

Becoming a Beloved Company

Nuance Conversations '08: A customer-experience consultant outlines what it takes to make yourself memorable for every customer.

By Adam Boretz, Speech Technology magazine

ORLANDO, FLA. — To build a company's culture around the customer, an organization must focus on purpose, passion, and people, according to a keynote address delivered here today as part of Nuance Conversations 2008, the annual users' conference for Nuance Communications. According to Jeanne Bliss, author of *Chief Customer Officer: Getting Past Lip Service to Passionate Action*, only a company with a mastery of all three can become what she called "a beloved company."

"The DNA of beloved companies really is built around these three pivots -- purpose, passion, and people," the aptly named Bliss said. "Memory creation is the currency of the brand of beloved companies," she told the crowd. "They enable people to deliver a memory at the point of contact -- [an experience] that is so critical that that becomes what brings people back."

According to Bliss, who is the managing partner of customer-experience consultancy CustomerBliss, the experience a company delivers to people is a reflection of its organization experience. This branding process, she said, begins with direction and with clarity of purpose. "Walk around your company and ask 10 people what the purpose of your business is to customers -- and find out how many different answers you get," Bliss told attendees. "Purpose [is] really important."

The second step, though, is no less important. "Beloved companies also have passion," Bliss said. "They're driven by being in a business that starts with the gut...[driving] passion forward." And, in the end, the third leg of Bliss's organizational tripod is what allows a customer-centric company to reach beyond its corporate confines. "It's about really connecting on a human basis with...the people in the organization of the beloved compan[y]."

The problem to be overcome, she told the crowd, is the turf mentality that artificially separates units that should be united. "Marketing is doing [its] own thing and sales is doing [its] own thing and service is doing [its] own thing," she said. "And what we deliver to the customer is our ability to work together inside that sandbox. How much we connect -- the metrics, the motivation, and the mechanics -- is what the customer feels. And the companies that do that well know that they need to put aside their separate goals and objectives and create this experience for the customer."

More often than not, however, the different silos within a company fail to work together in the sandbox, Bliss said. "Most of us are delivering a default customer experience and that's the outcome of each of the parts of the operation doing [its] own thing. What we need to move to in many, many companies -- just to get to the stairwell of desire -- is reliability."

A way to counter this disunity, Bliss added, is by doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way -- an approach that can create customer memory and stimulate desire.

"Reliability is about more customers being able to tell your story," she said. "Building a brand that customers want is about them being able to see [something] they get from [that brand] that they don't get from anybody else. That's the key.... But it's a lot of work."

The next step in the customer-centric evolution, Bliss said, involves the "move toward desire." And creating desire, she added, is critical to a company's long-term success. "Desire is what I call the cha-ching emotion -- it's what builds your business," she told the crowd. "When you build desire, people will remember your business -- and they will tell other people about it -- and they will want to come back."

Bliss also provided examples of five companies that truly connect with customers in extraordinary ways:

- * Baptist Health Care, a regional health-care provider;
- * biotechnology pioneer Genentech;
- * Rackspace Hosting, a provider of enterprise-level managed services;
- * regional supermarket chain Wegmans; and
- * Zappos.com, the online shoe retailer.

"They've been able to hardwire in humanity and not [lose] sight of the importance of the personal connection in delivering corporate outcome," she told the crowd. "Belief, passion, people, purpose -- it's what drives these companies."

The current economic climate, she added, made the formula all the more essential. "In this economy, what we're finding is that the companies that are connecting on a human basis -- at a retail level, at a call center level -- are the companies that people are remembering. Even if they can't buy as much, the connection that you're [making] with customers right now is what's going to pay you back when the economy starts coming back," she said. "So this is super-critical. It's humanizing the customer -- and humanizing that point of interaction."