

## Secret Shopping – Companies Offering the Best Customer Experiences – Get More Customers!

### Summary:

According to the renowned industry research leader Forrester, there is a clear correlation between superior customer experience and superior revenue growth. Customer Experience Management (CEM) is a clear competitive differentiator for companies looking to acquire new customers and keep the ones they have!

Gartner defines CEM as “the practice of designing and reacting to customer interactions to meet or exceed customer expectations and, thus, increase customer satisfaction, loyalty and advocacy.”

While there are innovators out there and companies obsessed about CEM, the experience reality is often very different from companies' expectations. We asked 150 executives 'If they consider Customer Experience to be a value proposition for their company.' Eighty percent (80%) of the companies claimed they offer “superior customer experiences.” When we asked potential buyers through our Secret Shopper Programme, only eight percent (8%) agreed.

The Secret Shopper Programme opens the lid on a sales process that too many businesses leave to chance. It provides a scientific analysis of the whole sales journey based on an exhaustive 160+ point assessment. Using a carefully constructed persona it reveals how a buyer experiences a sales offer. Secret Shopper drills down into every relevant detail, including how calls, emails and website visits are all perceived. Alinea Partners has analysed hundreds of sales journeys taken worldwide.

The Secret Shopper Programme is a sales impact tool for B2B companies who want to ensure they are offering the highest level of quality CEM. Companies run this programme when they are highly innovative, have new or evolving sales teams and/or when new services are launched. High performing companies in the programme target to be shopped at least twice a year.

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Based on its experience with hundreds of companies, Alinea Partners has identified customer acquisition, customer lifecycle management, buying abandonment, sales operations and performance and customer experience benchmarks that include the identification and classification of common pitfalls along the buying experience, triggers for enabling the creation of the optimal customer experience, and an extensive collection of best practices, which companies can use to deploy excellent customer experience standards.

## **CEM when buyers have the attention-spans of Goldfish**

Researchers surveyed 2,000 participants in Canada and studied the brain activity of 112 others using electroencephalograms. The results showed the average human attention span has fallen from 12 seconds in 2000, or around the time the mobile revolution began, to eight seconds.

Goldfish, meanwhile, are believed to have an attention span of nine seconds. (Source: The elegraph)

Businesses today are faced with a very high and increasing level of competition. The digital age has created numerous new channels for companies to reach customers and numerous new touchpoints for buyers to choose to engage as they like. Highly competitive sales and marketing executives strive to ensure that every experience a potential buyer or existing client has with their company is, simply put ... superior.

To understand the challenge, we need to understand the buyer. Today's buyer is living in a world disrupted by rapid changes everywhere - in technology, healthcare, politics, society, education, the economy, the climate, and culture. The introduction of new technologies — from mobile phones to smart grids — has altered the way we act, the way we interact, and the way we perceive and understand our world in a very short amount of time. Buyers now have much higher expectations than ever before, and their loyalty is harder to achieve and maintain than ever before.

In this changing landscape, businesses have to baseline 'What customer experience do we want to provide? What customer experience do buyers expect from us? And, how can we evaluate if we are on or off the mark?'

Today's buyer may interact with your company at your website, through chat, via email, telephone, a referral from a satisfied or unsatisfied buyer – or a combination of all of the above. All of those processes and experiences need to be top notch – all the time.

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This could be a very difficult undertaking unless the company is fully aware what it's best prospects -- the buyers whose needs are most likely to be satisfied by the seller's products/services -- want to get from their shopping experience. CEM programmes do precisely this: by gathering information about and analysing in depth the customer journey a given company provides to its prospects and customers alike, they can offer the company a pretty comprehensive picture of what works and what doesn't. Ultimately, the results of such a program benefit the company's bottom line by enabling it to extend its customer base through attracting more buyers who do not abandon the sale and go to the competition; thus enhancing profits substantially.

## **Customer Experience is NOT Customer Service**

A point worth making at this stage is the frequent confusion of customer experience with customer service. Very often, customers of a company refer to their overall relationship with it as "customer service", which is incorrect. Customer service is just one of the multiple elements of customer experience. Although as such it deserves due attention, it is by no means the only element that deserves this attention. One way of looking at it is if a customer is calling customer service, something has obviously gone wrong with the customer experience.

## **Customer Experience Best Practices**

Businesses are increasingly becoming aware that offering the best CEM is critical to their bottom line and sustainable profitability. They are paying growing attention to innovative initiatives such as sales impact and customer reference programmes, which can greatly improve buyer attraction and conversion into customers and many are eager to take advantage of all the opportunities such programs offer.

In our experience in just the last 3 years, having shopped more than 200 companies, we are seeing the emergence some best practice. A few of them are here:

Search engine optimization to make the discovery of a company and its offers as easy as possible. Very often when an offer and a country name are used as Search terms, a competitor's homepage or even a large IT provider's homepage surfaces first.

Successful companies here also look at logical Search keywords around business outcomes: business expansion, data recovery or new market service providers.

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Testimonials or references from happy customers are often forgotten or considered 'difficult to get.' Buyers pay more attention to referrals and experience descriptions than ever before. Just consider the last time you bought a new product or used a service. You want to know what others are saying about the experience.

A sales rep who actually takes time to perform due diligence on a buyer and ask about their business goals and current environment instead of only asking what they currently have or are using is highly competitive. Journeys that are led by the sales rep increase the buying experience significantly.

Professional proposals that have industry standard elements as well as a unique factor that differentiates your company and speaks to the buyer addressing their business needs will win more business than emails with a price list.

Those are just a few, but in order to illustrate all the different potential touchpoints where a buyer could buy or abandon the sale, let's go step by step through the customer journey.

## **For this white paper, we'll address the 1st three phases to get you started:**

Discovery is the essential starting point of any customer journey. If a buyer cannot see the product or service provider, they would not be able to buy from them. Search engine optimization is key here. Once the discovery is made, the prospect becomes aware of what the company they have discovered offers and consider buying from it. A user-friendly website that clearly states the advantages of this company's offer over the competition, combined with timely communications enable the purchase at each point that the buyer may be ready.

After the Discovery phase, a product or service provider needs to answer two questions regarding the awareness they have hopefully created in their prospects. The first question is whether they have attracted the best, or most promising, prospects and if the information provided on the website, via chat, email or telephone speaks to the buyer in a way that says 'we understand you.' The second is whether they successfully incited interest rather than doubt in these prospects. Doubt in this context could mean uncertainty on the part of the buyer about the seller's ability to satisfy their needs with their offer or a suspicion of discrepancy about what the seller advertises and what they will actually deliver or even confusion over what is actually being offered. Creating doubt must be avoided for a very obvious reason: doubt does not lead to purchase. It can put a premature end to the customer journey.

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Flexibility with regard to individual buyer and customer preferences is essential at the Purchase phase along with the simplicity of the purchasing process and a sound proposal. Price comparisons, a choice of payment channels and payment schemes are all best practices here.

Potential gaps in your Journey and best practice recommendations to make changes can all be greatly enhanced by CEM programmes such as Secret Shopping.

## The Secret Shopper Programme

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## Certification



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Since 2016, Alinea Partners has granted its **Customer Experience Certification** Programme for companies who rank above 51 points on the proprietary CX Index as part of Alinea Partners' globally- recognized Secret Shopper Programme.

The **Alinea Partners Excellence in Customer Experience Certification** (Gold and Platinum) is a recognition programme based upon the results and experience Alinea Partners has built up after designing and conducting its Secret Shopper Programme for hundreds of companies globally.

More information on the Alinea Partners Customer Experience Management (CX) Certification and its Secret Shopper Programme can be found here: <http://www.alinea-partners.com/secret-shopper-experience/>

For further information, contact [Customer.Excellence@Alinea-Partners.com](mailto:Customer.Excellence@Alinea-Partners.com)

## About Alinea Partners

Alinea Partners Consulting, G.m.b.H (HQ: Vienna. [www.alinea-partners.com](http://www.alinea-partners.com)) is a European strategic marketing network. We work with our clients on strategies and programs for sales enablement, channel development and marketing. We have a European multilingual team of go-to-market experts as well as a global, multilingual team of telesales agents. We make our clients more competitive, find new revenue opportunities and improve customer experience.

## Some Clients

Arrow, Alcatel-Lucent, Arrow Europe, Avnet Embedded, BASE (a KPN subsidiary), CCT Solutions, Capsuling, Cisco, Convergys Corporation, Dell, Fujitsu Technology Solutions, IBM, Intel, Lions Club Austria, Microsoft since 2006, Mind Meister, NEC, Prediki, PilotLite Ventures, SaaSPlaza, Sun Microsystems, Tangoe, Telekom Slovenije/Aventa/SiOL, UPC, miscellaneous financial investment firms, etc.