

BLIND TO THE FAULTS?

Lorne Mitchell of Objective Designers and Mark Richards of expw (pictured) think the reason why some service organisations drive their customers mad is 'context blindness'.



Lorne Mitchell

Most people can relate to examples of when customer service organisations have driven you completely bonkers: being passed off to another department that does not answer your call and drops you into a black hole; getting through to an overseas call centre that has not a clue how to address your problem; orders placed and fulfilled incorrectly...the list is endless.

But given that the customer relationship is such a fundamental component of the success of any business, why do companies behave in such a maddening way?

We believe the answer may lie in some interesting new research which describes a model that can help us both diagnose the roots of certain common mental health problems – as well as understand some of the wider dysfunctions within organisations.



Mark Richards

Context blindness

Recent psychological research in the UK has come up with a new model for us to understand better what is going on with people suffering from a range of mental health conditions, such as Asbergers' syndrome, autism and schizophrenia.

In summary, these symptoms are best expressed by the inability of people to switch easily between several foci of attention – and to track them against the history and context that relates to them.

This new line of research has been called 'caetextia' by the researchers – from the two Latin words caecus (meaning 'blind') and contextus (meaning 'context'). Further details can be found at www.caetextia.com.

Our thesis is that organisations, or parts of organisations, can also demonstrate the symptoms of caetextia or context blindness. Organisational caetextia (or OC as we will now call it) can help us understand why some organisations exhibit a sort of madness when dealing with their customers and employees – and also provides a clue as to why they remain blind to the significant consequences of acting in such a crazy way.

In cases of caetextia in individuals, the new research has uncovered two types of context blindness. This relates to the part of the brain that allows us to process context.

In order to see context, we need to be able to observe events from different points of view. Recent research has shown that all mammals have a part of the brain that can process masses of information at the same time – similar to the new ways that we configure parallel processing in computers.

This part of the brain developed millions of years ago to gauge risks by processing multiple streams of information and unconsciously comparing them to previous experiences. This is something we take for granted today, but millions of years ago it was the key to any mammal's survival and ability to conserve energy by not reacting to every stimulus that came along.

The research has concluded that this parallel processing part of the brain can become impaired – and this is particularly prevalent in people who demonstrate symptoms on the autistic spectrum. In such cases, the brain cannot do the parallel processing necessary to keep separate streams of attention, switching effortlessly between each of them to assess their relevance to what is actually happening in the here-and-now.

This form of parallel processing requires the brain to dissociate – in other words, to be able to review what it knows about something that it has come across before, whilst also paying attention to that something in the present. It is no wonder that such people often suffer from learning difficulties!

Organisational caetextia

The research has also uncovered two types of caetextia: front-of-brain or straight-line thinking blindness; and back-of-brain, random association blindness. We can – and have – applied these two types of caetextia to organisations and describe some of the symptoms below.

The first type we have termed 'Process OC'. This is where an organisation processes work in logical straight lines without taking into account the wider organisational implications of doing so.

This type of OC is fixated in the front of the brain. Examples might be a call centre agent who does not know which person or department to hand-off someone to and simply puts them into a telephone black hole. Another example might be an agent who says, "I am really sorry that this has happened to you, I will get someone to ring you back" – and they never do.

Organisational caetextia of the process type tends to happen lower-down organisations (for instance someone in the back office saying, "That's not my job, I only process this type of transaction"). Front-line workers will often be encouraged to adopt this type of thinking with phrases such as, "You are not paid to think. Just do what I say".

This dysfunction is exacerbated by outsourcing arrangements where the supplier organisation fulfils its minimum service level obligations and is very much driven by the mantra, "If it is not in the contract, then I can do it, but it will cost you more".

The second type – 'Informational OC' – tends to be found higher-up in organisations. This type of OC is based in the back of the brain.

The symptoms of this type of organisational madness are driven by managers and 'leaders' defining a whole load of information they need to run the business that is of very little value, other than to those managers holding their jobs down.

Often the amount of information needed expands without any understanding of the cost associated with gathering it. The information is then dressed up as targets to 'motivate' those lower down the organisation to stretch themselves to meet those targets and get a bonus. Vast parts of the organisation chase numbers that have no bearing on the reality of what is actually happening to customers on a day-to-day basis.

In times of stress, this information will often be used to create random associations between the data sets, coming to rapid conclusions to reinforce otherwise illogical assumptions and then finding it rather difficult to justify their decisions after the event. The whole saga of justifying Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq is a good example of this.

Organisations also use such pools of information to get rid of people lower down in the organisation who are not 'conforming'...even if the data bears no resemblance to reality and the people are doing valuable work with customers.

Successful organisations use a combination of back-brain (information = innovation) and front-brain (process = delivery) to drive continuous improvement. A well-known example of this is Google, which allows each employee to spend 20% of their time on their own projects.

Reality check

Until now, organisations who offer services to their customers have managed to get away with dysfunctional behaviour with very little accountability or public transparency. Managers have moved on before suffering the consequences of their decisions. Organisations themselves have restructured, merged and implemented new technology which has clouded their own perceptions of reality.

However, the world has changed and organisations are no longer able to hide behind this curtain of denial! The popularity of social networks and the recent developments around Web 2.0 are giving customers the ability to air their complaints and

suggest ideas for improvement – with all this happening outside the control of the organisation.

Those companies who embrace Web 2.0 and fully integrate it into their existing infrastructure will be surprised at just how powerful it is when they allow customers to control the context of each conversation or case that they have with you.

No longer will your customers feel isolated, ignored, angry or powerless. By placing all the protagonists – customers, call centre agents, technical support, product management, etc – in an ongoing, transparent conversation, control of the relationship shifts from supplier-centric to collaborative.

The likelihood is that, right now, you have no control over the loyalty of your customers except by building trust on a conversation-by-conversation basis. If you doubt this, think how easy it is to change your mobile or broadband service provider!

Now there is a surge towards organisations gaining a social media presence – Twitter, Facebook, etc – and if done correctly, this is a step in the right direction. However, unless such initiatives are incorporated into a wider customer management programme, the overall effect could be negative.

Giving your customers the opportunity to connect to you on your terms (say on a Facebook fan page) will only work if the actual experiences you provide for them are positive. Otherwise, you will simply be amplifying their collective voice.

The good news is that there are some emerging technologies which can massively simplify the process of engaging your customers in a series of context-sensitive conversations.

Open-source technologies such as Google Wave will be able to provide platforms that enable companies to offer their customers a transparent view of the organisation – and the data within – to provide a much more meaningful base for a valuable conversation.

Some more good news is that these technologies will make full use of the substantial investment made so far in CRM systems. By layering such conversational applications on top of existing systems, you will be able to harness the power of the data in the organisation in a way that encourages true multi-channel (voice, online, web, etc) contextual communication between all the elements of your organisation and customer base.

This revolution in customer relationship management will allow those organisations that have, up until now, been blind to context to start to see the world as it truly is.

Recommendations

We believe that the dysfunctional behaviour of OC can normally be isolated to a few departments or product lines. For those parts of the organisation that exhibit the symptoms, here are a few suggestions to improve the situation...

For those organisations suffering from straight-line thinking madness (or Process OC):

- Encourage and empower front-line staff to collect information about customer demand and what is stopping the organisation from fulfilling that demand. If an improvement is devised, test it and build it immediately into the process.
- Ensure that people are trained to handle the work they have and to ask for help when they are faced with questions.
- Alternatively, adopt a more integrated approach to your customer-facing staff by investing in inter-departmental communication. Make sure that when work is handed from one department to another, it is free from errors and has enough information that it does not require downstream re-work.

For those organisations suffering from random association madness (or Informational OC), the following may help:

- Understand the real world by measuring the things that relate to customer needs and customer value. Don't measure achievements against targets that have been dreamed up by senior managers or inspection departments; such activities are a complete waste of money.

- Constantly challenge the status quo – “Just because we have always kept our customers away from the data we hold about them doesn’t mean it should always be so...” Move important data held about them to the web so they can update it and keep it accurate.
- Encourage bottom-up innovation and improvement – make sure that customer feedback is given directly to those on the front line so they can improve their performance on a daily basis, rather than storing hierarchies of historical customer satisfaction measures that are used to ‘motivate’ middle managers.

If you adopt practical steps to give your customers an informed and timely response to their demands, combined with any information that they need to make a decision, they are much more likely to come back for more of your services.

But if you exhibit any of the traits we have outlined in either of the two forms of Organisational Caetextia, then they are much more likely to view your organisation as maddening and are unlikely to come back to you when it is time for them upgrade or buy something new.

Every customer-supplier conversation builds or destroys trust. The choice of how much context blindness your organisation exhibits is surely a key factor in contributing to the overall success of your organisation. The choice of what you do about it is yours!

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