How to Serve Customers — and Keep Users Happy, Too

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Google and Facebook are two of the world's biggest brands, valued at $309 billion and $159 billion, respectively. These huge companies share something else in common: most of their users aren't customers.

Googling banana bread recipes or posting Facebook status updates is free. However, the more we use these platforms, the more advertisers they attract — and advertisers pay the bills. Google, for example, earned over USD $160 billion from ads in 2019, which accounted for nearly 71% of its revenues.

We know how these business models work, but we often overlook the differences between serving users and customers. In a

recent Google video, the company says it’s constantly working to enhance the search engine: “In 2019 alone, we ended up making more than 3,620 improvements to search, for an average of nearly 10 improvements a day.” Yet, Google doesn’t appear to spend nearly as much time on ad tools – its biggest revenue source.

At my company, JotForm, our 8 million users are people who create online forms. Some also upgrade to become paying customers, and we continually improve our product for both of these groups. But the people who simply interact with our forms are also users – whether they realize it or not. Maybe they receive a retail survey or an emergency contact sheet from their children’s school; our “form users” should also have a great experience.

Whether you’re selling products, services, or running a non-profit, it’s essential to understand everyone you serve – and to use that knowledge to improve what you create and to prioritize your time. Here are three ways to strengthen your brand for *all* of your audiences.

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1. Know the difference between UX and CX

Digital creators are intimately familiar with User Experience, or UX. Designer, researcher and psychologist Donald Norman first coined the term in his 1988 book, *The Design of Everyday Things*. When Norman joined Apple in the early ‘90s, he assumed the title of User Experience Architect, long before it was common job description. Today, his consulting firm, the Nielsen Norman Group, defines UX as “all aspects of the end-user’s interaction with the company, its services, and its products.”

Customer Experience (CX) is a much newer field. In a 2010 blog post, Forrester defined CX as “how customers perceive their interactions with your company.” Forrester’s Harley Manning explained that good customer experiences “are useful (deliver value), usable (make it easy to find and engage with the value), and enjoyable (emotionally engaging so that people want to use them).”

If you think the definitions of UX and CX sound remarkably similar, you’re not alone. It’s easy to sink into the quicksand of business jargon, but there are two key differences:

- UX tends to focus on usability — are Google search results easy to navigate? Is our form builder simple to use?
- CX centers on strengthening the entire brand. From advertising to customer service to digital platforms and retail locations, how do people feel when they connect with your company?

The strongest organizations get both right. They serve the users scrolling Facebook and the advertisers who buy space on the platform. The goal is to ensure everyone has intuitive tools, simple processes, and a positive brand experience.

2. Happier customers mean happier users

Companies that serve different users and customers often face an internal tug-of-war. As UX writer Jeremy Bird explains, sales teams usually want to prioritize developments and innovations that serve paying customers. Designers and UX teams, understandably, want to perfect user experiences, like streamlining the onboarding process.

Consider a company like Yelp. We’re users when we search for

the best dumplings in our neighbourhood. We become customers if we advertise our vegetarian restaurant on the platform. With limited time and money, Yelp probably struggles to prioritize both groups in its product roadmaps and updates.

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According to Bird, the solution is to solve customer needs in a way that also improves user experiences. “By focusing on the customer to identify the problem to solve and the user to figure out how to solve that,” he writes, “we please both groups, which ends up being a major win for our company as well.”

For example, if Yelp found that most sponsored search results are too far from users seeking a late-night snack, the company could boost location tracking to better serve advertisers. Users would also see closer sandwich shops in their search results, both sponsored and organic. The product gets better for everyone.

3. Learn from digital “usage brands”

In 2018, three organizations studied how companies succeed in the digital age. The group asked over 5,000 U.S. consumers how they felt about 50 different digital and traditional brands, from Coca-Cola to Dollar Shave Club.

When the team analyzed the results, they separated the brands into either “purchase” or “usage” categories. As authors Mark Bonchek and Vivek Bapat explain: “Purchase brands focus on creating demand to *buy* the product, while usage brands focus on creating demand for the *use* of the product.”

The two categories have many nuances, but examining industry brand “twins” helps to clarify the distinction. For example, Hilton/Marriott uses advertising, loyalty points, and its own,

internal narrative to encourage hotel stays. Airbnb emphasizes local experiences, exploration, and stories from real guests and hosts. Both companies need to land bookings, but their approach is worlds apart.

Why do these differences matter? Researchers found that people were more loyal to usage brands. They were also more likely to recommend these brands to others, and preferred the usage brands over their competitors. Respondents were even willing to pay premium prices for usage brands.

To think like a digital pioneer, you need to inspire users – of all kinds – to tell their friends and colleagues about your company. Create products and services that are intuitive and easy to use, while equipping customers to be more productive, more successful, and to meet their goals, whether they're personal or financial.

Even if your company has always prioritized one group over the other, try to switch perspectives. What would please advertisers or customers? Do you have under-served users who deserve more attention? It's worth exploring how everyone encounters your brand, and what they experience. Like Google, you might choose to maintain your current strategy, but the more you understand all the players, the better you'll play the game.

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