

LRA's Rush: Customer Satisfaction Hits the Bottom Line

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Rob Rush
Principal and CEO
LRA Worldwide

Customer satisfaction—it's not just the goal of Horsham, Pa.-based LRA Worldwide; it's the firm's whole reason for being. Rob Rush, principal and CEO of the firm, recently spoke with Consulting about how his firm helps other firms give customers great experiences and why the customer still is—and always will be—king.

Consulting: What is the firm's current mission all about?

Rush: Our journey in the last four years was really to start to build a consulting business to back up the research business where we started. I had a desire to spend a little more time in the corner office helping our clients not just measure performance, but also start to improve performance. As you can imagine, a lot of the research often indicates what gap exists between the desired state and the real world, so to the extent that we could help a client eliminate or minimize those gaps, we knew that we'd be helping them provide a better customer experience.

So about four years we started building out our consulting business, which has been evolving rapidly. I think it's been evolving rapidly because there are a lot of companies who have recognized the straightest line to driving financial success is to delight your customers. And to that extent many of them are for the first time actually identifying a highly regarded individual within their organization to serve as a chief customer officer, whose job is to basically break down all of the different silos that exist within a company and put the customer at the center of that world. And those companies who have identified a chief customer officer are

creating a mandate and providing resources—real dollars and budgets around doing that. And I think other companies that have not done that have been seeking out a company like us to kind of function as a de facto [chief customer officer] on an external basis, and that's been a fabulous opportunity for us.

Consulting: Who is your client base?

Rush: We're probably in three key sectors and then we have a grab bag of different clients. We came out of hospitality. Another core [sector] is transportation. We work with the three New York area international airports. In travel we do some interesting work via rail Canada—Canada's version of Amtrak. And then another area is sports and entertainment.

Consulting: Does a brand ever give up too early on a marketing campaign?

Rush: Absolutely. Our feeling is if the CEO doesn't intuitively understand that at the end of the day customers are going to come back to you because they see clear advantages to your offering and most of that is not driven by the edginess or reverence of your advertising. It might be a piece of it, so I'll use Apple as an example—they've got very irreverent, ingenuous advertising, but they work overtime to ensure that operationally, whether it be in their retail stores or manufacturing operation that they've got great people with longevity in the company who know exactly what their role is in providing that experience to a customer. It makes a huge difference, and it's one of the reasons an Apple store can do over \$20 million dollars in 6,000 square feet, which is crazy insane numbers.

Consulting: Do you think the Apple model is the ideal?

Rush: I think if you look at an Apple or a Four Seasons or a Commerce Bank or a Costco, I think there are leaders in every sector who follow the customer experience model that I'm describing. They all realize at the end of the day, it's not about a promise; it's about just delivering every day on what we do. So it Costco, it's not just about low prices to compete with Sam's Club or Wal-Mart, it's also about providing an environment where a shopper feels that they're going to be on a little bit of a treasure hunt and they never know what they're going to find. They have tremendous longevity in their staff and very little turnover. People care about that experience. Most of these organizations like Costco pay their people more. Their individual salaries are higher, but usually the people are so productive because their engagement levels are so much higher. They do more work that they need fewer bodies, and overall labor costs as a percentage of revenues is going to be lower.

I think customer experience to many companies is like a flavor of the month. But it requires a lot of rigor, a lot of discipline and a lot of elegance to get your organization aligned right to really put the customer at the center of that. The other thing to keep in mind is that our space is probably a little different than the way maybe Accenture would look at it or some of the larger strategy shops. Most of their work around customer experience is more around customer analytics or customer relationship management. And that's important, but our view of that is doing all that didn't necessarily make [your] experience better.