

Customer first thinking.

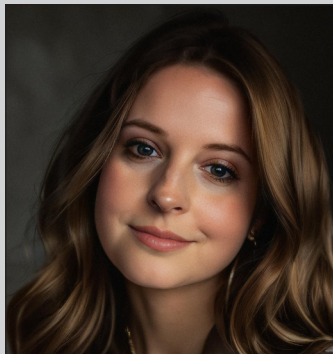


Humanizing the Customer Relationship:

An Interview with Christina Garnett, CX Evangelist and “Pocket CCO”

Christina Garnett:

Christina Garnett is a recognized authority on CX with a focus on cultivating “brandoms” and the author of “Transforming Customer Brand Relationships”.



In the classic 1976 movie “Network”, TV news anchor Howard Beale urges his viewing audience to shout at the top of their lungs, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore!”.

Beale’s soliloquy leading up to that exhortation was all about the helplessness people feel in the face of excessive corporate power and the dehumanization of society. He might as well have been vocalizing the suppressed rage that many people feel today. Fifty years after that movie was made, people are in exactly the same frame of mind – feeling left behind at a time of growing wealth disparity – beaten down by the daily mistreatment they get as customers – victimized by a system that is not serving them well. People feel taken for granted. They are disillusioned. They feel disenfranchised. And they are angry about it.

According to the most recent American Customer Rage Survey, the marketplace has become a “combat zone”. The authors of the report say, “What we are witnessing is not just an epidemic of fuming customers, but the dawn of a broader, more seismic shift

– a new era of broader and more diversified marketplace conflict”.

Complaints about poor service are way up: 77% of customers have experienced a product or service problem in the past year (it was only 32% when “Network” was made). And 64% of those customers feel rage over it. No wonder! Even if you can find a phone number to report a problem these days, good luck getting it resolved without having to go to extraordinary lengths. Customer rage bubbles up like volcanic lava through social media channels – takes the form of boycotts against brands judged to be villains - manifests itself in uncivil behaviour toward store clerks.

Yet most brands today cling to this Pollyanna ambition of building harmonious customer relationships even as they turn a blind eye to the simmering resentment people feel. While most brands have made it easier than ever to buy their products, they have also made it harder than ever to get decent service. Brand marketers are not directly to blame – their job begins and ends with selling stuff - but the companies they work for are certainly culpable. Because companies look at the post-sale treatment of customers as overhead. A cost of doing business. So they exert minimum effort to keep customers happy. Their goal is to automate the experience, involving as few humans as possible. In doing so, they are dehumanizing it, stripping it of empathy and care.

If customers feel brands don’t care about them, how can brands ever hope to earn their trust and loyalty? The answer, according to CX evangelist Christina Garnett, is to treat customers “as partners, not just consumers”. Which means making customers feel valued. Giving them the recognition and support they deserve. Fostering a sense of “we’re in this together”. And most importantly, proving that the brand has “their back”.

None of that is possible if brands rely solely on “look at me” messaging to drive engagement. That only comes across as selling by another name. To bridge this chasm between brand marketing and CX, a relationship playbook is needed which lays out a pathway to forming a genuine emotional connection with customers. In her book “Transforming Brand Customer Relationships”, Christina serves up a compendium of best practices around building a more humanistic brand through community



building and social listening. Long lasting relationships are only possible, she believes, if brands create “brandoms” that customers want to belong to – places they can meet and feel connected to each other. The brand is an enabler and not a manipulator, fuelling the conversation, facilitating meaningful interactions and meet-ups.

SS

Stephen Shaw (SS): You earned your undergrad degree in English Lit. Today you’re a recognized CX expert and published author. Take me through your journey. How did you find yourself pursuing a career in marketing?

CG

Christina Garnett (CG): When I graduated college I originally wanted to go into law. Then around my sophomore year it became very clear to me that wasn’t what I wanted to do. And so I thought about teaching because I did a lot of volunteering in college working with other students and I loved it. It felt natural to me. And so I wound up getting a position at a school teaching math and history for students with learning differences. I taught there for two years, absolutely loved it. And I’m a firm believer that teachers make the best marketers because a good teacher will do differentiated instruction - and good marketers do the same thing. Then I met my husband, moved to Virginia, and had to figure out if I wanted to teach again or if I wanted to do something else. That’s when I found marketing. And so I read everything I could get. If there was an online course, I took it. If there was a YouTube tutorial, I watched it. I “Googled” everything. And then I was reading every book I could read. I was taking college classes, just constantly feeding my brain to figure out what more there is to know. I just absorbed absolutely everything I could get my hands on. I started consulting for a local non-profit called Score. I was their social media person. From there I started

working at SBDC¹ as Marketing Director. And then I was brought on to be a strategist for ICUC², creating playbooks for Fortune 500 brands. During that time I was writing a lot on Medium. HubSpot saw my content and asked me if I wanted to join. And so then I led the “Hub Fans Advocacy Program”³ which is community meets advocacy meets brand love. When I eventually left HubSpot I started Pocket CCO because people would say they wished they could just pull me out of their pocket and ask questions.

SS

Tell me a about your experience with Hubspot.

CG

One of the things I created while I was there was the Inbound Correspondence program⁴, which is where we treated our advocates like influencers. They got a ticket to Inbound⁵, they got to share their experience, and there was tons of social UGC because we treated customers like influencers. If you treat your customers the way you treat influencers, you will fix so many big and small problems naturally. So the more you treat your customers like influencers, the better off you’re going to be and the actual relationships you’re going to foster. And so that advocacy program was very much about “How can we make it easy to love us?”. “How can we make it easy to advocate for us”? “How can we make it feel as special as humanly possible?”. And it’s not because you have a certain follower count, it’s because we appreciate you and we want to treat you the way that you deserve. That’s really powerful.

SS

You came out recently with a blog called “The Great Breakup” and one of the things you say is that customers are losing faith in the entire brand relationship model. It reads like a cri de coeur. Have you lost faith in the willingness of companies to actually see the importance of relationship building?

CG

I’m a disappointed idealist. So I know they want what a customer relationship can do. They just don’t want to do the work to get there. A lot of brands are going to have to lose a lot of market share in order to see what they’re doing wrong.

SS

Marketing is in charge of sales and CX is in charge of the operational part of the post sale experience. One is seen as a revenue producer, the other is seen as overhead. Isn’t that the heart of the problem?

CG

Yes, I think that's a massive problem for brands. I also think that a lot of brands only see CX as a CS issue. CX lives in this little silo. Proper CX requires everybody to be on the same page. You need everybody to be aligned on what that looks like. And if you do that correctly, then you do create an actual flywheel. You will create something that is going to be self-sustaining because if customers have a great experience, they're going to want to share that.

SS

Your book reads like a playbook of CX best practices. Was the vision for the book to spread the gospel around the importance of CX?

CG

I've seen the world of CX from all of these different lanes, but I've never seen a book that puts everything together. I hope that the book is a player coach because I've done the work and I want to coach you how to do it.

SS

In the book you stress the emotional connection to the brand. How do you define emotional connection?

CG

Emotional connection fosters something in you that makes the choice safer. And for different people, that emotion is going to be different things. For example, if you are a parent, the emotion you need to buy something is very different than if you are buying a concert ticket. What is the emotional trigger that makes the behaviour absolutely necessary? Is it psychological safety? Is it kindness? Is it shared values? Is it feeling like you belong? Is it love? And so, when we're thinking about emotional connection, it needs to feel like this is the safe choice. This makes sense.

SS

I imagine it's quite category dependent as well.

CG

I would argue that psychological safety works across categories, especially when you have economic uncertainty. But what that looks like is different by category. And so you're seeing a lot more hesitancy in purchasing decisions, you're seeing sales cycles get even longer. So what can we do to foster psychological safety, to make people feel this is a safe choice in a very unsafe environment?

SS

You reference "brandom" as the emotional pinnacle of loyalty. What makes it the ultimate expression of loyalty?

CG

Brandom is where being a part of a brand becomes a part of your identity. Two groups that showcase this are Tesla owners and Apple owners. Just absurd levels of brandom.

They not only are going to show up when there's a new product or service, they're going to champion it, they're going to spread it everywhere. But more importantly, and this is where brandom is important, they also act as a reputational safeguard where if someone starts talking trash about the brand, they don't just love you, they defend you.

SS

You introduce a pyramid model in the book called the "Hierarchy of Customer Delight". Can you describe the various tiers?

CG

It's based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. At the bottom you have the survival tier: as a business, you did what you said you were going to do, nothing more, nothing less. Next up is safety. So safety is like CS. No product or service is flawless. What happens if something goes wrong? Do customers have the safety of knowing that the brand's going to show up, is going to fix the problem, is going to take care of it, is going to do what needs to be done? The middle of the pyramid is a bit more warm and fuzzy. Now we're talking about belonging, we're talking about connection, we're talking about community. That's where most brands stop and think they've done a fantastic job. They created a Slack channel and you would have thought that they won the Nobel Peace Prize. Look, we have a community! We sent swag sweatshirts with our logo on it. See, we're doing great!

The top part is where I want brands to get to. This is where you're treating your customers like influencers. You're giving them behind the scenes access. You're empowering them. They should be invited to talk to your product team. They should be able to give their ideas. They should be able to say if you just had this one feature, it would make my life so much better. Because when you ship that feature, they're going to tell everybody they've ever met. They are going to be a one person advertising campaign, telling absolutely everybody. And then at the very top tier, that's where you're going to make them the star, you're going to make them the hero. That's where it's a part of their identity. Now you are changing their lives. That's what we need to get to: how are you as a brand working with your customers and lifting them up in such a way that you change their life? And the thing is, brands want to believe they're changing lives.

SS

You talk about finding the passion points of your customers and focusing storytelling there. Are you suggesting that if a company has a purpose statement that connects with those passion points, then that should form the core brand messaging?

CG

Absolutely. Patagonia is a great example. Patagonia is a living, breathing example of that. When someone says they're a fan, they're not only connecting themselves with the brand, they are connecting their identity to what that brand stands for. Ben and Jerry's is another great example. As a fan you are aligning yourself with the values they have as a part of their core mission statement. The Patagonia vest or Ben and Jerry's ice cream symbolize something so much more than the product. Shared values becomes the differentiator. Instead of leaning into your product differentiators, you're aligning yourself with your customers.

SS

One of the challenges is convincing senior management that it's important to have great customer relationships. Virtually all of the Fortune 500 companies use NPS as a beacon metric. But apart from a very few top performers, most company scores are fairly middling. What's your perspective on NPS as a barometer of loyalty?

CG

I think that NPS is important. How it's utilized is incorrect. There's not a deep enough look at the qualitative data. Qualitative is just as important as quantitative. You need both. You absolutely need both. And one NPS score is never, ever going to tell you the full picture. On top of that, it doesn't explain what to do with that number. At best, companies will focus on the detractors to fix their problems. Very, very seldom do they focus on the Promoters. And then they absolutely are not paying attention to the Passives where the gold is. They are treated like the middle child. And so NPS as it stands is a completely wasteful exercise. It could be fantastic. It could be absolutely utilized in a way that is incredibly informative, both internally and externally. But as I see most brands execute it, it's just a wasted exercise.

SS

Well, I guess it's at least awakened senior management to the importance of loyalty. And it does create a corporate benchmark. Unfortunately, many companies use it as a customer satisfaction metric and not a measure of how well they're improving the lives of people. What adjunct

measures should augment the NPS score?

CG

It should be social sentiment. It's shocking to me how many leaders want to improve their stats, but they never talk to the social team. They'll spend an obscene amount of money on a social listening tool, but they never talk to the social team, especially the person in charge of responding to comments. That person can tell you this customer is saying this, or this customer is saying that, or I saw this a couple days ago, or I haven't seen anything like that. Your social team should have a seat at the table because they are seeing your sentiment in real time and they will be able to tell you immediately that on Twitter and LinkedIn they're killing us while on Facebook they keep burying us. They'll be able to tell you what content does better. There's so much informational gold that the social and CS team have that no one taps into.

SS

Well, I think the other challenge is to connect sentiment to company performance.

CG

Great social runs on vibes. But if you say "vibes" to leadership, they think that's like "woo, woo". But it goes back to emotional connection. That leads to behaviour which leads to revenue which leads to net new retention which leads to all of the things that leadership cares about.

SS

We're hearing a lot about agentic commerce. The thinking generally is that as it becomes more widespread it's going to weaken brand loyalty because it'll cut off the brand from customers. What are the implications for marketers?

CG

I do believe that we're going to see more and more of the need for the "people stack" and the "tech stack". There's going to be a world where people want convenience and personalization and then there are going to be other people who don't want an agent to tell them what they should buy. Everything is so convenient now - there's no friction. Nothing is really giving you the dopamine that you used to get from a scavenger hunt. And so I think that over time we're going to see more and more consumers get sick of that. I think there's a lot of humans that are going to absolutely reject that life, that are going to shop small, that are going to go to a local brick and mortar store because they want the personal experience. More people are going to want to go to coffee shops. More people are going to want to go to concerts. More people are going to want to

meet real people because the Internet is not giving that dopamine hit anymore. People still have an ancestral need for connection, and AI is not going to change that.

SS

Well, as Cory Doctorow says, it's the "enshittification" of the Internet. How should brand marketing adapt to this new reality?

CG

Brands need to figure out who are they to humans. What I'm seeing a lot of brands doing is just focus on the stimuli. They don't focus on the human psychology. They have no idea what their audience is actually paying attention to because there's no way your audience is paying attention to every single trend. Now, if you pick the trends that are only relevant for your audience, great, do it. But I guarantee you no one is paying attention to every single trend. Nobody.

SS

A lot of dramatic change is going on right now, everywhere, all at once. It's leaving marketers feeling in a state of future shock. If you're in front of a classroom of marketing graduates, what's your message to them?

CG

I think my advice to them would be instead of looking at the market, look at yourself. You need to find your own product market fit. Because especially in this world, if you're trying to get hired, you are a product. Your knowledge, what you have to offer, what you can do is a product. How do you differentiate yourself? Who are the people that are most likely going to get the most impact

from you? Especially in a world where everyone's trying to build a personal brand. And being curious intellectually, like intellectual curiosity is priceless. That would be my advice. You have to be hungry.

¹. Small Business Development Center

². ICUC is a social media and community management company.

³. The HubSpot Advocacy Program (now known as "HubSpot Community Champions") enables a community of evangelists to share their expertise and knowledge, for which they gain exclusive access to events, networking opportunities and the chance to contribute content.

⁴. The INBOUND Correspondents program is a special program for the most engaged members of the HubSpot Community invited to provide their perspective on the annual INBOUND conference.

⁵. INBOUND is an annual Hubspot event for marketing, sales, and customer success professionals for knowledge sharing and networking.



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