# Mind Over Market

## The Practical Psychology Behind What Works

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# INTRODUCTION

In one of my earlier books – ***The Human Edge: Psychology as a Secret Weapon for Leadership Excellence*** – I had one chapter devoted to applied psychology in marketing. That proved to be a challenge as the breadth and depth of this topic is so crazy, that it became the longest chapter, and yet I only scratched the surface on many relevant topics.

So even during the writing of that book, I felt the compulsion to attack this topic in a more dedicated fashion, hence this work.

This book is divided into 3 areas:

**Part 1**: Where we go through the foundations of applying psychology to marketing: The basics, the theory, and the science behind it all.

**Part 2**: Where we go more into applying these principles and concepts in marketing efforts.

**Part 3**: Where we talk about the ethical considerations and future trends in applying psychology to marketing.

I wrote this book for leaders either directly involved in the Marketing function, or perhaps leading others who are responsible for Marketing in an organization, however anyone involved in this field will find some value.

One final word of introduction: I started my career as a finance person, and that part of my brain is still very prevalent, so I measure all applications of psychology in marketing against a standard of real, observable, business results.

Let's go!

**Part 1: The Human Mind Behind Marketing**
*Foundations of How People Think, Feel, and Decide*

**Part 2: Applied Marketing Psychology**
*Turning Psychological Insight into Marketing Impact*

**Part 3: Integrity & Foresight in Marketing Psychology**
*Integrity & Foresight in Marketing Psychology*

# Chapter 11 - Customer-Centric Approaches That Work

If you want to build a thriving business today, you need to put your customers at the center of everything you do. It’s not just about offering great service; it’s about creating an entire ecosystem that revolves around their needs, preferences, and emotions.

## From Skeptic to Evangelist: My Journey to Customer-Centricity

For the past two decades, I've been a passionate advocate for customer-centricity. But my journey didn't start there. In fact, my early career perspective was quite different. Initially, I viewed customers simply as the money-giving end of a commercial transaction. The concept of differentiating based on customer experience seemed absurd to me. "You differentiate based on your product or price," I thought, "not some emotional connection with customers. "

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Two pivotal factors steered me towards the path of customer-centricity:

## The First Pivotal Factor: The Power of Facts

I couldn't ignore the success stories of companies that had built incredible customer loyalty without superior products or competitive prices:

**Zappos**: A shoe retailer that became a customer service legend despite the fact that the shoes they sold were like everyone else.

**Harley Davidson**: Despite technically inferior and pricier bikes, they created a cult-like following.

**Southwest Airlines**: With no better planes or routes, they became a "lovemark" brand and used that differentiation to deliver 47 consecutive years of profitability from 1973, by far the best in the industry.

These companies - and many others - have built lasting success by differentiating through exceptional customer experience. They've mastered the art of making customers feel valued, turning every interaction into a positive, memorable moment.

I started my career in finance, where numbers rule and results matter. And if there's one thing I've learned, it's this: customer experience isn't just a feel-good strategy - it delivers real, measurable business results.

**The Second Pivotal Factor: The Lightbulb Moment**

During a heated debate on this topic, a colleague made a simple statement that changed my perspective forever:

*"Customers are already having an experience with our brand. It's not about creating an experience. It's about creating a positive, managed, deliberate, and emotional experience."*

This fact hit me. I realized that every interaction, whether intentional or not, shapes the customer's perception of a brand. The key is to make each experience positive, memorable, and emotionally resonant. So, you're not just creating a customer experience. You're creating a deliberate, positive managed one.

These two factors – irrefutable success stories and a profound shift in perspective – transformed me from a skeptic into a believer. Since then, I've been a successful convert, championing the power of customer-centricity in driving business success.

As we delve deeper into this chapter, we'll explore how you can harness the transformative power of customer experience to elevate your brand and drive sustainable growth like those other companies we discussed and like I've done over the last twenty-plus years of my career for multiple companies in multiple countries.

A customer-centric strategy means understanding what your customers want - even before they do - and designing products, services, and experiences that exceed their expectations. But here's the catch: you can't just guess what they want. You have to engage with them directly, use research effectively, and create an understanding of how they behave in different contexts.

In this chapter, we'll cover:

- The importance of direct customer engagement across functions – Breaking down internal barriers and keeping customers top of mind.
- Using customer research effectively (avoiding common pitfalls) – Gathering the right insights without getting lost in data overload.
- Defining the context for the "Chameleon Customer" for use in targeting and messaging.

By the end, you'll have a clear roadmap to build customer-centric strategies that drive loyalty, advocacy, and long-term success.

**The Importance of Direct Customer Engagement Across Functions**

Many companies love to claim they're customer-centric. It's plastered all over their websites, mission statements, and slide decks. But if you scratch the surface, what you'll often find is that "customer focus" lives in silos, tucked neatly into customer service teams, sales departments, or - if you're lucky - marketing.

Here's the reality: being customer-centric isn't a department. It's a mindset. It's a company-wide discipline. In a truly customer-obsessed organization, everyone - from the CEO to the intern, from IT to Finance - plays a role in shaping the customer experience. And yes, I mean everyone.

This isn't just a nice idea - it's something I'm deeply passionate about because I've seen firsthand how transformative it can be. When companies get this right, it's like flipping a switch. The energy shifts. Decision-making improves. Products resonate more. And customers? They feel it.

I remember one company where we made this shift - successfully. At the start of the new strategy, there was pressure from the marketing team to launch a campaign about how we were becoming "customer-centric." But we'd all seen too many companies roll out those kinds of messages without making any real internal change. So we took a different path. We didn't talk about it at all in our campaigns - not at first. Instead, we focused on doing the hard work: improving the experience and aligning the organization behind the customer. Then we waited to hear it from customers directly - to see that they noticed the difference. And they did. Within six months, we were hearing consistent feedback from the market. At that point, with one campaign, we took the message nationwide - and we truly owned the positioning. It didn't take years. It just took full commitment. And when you do it right, that's all it takes.

**It Starts at the Top: The CEO Owns the Customer**

If an organization claims to be customer-centric, but the CEO isn't actively engaged in customer experience, it's just lip service. The accountability for "the customer" sits squarely with the CEO. Full stop.

Not the CMO.

Not Customer Operations.

Not some poor soul buried three layers deep in Marketing with "customer" tacked onto their job title.

The CEO.

I've seen companies - especially in industries like telecom, banking, insurance, utilities… - where the responsibility for customer experience is scattered, vague, or worse, treated like an afterthought. That's not leadership. In companies where customer obsession is real, it's the CEO who talks about customers in every meeting, reviews feedback regularly, and sets the tone for the entire organization.

**And Everyone Knows the Customer**

Now, here's where it gets even more critical. While the CEO is accountable the at the highest level, every person in the company - regardless of their role - needs direct exposure to customers. Not just the frontlines. Everyone.

In organizations I've had the privilege to lead, this principle isn't optional; it's part of the culture. Every new employee, from IT techs to CFOs, spends time directly engaging with customers as part of their onboarding. That might mean working in a retail store, answering calls in a contact center, or shadowing customer interactions. And it doesn't stop after onboarding. At least once a year, every employee, in every department, at every level, spends time face-to-face - or voice-to-voice - with real customers.

Why?

Because you can't truly understand the impact of your work unless you see how it affects the people you're serving.  Plus, there is an element of a "hack" in this approach. Customer-facing teams in a lot of organizations feel like second-class citizens.  Not listened to, not cared about, not as important as everyone else.  But in a customer-centric organization, when all of the levels and functions from the company are out standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the customer-facing teams, it builds community and familiarity and conversation.  It's literally the approach of "walking a mile in their shoes".

**The Usual Suspects: Who Resists the Most?**

Now, you'd think this would be a no-brainer. But some functions push back hard.

**Marketing.**
Yes, you read that right. I've walked into organizations where marketers - people responsible for customer journeys, messaging, pricing, even product development - had never spent time directly with customers. That's insane. Imagine designing a product without ever talking to the people who'll use it. Yet it happens. A lot.

**Finance.**
I’ve had finance people straight-up threaten to quit when I told them that they needed to spend time with customers. My response? “Okay. Quit.” That’s how important this is. Interestingly, the same people who resist the hardest - whether it’s finance analysts or data-driven controllers - often become the most obsessed with customer insights after they’ve had the experience. They start connecting the dots between numbers on a spreadsheet and real human impact. Maybe similar to my story, these initial naysayers turn out to be the biggest zealots for customer experience once they’ve been part of it.

**IT and Engineering.**
Engineers, system architects, and technical teams are the backbone of the systems customers rely on every day. Yet, ironically, they’re often the most disconnected from real customer experiences. Their world is built on code, infrastructure, and technical precision - but when you bring them face-to-face with the people using their creations? Everything changes.

I remember “forcing” one network engineer to spend time in a retail store. He wasn’t happy about it. In fact, he was threatening to quit, convinced it was an “unfair” waste of his time. Then, a customer walked in, frustrated about their mobile coverage at home. That’s when everything shifted.

Our reluctant engineer jumped into problem-solving mode, helping that customer - and then another, and another. For the first time, he saw the direct connection between his work and the people it impacted. That one experience changed everything. He never had to be “forced” again. Instead, he chose to spend more time in retail stores, bringing his team along with him, driven by a newfound passion for customer-driven innovation.

When technical teams step outside their comfort zones and see their work through the customer’s eyes, they don’t just solve technical problems - they solve real ones. And that’s when they do their best work.

**Why Direct Engagement Changes Everything**

Imagine a company where:

- The product team builds features based on assumptions, not real needs.
- Marketing crafts brilliant campaigns that miss the mark because they don't align with customer pain points.
- Customer service handles the same complaints repeatedly, but insights never reach the teams who can fix the root causes.

This isn't hypothetical. It's reality in far too many organizations. The result? Frustrated customers, wasted resources, missed opportunities, and churn rates that keep leadership up at night.

Direct customer engagement solves this.

When every function - product, marketing, finance, IT - hears the customer's voice firsthand, it creates a powerful ripple effect:

- Decisions become grounded in reality, not assumptions.
- Teams develop empathy, not just efficiency.
- Cross-functional alignment improves because everyone's anchored to the same North Star - the customer.

**Breaking Down Silos: Making Customer Engagement Everyone's Job**

The biggest barrier to true customer-centricity? Silos. Departments operate in their own bubbles:

- Marketing focuses on brand metrics.
- Product cares about feature releases.
- Customer service handles complaints in isolation.

The problem? Customers don’t experience your company in silos. Their journey cuts across departments - so if your internal structure is fragmented, the customer experience will be too.

So, how do you break down these walls?

**a) Make Customer Interaction Non-Negotiable.**

It’s not optional. Everyone - from interns to executives - spends time with customers regularly. Not just listening to recorded calls or reading survey reports. Real interactions.

**b) Share Customer Feedback Across the Organization.**

Customer feedback shouldn’t be trapped in Customer Support or Marketing. It should be shared company-wide, discussed in leadership meetings, and reviewed regularly. Surveys, complaints, testimonials, product reviews - every department should be exposed to them. And yes, the CEO should be driving this, weaving customer insights into the fabric of decision-making.

**c) Align Metrics to Customer Outcomes.**

If your KPIs don’t reflect customer impact, you’re measuring the wrong things. Tie success metrics - like Net Promoter Score (NPS), Customer Lifetime Value (CLV), and customer retention rates - to every department’s performance. Make it part of how success is defined and rewarded.  I do have a caveat on this one though.  I like Einstein's quote:  "Not everything that can be measured matters... and not everything that matters can be measured".  While KPIs and data and insights and measurement are all critical, you need to use intuition, conversations, observations too.  Data and metrics should inform decisions, not make them for you.

**d) Foster Cross-Functional Collaboration.**

Leverage collaboration tools (Slack, Notion, Asana - pick your poison) to create shared spaces where customer insights live, breathe, and spark discussions. This breaks down communication barriers and ensures that customer-centric thinking flows across the organization.

**e) Be Clear on Your Expectations for the "Visitors".**

A danger that will occur with the HQ and non-customer facing people being in a retail environment or other customer-facing contexts is that often - especially with senior people - they feel that they are there to observe and fix things.  Come back with a list of what's wrong, what people weren't doing right, what needs to be changed.  That's just wrong.  To be clear:  The purpose of sending all these people to customer-facing environments is for them to learn, not for them to lead or teach or fix or tell.  To listen and learn. That's their objective.

## The Bottom Line: Customer Obsession Isn't a Department - It's a Culture

If your company says it's customer-centric, but only certain teams interact with customers, you've got a branding problem, a business problem.

True customer engagement isn't a box to check - it's the foundation of sustainable growth. When every function owns the customer experience, decisions get sharper, products get better, and the brand becomes more than just a logo. It becomes something customers actually trust and believe in.

And when that happens? You don't just win customers - you create advocates.

<u>Key Takeaway:</u> Customer engagement isn't the job of one team - it's the accountability of the CEO, and the responsibility of every person, in every role, across the entire organization. Embed it in your culture, make it part of your daily operations, and watch how it transforms both your business and your people.

## Engagement Beyond the First Sale

Far too many businesses operate with a "conquer and forget" mindset - pouring time, energy, and resources into acquiring new customers, only to drop the ball once the deal is done. The irony? The real value of a customer isn't in the first sale - it's in every interaction that comes after.

This isn't just a theory. It's a truth that customers feel every day. In industries like telecommunications, utilities, and banking, what's the number one complaint you'll hear? It's not about pricing or even product performance.

It's this: *"Once I became a customer, they forgot about me."*

Think about that. A business may invest thousands to acquire a customer, celebrate the win, and then - radio silence. That is, until the customer threatens to leave. Suddenly, the company rolls out the red carpet, offering deals and attention that should've been there all along.

Don't be that company.

**How to Engage Customers After the Sale (Without Feeling Like a Robot)**

**a) Personalized Follow-Ups: Make It Human, Not a Checkbox**

A follow-up email, a quick check-in call - it sounds simple because it is. But here's the catch: it has to feel real. Customers know when they're getting an automated, soulless template versus a genuine message from someone who cares.

I've seen companies set up "customer engagement automation workflows" that churn out generic emails with fake personalization:

*"Hi [Insert First Name], we value your business. Let us know if you need anything!"*

Yawn. That's not engagement. That's noise.

Real engagement sounds more like: "Hey Sarah, I noticed you've been using X feature a lot - how's it working out for you? Any feedback we can take back to the team?"

It’s not complicated. It’s authentic. Customers feel the difference.

**b) Proactive Care: Help Customers Before They Even Realize They Need It**

Here’s the thing - you know more about your existing customers than new prospects. You’ve got data. You know their habits, their preferences, and how they use your product or service. So why wait for them to come to you with a problem?

Be proactive.

If a customer is on the wrong plan based on their usage - tell them. Even if it means recommending a cheaper option. Yes, your Finance team will freak out because they’ll see it as “re-pricing the customer base.” But here’s the reality:

- Most customers won’t switch.
- Those who do will trust you more.
- And 100% of them will remember that you put their interests first.

I’ve done this. I’ve had CFOs stress about “potential revenue loss,” only to see customer retention, satisfaction, and brand loyalty skyrocket after proactively helping customers save money. And guess what? That loyalty drives revenue and earnings growth far beyond any short-term revenue you might lose.

**c) Random Acts of Kindness: Create Stories That People Can’t Stop Sharing**

The stories people tell about your brand aren’t usually about the standard service you provided. They’re about the unexpected, over-the-top moments - the ones that feel personal, random, and unscalable. And that’s the point.

I’ll never forget this one:
When I was leading a telecom service company, we had a long-time business customer who got his phone stolen while on vacation in Greece. Technically? Not our problem. But that’s not how we saw it. We put someone on a plane that night with a replacement phone, delivered it in person, and even helped set it up.

Was it scalable? No.

Was it cost-effective? Not even close.

Did it matter to that customer and everyone he told about it? Absolutely.

That story became legendary - internally and externally. It wasn’t just a customer service win; it was a brand-defining moment. People told their friends. Employees felt proud. And it reinforced exactly who we were as a company.

Here’s another one:
We noticed that some of our customers were buying the latest smartphones, but they lived in areas where the network coverage couldn’t support all the features. So, we did something crazy - we analyzed their usage and recommended plans with our competitors that would serve them better.

Yep. We fired customers.

Some left. But here’s the twist: more stayed.
And even more told their friends, family, and colleagues what we did.

Our customer engagement scores soared.

New customers signed up because they heard the story.

Random Acts of Kindness work because they're not part of the script. They're authentic. They're human. And they create emotional connections that no marketing campaign can buy.

That authenticity - that humanness - is essential. People can tell when something is scripted. And once it feels scripted, it becomes expected, routine, transactional. The magic disappears.

At one company I worked at, we had a box in the middle of our contact center floor labeled "trinkets and trash." It was literally filled with little items - pens, hats, tea bags, even blank note cards. Our customer care team could pick something out and send it to a customer at their own discretion. No rules. They might send a trinket after a great call. Or a terrible one. To a high-value customer. Or a brand new one. Just because. And it worked. We got thank-you calls, letters, even press coverage because of that little box.

Then we were acquired by a large telecom company. They loved the idea and rolled it out across their markets. And it failed. Again and again. Eventually, I was asked to go see what was going wrong.

Everywhere they had replicated the box, <u>they added rules</u>: trinkets could only be sent X times per day, and only to high-value customers, and only under specific circumstances. And just like that, the authenticity vanished. The spontaneity was gone. It no longer felt human. It was a <u>transaction</u> to the employees and to the customers.

And the customers felt it. They started complaining - not just about the trinkets, but about not getting them. Or that the trinket didn't match the value of their business. It had become transactional. Predictable. Scripted.

The lesson? For “random acts of kindness,” protect authenticity at all costs.

**The Key to Lasting Engagement: Don’t Chase Loyalty - Earn It**

Customer engagement doesn’t end after the sale. In fact, that’s when it really begins. It’s not about loyalty programs or perfectly timed upsell emails. It’s about showing up when customers don’t expect it, adding value when there’s nothing in it for you, and proving, over and over again, that you’re in it for the long haul.

Because at the end of the day, people don’t stay loyal to products - they stay loyal to experiences. The question is:  What experience are you giving them after the sale?

**Using Customer Research Effectively**

Customer research can be an essential tool for understanding your audience, but like any tool, it’s only as effective as the person using it. I often compare customer research to a funhouse mirror - it does reflect reality, but it’s a distorted way. The trick isn’t to dismiss it because of the distortion; it’s to understand where and how it’s distorted so you can interpret the image correctly.

One of the biggest issues with traditional customer research - and this ties directly to our discussions on applied psychology in marketing - is that it often asks the wrong questions. Or, more accurately, it asks the right questions to the wrong part of the brain.

Think about it: most customer research asks people to predict their future behaviour.

- “Would you buy this product at this price?”
- “How likely are you to recommend this to a friend?”
- “Which packaging do you prefer?”

The problem? You're asking the customer's rational brain to explain how their emotional brain will make a decision in the future. It's like asking your accountant to describe how your interior designer chooses paint colours - completely different expertise.

And here's the kicker: by asking the question, you're already influencing the answer. You're pulling the decision-making process into the realm of logic and analysis, when in reality, most purchase decisions are driven by emotions, instincts, and unconscious biases.

So, how do you work around this? There are two key strategies:

1. Craft questions or situations that don't fully engage the rational brain. Use techniques like scenario-based questions, implicit association tests, or A/B testing with subtle emotional triggers.
2. Focus less on what people say and more on what they do. Observing actual customer behaviour in real-world scenarios provides insights that are often far more reliable than self-reported data.

In short: actions speak louder than survey responses. Especially when it comes to understanding customers.

**Common Pitfalls in Customer Research**

While these foundational issues are critical, there are also some recurring mistakes that businesses make when conducting customer research - mistakes that can lead to misleading data and poor decision-making.

<u>One of the biggest traps is focusing on vanity metrics</u>. Companies love to showcase numbers like social media likes, page views, or follower counts because they're easy to track and look impressive in presentations. But here's the thing: likes don't pay the bills. I once worked with a CEO who cut through all the noise of complex customer satisfaction reports with a simple question:

“How many customers did we lose this month?”

That was his metric. No fluff. Just the raw, undeniable indicator of whether the company was meeting customer needs. It was a stark reminder that real business success isn’t about what looks good on a dashboard - it’s about what drives revenue, retention, and loyalty.

Another common misstep is asking leading questions. Poorly designed surveys can unintentionally (or sometimes intentionally) nudge people toward certain answers.

- “Do you love our new product?” is not the same as
- “What would you improve about our new product?”

The former seeks validation; the latter seeks truth. Crafting effective research questions is an art form. It requires an understanding of cognitive biases, question framing, and even the subtle impact of word choice. If you’re going to invest time and money into gathering customer insights, make sure you’re asking questions that actually matter.

Then there’s the tendency to ignore qualitative data. Companies love numbers because they’re easy to analyze, compare, and present. But numbers only tell part of the story. The real gold often lies in the open-ended responses, customer stories, and emotional insights that come from qualitative feedback. And with the rise of AI-driven analysis tools, companies can now process and interpret qualitative data at scale, turning messy feedback into actionable insights.

Another pitfall? Overloading surveys. There’s this misguided belief that if you’re going to bother someone with a survey, you might as well ask them everything. The result? Long, tedious questionnaires that lead to survey fatigue, half-hearted responses, and people clicking through just to get it over with. Research shows that surveys should be no longer than 12 minutes, with around 20–25 well-crafted questions at most. Keep it concise. Keep it focused. Respect your customer’s time, and you’ll get better data in return.

**How to Gather Actionable Customer Insights**

So, if these are the pitfalls, what does effective customer research actually look like?

It starts with having a clear goal. What are you trying to learn? Are you looking to improve a product feature, enhance customer service, or understand why customers are churning? If you don't know what you're trying to solve, your research will be directionless.

Next, it's crucial to use multiple sources of data. Relying on a single method - whether it's surveys, interviews, or analytics - gives you a narrow view. The most insightful companies combine data from:

- Surveys for broad quantitative trends
- Customer interviews for in-depth, emotional context
- Social media listening to capture unfiltered, real-time feedback
- behavioural analytics to see what customers actually do
- Direct observation when possible, especially in physical environments

By layering these different data sources, you create a rich, multi-dimensional understanding of your customers that no single method can provide.

Segmentation is also key. Not all customers are the same, and treating them as a homogenous group is a recipe for mediocre insights. Whether you're segmenting by demographics, behaviour, psychographics, or context, make sure your research reflects the diverse needs, preferences, and motivations within your audience.

For example, Airbnb doesn't just look at their users as "customers." They segment feedback from hosts and guests separately, recognizing that each group has unique experiences, expectations, and pain points. They also combine this feedback with market trends, booking data, and even regional cultural insights to continuously refine their platform. That's how you stay relevant in a rapidly changing market.

Key Takeaway: Customer research isn't about gathering data - it's about uncovering truths. The best insights come not from asking customers what they think, but from understanding how they feel, what they do, and why they behave the way they do.

So, stop asking the rational brain to explain emotional decisions. Start observing, listening, and digging deeper.

**Turning Research Into Action**

Collecting customer research is the easy part. The real challenge? Doing something with it.

Too many companies invest time, money, and energy into gathering insights - customer surveys, NPS scores, focus groups - only to let that data sit in PowerPoint presentations, gathering virtual dust. It gets discussed in meetings, maybe referenced in a strategy deck, and then… nothing changes.

Here's the harsh truth: "Data without action is just trivia."

The goal of customer research isn't to admire the data. It's to inform decisions, spark improvements, and ultimately make your business better. Otherwise, why bother?

So, how do you bridge the gap between research and results?

Start with the end in mind. Define what "action" looks like

Before you even conduct customer research, you should be asking:

- "What decisions will this data help us make?"
- "If we learn X, what would we change?"

This mindset shift is critical. Too often, research is conducted in isolation - "let's survey customers" - without a clear plan for how the findings will influence strategy. The result? Vague insights with no actionable outcomes.

Instead, approach research like a tool, not a task. You're not gathering data for data's sake. You're gathering it to make decisions.

- If you're launching a new product, define how customer feedback will shape the features.
- If you're running a marketing campaign, decide how insights will influence messaging and positioning.
- If you're addressing churn, identify the specific behaviours or triggers you're looking to understand - and what you'll do if you find them.

Without this clarity, research becomes an academic exercise. With it, it becomes a driver of real change.

**Prioritize Insights, Not Just Data**

Not all data is created equal. One of the biggest mistakes companies make is treating every piece of feedback with the same weight. But not every insight deserves action.

Here's how to separate the signal from the noise:

- Look for patterns, not one-off comments.A single customer complaint doesn't mean you have a systemic issue. But if 50 customers mention the same frustration? That's a red flag.  Unfortunately, this can be a by-product of getting everyone "into the field". Your senior VP of Whatever is in a store one day and here's one comment about something and all of a sudden it's escalated to priority number one.  Look for patterns.

- Focus on impact.Some issues may be common but have minimal impact on customer satisfaction or revenue. Prioritize insights that affect customer retention, acquisition, or lifetime value.
- Quantify where possible, qualify where necessary. Numbers tell you what's happening; qualitative feedback tells you why it's happening. Use both.
- Don't make assumptions. I recall one situation where a poor customer contacted us multiple times for the same issue: He had opted out of email messages from us, yet he kept receiving them, again and again. We assumed it was a problem with his account or settings as it was only him complaining. That turned out to be the wrong assumption. When we asked the correct question – is it impacting more, but he's the only one complaining? – it turned out our entire opt-out system wasn't working.

Think of insights like a pyramid:

- At the top: High-impact, recurring issues that directly affect customer behaviour.
- In the middle: Useful feedback that informs incremental improvements.
- At the bottom: Noise - interesting, but not worth immediate action.

Don't get stuck optimizing for the bottom of the pyramid.

**Close the Loop: Turn Feedback into a Continuous Cycle**

One of the most powerful (and underused) practices is closing the feedback loop - not just collecting data, but showing customers how their input led to real changes.

Imagine this:  A customer submits feedback about a frustrating checkout process.  A few weeks later, they receive an email:

"We heard you. Based on your feedback, we've streamlined our checkout process to make it faster and easier. Thank you for helping us improve."

That customer feels seen, valued, and heard. And it's not just good customer relations - it's good business. Customers who feel heard are more loyal, more engaged, and more likely to advocate for your brand.

This doesn't have to be complex:

- For B2B companies, it could be a simple follow-up call or quarterly business review highlighting changes based on feedback.
- For B2C brands, it could be a blog post, an in-app notification, or a feature update announcement.

The key? Make feedback a two-way street, not a black hole.

**Translate Insights into Actionable Strategies:** Okay, now let's get tactical. How do you actually turn research into action?

**a) Refine Your Product Based on Common Pain Points**

If customers consistently mention that a feature is confusing or that they're missing functionality, that's not just feedback - it's a product roadmap priority.

Example: Slack noticed that new users often felt overwhelmed by the interface. Based on user feedback, they simplified onboarding flows and introduced tooltips to guide new users. Result? Higher activation rates and improved customer satisfaction.

**b) Adjust Marketing Messages to Reflect What Customers Actually Care About**

Sometimes, the message you think is resonating… isn't. Research helps you recalibrate.

Example: Dove's famous "Real Beauty" campaign was born from customer research revealing that most women didn't relate to traditional beauty standards. By shifting their messaging to focus on authenticity and self-confidence, Dove created one of the most impactful marketing campaigns of the last two decades.

**c) Improve Customer Service Based on Feedback Trends**

If multiple customers report long wait times, inconsistent answers, or frustrating processes, that's not just a service issue - it's a brand experience problem.

Example: Zappos built their legendary customer service model around insights from customer calls, realizing that people valued genuine, unscripted conversations over rigid scripts. Their call center agents are empowered to go off-script, even spending hours on a single call if it means delivering exceptional service.

**Make Customer Insights a Company-Wide Responsibility**

Here's a common trap: thinking that customer research is only relevant to marketing or product teams.

In reality, insights should flow across the entire organization:

- Finance can use customer data to understand lifetime value and pricing sensitivities.
- Operations can identify bottlenecks in the customer journey.
- HR can even use customer-centric insights to shape employee training and culture initiatives.

Customer insights aren't just for fixing problems - they're fuel for growth. The companies that thrive are the ones where everyone feels accountable for the customer experience, not just the customer-facing teams.

**Avoid “Analysis Paralysis” - Done Is Better Than Perfect**

One of the biggest barriers to turning research into action is over-analysis.

Teams get stuck debating:

- “Do we have enough data?”
- “What if we misinterpret the feedback?”
- “Should we run another survey just to be sure?”

Here’s the thing: no dataset will ever be perfect. But waiting for perfect data often means missing the window to make meaningful changes.

Action beats perfection.
Test. Learn. Iterate.
Customer feedback is an ongoing conversation, not a final exam.

Key Takeaway: Great customer research isn’t about collecting data - it’s about creating change.

It’s not enough to understand your customers. You have to act on what you learn, embed those insights into your strategies, and constantly evolve based on feedback. Because at the end of the day, the companies that listen AND act are the ones that win.

**From Static Personas to Chameleon Consumers: Adapting Marketing to Contextual Human behaviour or "Why Traditional Personas Fail"?**

For decades, marketers have relied on buyer personas to segment and understand their target audiences. These personas - often fictional composites like "Marketing Mary, age 35, enjoys yoga and drives a Volvo" - were meant to create empathy and guide content and product decisions. But over time, this approach has shown significant limitations. While there is science behind the application of personas, it’s as if the academic perspective, the fascination with that science has replaced the prioritization of practical application.

Personas are often built on assumptions, stereotypes, or outdated data. They tend to reflect demographic categories rather than meaningful behavioural insights. Most importantly, they assume that consumers act consistently based on who they are, rather than adapting their choices to changing contexts.

In reality, human behaviour is far more fluid. The same person might be price-sensitive in one setting and indulgent in another, cautious on Monday morning and impulsive on Friday night. These shifts are not captured by static personas. What matters more than "who" the customer is, is the context they are in when making decisions. This insight gives rise to the idea of the Chameleon Consumer.

**The Concept: Who is the Chameleon Consumer?**

The Chameleon Consumer is a modern view of the buyer that acknowledges a key psychological truth: behaviour is driven more by context than identity. These consumers adapt their preferences, decision-making styles, and emotional responses depending on their environment, mood, timing, and task at hand.

This concept is rooted in behavioural psychology and supported by research from people we've already talked about like Daniel Kahneman who demonstrated that human decision-making is often irrational and deeply shaped by context. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's work on "Nudge" showed how small environmental changes can shift behaviour dramatically. Dan Ariely highlighted how we are "predictably irrational" - our decisions don't follow logical consistency, but are shaped by moment-to-moment factors.

Further, cultural theorists like Douglas Holt have emphasized that people adopt different identities in different settings, using brands to express these fluid selves. And with the rise of digital platforms and real-time data, marketers can now observe and respond to these shifts in near real-time.

In short, the Chameleon Consumer approach reflects how people actually live and choose - not as fixed personas, but as adaptive agents influenced by context.

**Implications for Marketing Strategy**

Adopting the Chameleon Consumer perspective doesn't just tweak the edges of marketing strategy - it requires a fundamental reorientation. Instead of designing campaigns around who customers are, marketers must design for when, where, and why those customers are making decisions. This shift has broad implications across segmentation, messaging, channel strategy, and brand identity.

**Segmentation becomes dynamic and situational.**

Traditional segmentation - based on fixed traits like age, income, or job title - assumes that people's needs and behaviours are relatively stable. But in a Chameleon framework, segmentation is contextual and fluid. Rather than grouping by demographics, marketers group by behavioural states, such as "rushed weekday decision-maker," "evening browser in inspiration mode," or "budget-conscious shopper in pre-payday mode." This opens the door to more responsive strategies, where the same individual may fall into multiple segments depending on the moment. It also requires teams to embrace real-time behavioural data as a primary segmentation input - not a secondary validation tool.

**Messaging becomes emotionally and temporally tuned.**

If consumer decisions are context-driven, then messaging must align with the emotional and psychological state of the moment. This requires marketers to think less like brand broadcasters and more like emotional designers. What will resonate with a user checking your app at 7:30 a.m. before their commute is radically different from what will connect with them during a quiet Sunday scroll. Tone, content, pacing, and even visuals must all flex to meet the moment. Emotional granularity - the ability to match the precise emotional state of a context - is a competitive advantage.

**Channel strategy becomes context-sensitive.**

It's not just what you say, but where and when you say it. The same person browsing Instagram may want aspirational, visually immersive content, while that same person using Google Search might want precise, solution-oriented information. Platforms are not neutral delivery systems; they frame cognition and behaviour. Marketers must align the message not only with the persona but also with the platform's tempo, affordances, and expectations. This demands channel fluency: a deep understanding of how consumers behave differently across environments - and how your brand can show up accordingly without becoming fragmented.

**Brand identity must embrace multiplicity without incoherence.**

One of the biggest strategic shifts is in how a brand expresses itself. In a Chameleon model, brands must develop the capacity to show different facets of their identity depending on the customer's context. This doesn't mean becoming inconsistent or inauthentic - it means becoming contextually coherent. A brand can be playful and irreverent on TikTok while remaining authoritative and data-driven on LinkedIn, as long as both expressions ladder up to a unifying brand essence. Strategic flexibility must be underpinned by a strong brand core: a set of values, promises, and emotional anchors that remain consistent even as their surface expressions adapt. This is a challenging balancing act as brands need authenticity and trust, so protecting and prioritizing those aspects while still recognizing the changing behaviours and needs of potential clients is key.

### Applying It in Everyday Marketing

To make this concept practical, here's how marketers can shift from static personas to a Chameleon Consumer mindset:

| Traditional Approach | Chameleon-Informed Approach |
| --- | --- |
| Create a persona profile | Map out key contexts of decision-making |
| Segment by age / gender / location | Segment by task, emotional state, or moment |
| Design a single customer journey | Design modular, moment-based experiences |
| Send the same message to a segment | Trigger dynamic content based on real-time behaviour |

### Tools and tactics to use:

Shifting from static personas to a Chameleon Consumer mindset isn't just conceptual - it demands operational tools and tactical shifts. Below are key methods marketers can use to translate this mindset into action, each rooted in behavioural insights and enabled by technology.

**Behavioural Segmentation**
Instead of slicing audiences by who they are, behavioural segmentation focuses on what people do - and when. This includes signals like browsing behaviour, purchase timing, device use, and engagement patterns. For example, someone who repeatedly abandons a cart during late-night sessions may be driven by uncertainty or decision fatigue, not price.

The key here is interpretive depth: marketers need to look beyond the behaviour itself and ask, “What does this behaviour suggest about the context or emotional state?” With tools like real-time analytics and machine learning, these patterns can be surfaced and responded to dynamically - automating nudges, content, or offers based on micro-moments rather than macro identities.

**Jobs to Be Done (JTBD) Framework**
The JTBD approach asks a deceptively simple question: What is the customer trying to accomplish in this moment? It reframes consumption not as a reflection of static needs, but as a way of solving context-specific problems. A consumer doesn’t just “buy a smoothie” - they hire it to satisfy a need like “a quick, healthy breakfast on the way to work” or “a reward after a workout.”

By mapping your offerings to these contextual jobs, you can create marketing messages that resonate with the customer's why - the motivational core behind their action. This not only increases relevance but also helps uncover new product or service opportunities that may be invisible under traditional segmentation.

**Customer Journey Mapping with Emotional and Contextual Layers**
Traditional journey mapping often focuses on linear touchpoints - awareness, consideration, conversion. But in the Chameleon model, journeys are nonlinear and emotionally variable. Modern maps must incorporate emotional states, cognitive load, and contextual factors (e.g., time of day, urgency, social setting).

For example, the same homepage may need to serve a "researching buyer at work" and a "late-night impulse shopper on mobile." Each has different goals, expectations, and attention levels. By layering emotional and contextual insights into journey maps, marketers can design more adaptive experiences that meet people where they are - not where the brand hopes they'll be.

**Contextual Messaging Systems**

This involves dynamically varying your message based on external signals such as time of day, device, weather, or even geolocation. A lunchtime food app can highlight fast, energizing meals at noon and cozy comfort dishes on rainy evenings - each aligned with the likely emotional and physiological context.

Contextual messaging moves beyond personalization-as-a-name-in-an-email. It's about resonance: delivering the right emotional tone and value proposition at the exact moment the consumer is most open to receiving it. Achieving this requires integration across systems - CRM, behavioural analytics, content management - but the result is marketing that feels intuitive and timely rather than intrusive.

**AI-Driven Personalization Engines**

Artificial intelligence makes much of the Chameleon Consumer model scalable. Using predictive models, AI can infer likely goals, moods, and contexts based on real-time behaviour and historical patterns. This enables marketers to serve dynamic content - images, headlines, offers - that adapts moment-to-moment.

But effective use of AI requires clarity on what to personalize. Not everything should be dynamic. Brands need to define their personalization boundaries: which variables shift, and which core messages stay consistent. Done well, AI becomes a powerful enabler of empathy at scale - recognizing when a customer needs reassurance, urgency, or inspiration, and responding accordingly.

**Real-World Examples**

Spotify doesn’t build campaigns for "Millennial music lovers" - instead, it markets playlists like "Songs to Sing in the Shower" or "Late-Night Study Beats," responding to the user's mood and moment.

Google’s Micro-Moments framework encourages marketers to focus on "I-want-to-go," "I-want-to-do," or "I-want-to-buy" moments - recognizing that intent in the moment matters more than static traits.

Retail example: A grocery app might highlight budget-friendly options before payday and premium treats on weekends - while still targeting the same user.

Travel example: An airline app shows business-class upgrades during workdays and family travel deals on weekends - even to the same frequent flyer.

**How to Get Started: Practical Steps**

Adopting a Chameleon Consumer mindset can feel like a significant shift, especially for teams accustomed to persona-based planning. The following steps provide a roadmap for making the transition from static segmentation to context-driven marketing. Each step builds on behavioural principles while remaining grounded in practical action.

**1. Audit your current strategy: Are you designing around personas or around moments?**
Begin by taking a critical look at how your current campaigns, journeys, and content strategies are structured. Are you still creating experiences for “Marketing Mary” or “Tech-Savvy Tom” - or are you truly designing for what those individuals might be doing, needing, or feeling at different times?

Review messaging calendars, journey flows, and segmentation logic. Where are you relying on demographic or identity proxies rather than behavioural signals? This audit helps identify areas where your team is still thinking in terms of who instead of when, why, and how. It also starts to highlight where quick wins in contextual adaptation might exist - often in timing, channel choice, or tone.

**2. Identify 3–5 core decision contexts that shape customer behaviour**

Rather than attempting to map every possible context, start with a manageable number of high-impact scenarios. These might include things like:

- High-pressure, time-sensitive decision-making (e.g., booking a service while multitasking)
- Browsing for inspiration without a clear goal (e.g., late-night scrolling)
- Pre-purchase comparison mode (e.g., just before a big-ticket decision)
- Recovery after a service failure (e.g., frustrated or anxious states)
- Routine, habitual actions (e.g., replenishing a subscription)

Choose contexts that align with key revenue drivers or emotional hotspots in your customer journey. Then dig into the psychology of each: What emotional states are likely? What cognitive shortcuts or biases are activated? This helps ensure your marketing responses are not just timely, but psychologically attuned.

**3. Build messaging, offers, and content tailored to these states**

Once you've defined your key contexts, develop modular content and messaging that speaks to the emotional and functional needs of each. For example:

- In high-pressure contexts: focus on clarity, reassurance, and frictionless UX.
- In exploratory contexts: offer curiosity hooks, inspirational content, and flexible paths.
- In budget-conscious moments: highlight value, trade-offs, or deferred payment options.

This step also includes revisiting your tone of voice. Is your default tone appropriate for every context, or does it need to flex? Consider building a tonal framework that helps your brand speak in emotionally congruent ways across different touchpoints.

**4. Use real-time data to dynamically adapt interactions**

This is where strategy meets technology. Integrate data sources like device type, time of day, referral source, browsing behaviour, and location to infer the likely context. This doesn't require invasive personalization - it's about being perceptive, not intrusive.

For instance, if a customer is browsing your app on a Friday evening, your content engine might prioritize weekend offers or inspiration-led content. If someone returns to your pricing page multiple times during work hours, that may signal evaluation mode - and prompt the delivery of social proof or comparison charts.

The goal is to make the experience feel relevant and intuitive - not robotic or over-personalized.

**5. Test, learn, and iterate: Track how context shapes behaviour**

This is not a one-and-done shift. The Chameleon model thrives on feedback loops. Set up experiments that test how different messages, formats, or offers perform across contexts. Track both behavioural KPIs (e.g., clickthroughs, conversions, dwell time) and qualitative indicators (e.g., satisfaction, perceived relevance).

Over time, you'll build a behavioural intelligence layer that becomes a strategic asset - enabling smarter automation, more resonant creative, and more loyal customer relationships.

“Marketing today isn't about knowing who your customer is - it's about knowing what they need in the moment.”

By replacing rigid personas with contextual understanding, marketers don't abandon empathy - they sharpen it. The Chameleon Consumer is not a trend, but a reflection of how people actually live, think, and choose. The brands that thrive will be those that learn to adapt alongside them.

**Conclusion: The Heartbeat of Business - Customer-Centricity**

If there's one undeniable truth in business, it's this: companies don't create value in isolation - customers do. Every strategy, campaign, product, and service exists for one purpose - to serve a customer need. Yet, despite this obvious fact, too many businesses fall into the trap of treating customers as an afterthought, focusing on internal metrics, operational efficiencies, or the next big product launch while forgetting the very people they're supposed to serve.

This chapter has shown that true customer-centricity isn't about having a catchy mission statement or a slick marketing campaign. It's about embedding the customer into the DNA of your organization. It's about every department - from finance to IT - understanding that their work impacts real people. It's about using research not as a checkbox exercise, but as a tool to uncover truths, to challenge assumptions, and to make decisions that resonate beyond boardrooms and slide decks.

And prioritize those organic, real, live interactions with customers.  It always surprised me that companies would build systems and processes to avoid talking with their customers - IVRs, chatbots, FAQs... anything to not have a live conversation - but then turn around and invest millions into "customer research". Really?

Customer engagement isn't something you do once and check off a list. It's continuous. It's dynamic. And most importantly, it's human. The companies that thrive are the ones that treat every interaction as an opportunity - not just to sell, but to connect, to listen, and to deliver value that goes beyond the transaction.

So, what's the ultimate takeaway?

Customer-centricity isn't a strategy. It's a culture.

And when you get it right, it's not just your customers who feel the difference - your employees do too. It creates pride, purpose, and a shared belief that what you're doing matters. Because at the end of the day, businesses don't build relationships. People do.

# Connect

*Thank you so much for taking the time and energy to absorb the lessons from this book. If you have any follow-up questions, or just want to chat, feel free to reach out to me:*

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