probably be bypassed with a few phone-tree options."

This is a pet peeve of mine. Most customers are honest, yet we as software product creators go to great lengths to treat them as if they are trying to rip you off.

Instead, mimic what IDM Corporation, the creators of UltraEdit software, designed into their software products. Like most software companies, IDM limits the installation of their apps to a maximum

number of concurrent computers. Their app uses the Internet for verification, however, they added the ability for the customer to reset their counters and start again. If the customer accidentally exceeded the maximum installation count, all they have to do is select this counter reset command and re-enter the serial number again. Time-wasting telephone calls or angry e-mails are no longer necessary. In other words, IDM gave their customer the ability to manage their licensers over the Internet for themselves. Absolutely brilliant!

### **Supportability**

Last, but not least, if your organization believes customer satisfaction is a high priority, then make sure you invest in providing great customer support. The support team needs to be available, speaking or writing in the language that customers expect (probably English), trained in the products they support, courteous, and responsive.

The CompanyX LinkedIn discussion included comments regarding technical support, too:

“This is what happens when American companies move their customer support offshore to try to save money. Years and years ago, I remember getting help when I needed to call. The last time was no help whatsoever.”

There was even a response from an individual that used to work in technical support. Listen to what she has to say:

“Customer service is generally outsourced - usually offshored - and techs typically have almost no product-specific training and NO back-up help for their own learning curve! At my job, we didn't even have access to the software/hardware we were supposed to be supporting!!!”

Wow!

Don't interpret either outsourcing or lack of specific equipment to be an indictment of bad support practices. However, customers pay good money to purchase license software products simply expect to get understandable, quality, and timely technical support if they get stuck.

## **A Final Word**

You'll be happy to know that the CompanyX LinkedIn discussion actually had a positive outcome! A brave support manager from CompanyX was monitoring the online discussion and jumped right in. He empathized with the ever-mounting customer rants and acknowledged their gripes. Here's an excerpt:

“I can assure you that we're listening and continually working to improve both the quality and timeliness of our support. In an effort to support this we've created a dedicated Customer Advocacy team.”

Still skeptical, he was reminded by several folks that “actions speak larger than words” and to CompanyX's credit (or to this man's initiative) further policy changes were pronounced online on this same discussion thread:

“Activation - we've built in a few safeguards to help our customers successfully activate their licenses as allowed under the EULA. This includes a bit of wiggle room in case of a mistake (oops, forgot to deactivate!) or catastrophic system failure (ARGH!) to help you get re-activated.”

Finally, Seth Godin probably summarizes the impact of customer intimacy in his wonderful book *Permission Marketing* with a single rule to live by:

“Increase the durability of customer relationships. Invest money in customer retention, because it's a small fraction of the cost of customer acquisition.”

Great words to live by. Once you acquire customers, you sure don't want to lose them.

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# Bio



Ken Whitaker of Leading Software Maniacs® (LSM) has more than twenty-five years of software development executive leadership and training experience in a variety of technology roles and industries. He has led commercial software teams at Software Publishing (remember Harvard Graphics?), Data General, embedded systems software companies, and enterprise software suppliers. Ken is an active PMI® member, Project Management Professional (PMP)® certified, and a Certified ScrumMaster (CSM). Sources for LSM's material come from case studies, personal leadership experience, the PMI *Project Management Book of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*, and Ken's leadership books: *Managing Software Maniacs*, *Principles of Software Development Leadership*, and *I'm Not God, I'm Just a Project Manager*.

PM University, <http://www.pmuniversity.com>, is a new addition to Leading Software Maniacs online, eLearning curriculum focused on pragmatic project management and software leadership courses. Ken is also the creator of PM Chalkboard™, <http://www.pmchalkboard.com>—the fastest way to learn basic project management principles with entertaining, no cost tutorial videos. Ken also is a frequent guest writer for <http://www.projectmanagement.com> (formerly, <http://www.gantthead.com>).

To help project managers and anyone working digital projects and software development, Ken has developed the Spresso™ project versioning software, <http://www.VersionItWithSpresso.com>, (available for both Windows and OS X).

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