Re-designing Your Customer and Employee Experience for the COVID-19 World

By Len Ferman

Sweeping changes are taking place around the globe as we collectively cope with the COVID-19 crisis.

These changes are a startling wake-up call for the vulnerability of the present business models in all organizations.

In the near term the customer and employee experience for nearly everyone will be altered in some manner. In certain cases this will be radical as when a restaurant is required to migrate to delivery only.

How organizations handle these changes may determine whether they survive the crisis.

And it is possible that there will be a long-term business transformation after the crisis is over as well.

The needs of at least some customers and employees are likely to be permanently altered by this generational event. Individuals in high risk groups may wish to perpetually practice social distancing post crisis.

Accordingly this is a time in which it is essential to have a deep understanding of the journeys you're your customers and employees have with your organization. All business leaders need to be talking to customers and employees and applying empathic thinking to identify the critical pain points and moments of truth that the crisis has created.

Armed with these insights it is possible to leverage the innovation process to design new customer and employee journeys.

In designing the new journeys it is necessary to recognize the constraints of the new business environment and resolve those in a way that takes full advantage of the organization's core competencies.

A complete re-design of the customer and employee experience is necessary for some organizations to continue to operate at this time. And for many organizations a long-term re-design for some customer segments and employee groups could be necessary to sustain their business.

In the course I developed on business creativity and innovation at the University of North Florida, and in my consulting practice, I advocate a four-step approach to innovation:

1 EXPLORE	2 IDEATE	3 EVALUATE	4 DESIGN
Identify key customer needs & market opportunities	Generate ideas to meet customer needs & capitalize on market opportunities	Evaluate, prioritize and cultivate top ideas for development	Identify customer requirements and develop & test rapid prototypes

In the present crisis I would utilize the four-step innovation process as follows:

1. EXPLORE –

Identify and prioritize the problems that customers and employees have at each step in their current journey with your organization.

EXAMPLES:

- AUTO REPAIR CENTER – problems identified in the customer experience journey:
  - When planning a visit, customers have anxiety regarding how many other customers may be at the center.
  - When dropping off the car customers are concerned about the wellness of the service staff.

- When service is complete customers fear that car may have been contaminated.

- FOOD DISTRIBUTION COMPANY – problems identified in the employee experience journey:
  - Employees are concerned about coming into close contact with people when entering the store to make a delivery
  - Concern they might not be able to distance themselves from customers when they are stocking the shelves.
  - Fearful that the last person to use the delivery truck did not leave it clean.

2. IDEATE -

Generate ideas that provide specific solutions for each high priority problem.

EXAMPLES:

- AUTO REPAIR CENTER – ideas to solve customer experience problems:
  - Only allow cars to be dropped off by appointment and space appointments out so that no service staff have more than one customer in a given time period
  - Upon arrival customer leaves car in drop off zone with keys in car and sends text notification so they do not have to physically meet service rep
  - Sanitize the car upon completion of service

- FOOD DISTRIBUTION COMPANY – ideas to solve employee experience problems:
  - Schedule delivery times to take place when the store is closed to customers to limit any contact to store personnel only.
  - Ensure only one distributor at a time has access to shelving units in the same aisle of the store and re-stocking takes place after customer hours.
  - Develop procedures to sanitize the interior of a delivery truck if it is being shared by different drivers.

3. EVALUATE –

Evaluate every idea via a scoring exercise that encompasses both objective and subjective criteria. Then prioritize and select the top ideas to implement.

EXAMPLES:

- Criteria for the AUTO REPAIR CENTER to evaluate customer experience ideas:

- o Will the idea make customers feel safe enough to visit our auto repair centers?
- o Will the idea contribute to sustaining revenue?
- o How feasible is it to implement the idea?
- o Does the idea meet temporary government guidelines on social distancing?

- Criteria for the FOOD DISTRIBUTION COMPANY to evaluate employee experience ideas:
  - o Will the idea make employees feel safe when conducting their job?
  - o How much will the idea impact our ability to deliver food to stores?
  - o How much cooperation and coordination does the idea require from the stores?
  - o Will the quality of our food be compromised by implementation of the idea?

4. DESIGN –

Once the top ideas are selected then the requirements to implement the idea are defined and a rapid prototype is tested and refined until the optimal design has been identified for implementation.

EXAMPLES:

- High level design requirements for AUTO REPAIR CENTER customer experience idea:
  - o Drop off zone is in a safe area that is monitored remotely.
  - o Service rep responds within 2 minutes to pick up car and take inside shop.
  - o Service rep calls customer to notify them of car status immediately after dropping off car inside shop work area.

- High level design plan for FOOD DISTRIBUTION COMPANY employee experience idea:
  - o Food distribution company provides employees with drop off times when no other people are scheduled to arrive at a store
  - o Locks on storage area entrance to have keyless card entry and cards are provided to employees making deliveries.
  - o Defined areas and shelves in storage area designated for food distribution company deliveries that limits the space that employees must travel inside the store.

Organizations need to begin developing short- and long-term plans to survive the current COVID-19 crisis now. Companies that start with a focus on the customer and employee experience will be in the best position to understand the problems that require the most attention. In many cases, where a business was completely reliant on in person contact, the entire customer and employee experience needs to be re-designed. By following the steps prescribed in this article, organizations can address the needs of customers and employees and find ways to continue to operate and endure the crisis.

About the author:

Len is an adjunct professor at the University of North Florida where he teaches a course he developed on business creativity and innovation. His unique teaching methods were highlighted in a Forbes magazine article titled, "How to Prepare College Students to Innovate." In addition, he recently authored a college textbook, "Business Creativity and Innovation: Perspectives and Best Practices", that was published Cognella, and is in use at several universities and is available on Amazon.

Len is also the founder and managing director of Ferman Innovation, a boutique market research and innovation consulting firm. Len specializes in qualitative research, facilitating ideation and action planning sessions, building customer journey maps and providing training on the innovation process.

Prior to founding Ferman Innovation, Len spent 25 years with Fortune 100 companies managing customer experience research and innovation. Len led the front end of innovation at Bank of America and served as head of ideation. He developed the Idea Tournament process to identify and select optimal concepts for development.

Len graduated from Duke University with an M.A. in Economics and an M.B.A.