

Is Chief Customer Officer in Your Future?

Are you ready to take a seat at the C-suite table? Build the competencies to lead customer-oriented change.

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The contact center has made great strides in its struggle to cast off the complaint center image in recent years. The C-suite's growing focus on customer experience is paving the way for service leaders to finally take a seat at the executive table.

Organizations are increasingly appointing chief customer officers (CCO) to oversee organizationwide customer experience initiatives. Although only a handful of executives held the title (or a similar title) a decade ago, there has been an accelerated increase in the last few years, according to Forrester Research. In fact, the firm found that the number of CCOs almost doubled between 2009 and 2010.

Today, "there are more than 300 CCOs in the world, and hundreds more serving the same purpose but without the formal title," says Curtis Bingham, founder and executive director of the Chief Customer Officer Council (CCOC), a member-led peer-advisory network. Bingham observes that the year 2000 seemed to be the tipping point, after which the number of CCOs began to triple every two years.

What Is the CCO's Role?

So what, exactly, is a CCO's role in the organization? While most people can readily define what a CFO, CIO or COO does, Bingham points out that the CCO role is still in its infancy, and therefore, there is a great deal of variability in how it is implemented in organizations. Generally, though, the role is closely aligned with the CEO's priorities. "In a small company, the CCO is typically focused on customer acquisition; in larger companies, they're more focused on customer retention," he says.

The CCOC defines the CCO as: "An executive that provides the comprehensive and authoritative view of the customer and creates corporate and customer strategy at the highest levels of the company to maximize customer acquisition, retention and profitability." For a deeper understanding of how the role differs from that of a service executive, it may help to look at the issues that CCOs are tackling. According to research conducted by the CCOC, the top priorities for CCOs are:

- Developing customer-centric tactics—i.e., finding ways to focus products and services more on customers, and drive customer-focused processes.
- Customer experience management (using metrics and analytics).
- Creating a customer-centric culture.
- Creating a high-level customer strategy.
- Gathering customer insight.
- Building customer relationships.

As the CCOC's definition and priorities reveal, the ability to drive customer strategy *across functions and silos* is a critical differentiator of the position. "Without the ability to collaborate across different elements of the organization, the service leader is limited. They have no credibility in the organization and cannot influence change," Bingham says.

Where Do They Come From?

According to Forrester's research, most CCOs are promoted from within the organization

with a median tenure of eight years with the company. One-third of CCOs are former division presidents or general managers, and almost another third come from a marketing or sales role. About one-quarter previously held operations positions.

Bingham has found that most successful CCOs have a broad background with a wide range of experience, and have touched a lot of different areas during the course of their careers. "Having this broad experience gives them greater credibility within the organization, which becomes very important once they're trying to earn authority," he says.

Case in point, Jasmine Green, vice president and chief customer advocate for Nationwide Insurance. Green was named the 2011 CCO of the Year by the CCOC, an award that recognizes CCOs who have made the greatest strides in improving customer centricity within their company. Green's background spans many different roles during her 25 years at Nationwide, including claims, product underwriting and operations.

Although Green is very much a "numbers person," with a degree in accounting and a love of statistics and analysis, she considers customer service to be her passion. "All of my experience with Nationwide has been dealing with customers face to face, so I truly understand and appreciate the customer experience and how a company needs to interact with customers to make it the best experience that they can," she says. "My role as chief customer advocate is the culmination of all of the various roles that I've held and that customer service experience."

For Green, business acumen and understanding the financials have been key to the CCO role. She advises service leaders who wish to pursue a CCO role to begin building their knowledge of the business and how customer service impacts it. "Understand where you are now and where you want to be," she says. "Be able to tell the story—the good, the bad and the ugly—and do it from a financial perspective. Speak in terms of retention and new customers coming on board."



Curtis Bingham
*Founder and
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How to Position Yourself to Step into the Role

Is CCO a role that you can aim for within your organization? What are the factors that will catch the attention of your C-level executives and get them to consider you as a viable candidate?

We turned to Jeanne Bliss for her insights. Bliss was one of the earliest and probably most widely recognized corporate customer advocates. She held the CCO role at five major U.S. corporations in a variety of industries, and has spent 20 years in the corporate world as a crusader for customer experience and culture. Today, Bliss is president of CustomerBLISS, a customer experience coaching and consulting firm; cofounder of the Customer Experience Professionals Association (cxpa.org); and author of the widely read book, *Chief Customer Officer*. She spends much of her time coaching new CCOs to transition into the role.

According to Bliss, to be promoted from within the organization, you need to show that you have run a successful service operation, that your center has shown an increase in profitability, and have specific results that you can point to. You also need to be credible and respected as a person and a leader.

The ability to collaborate and work across functions is also critical. "The successful leaders are those who are willing to check their egos at the door and give the power away," Bliss says. "When this work is successful, it's because the leader is able to collaborate, can connect the silos to work together and can make other areas of the organization successful.

"Those are not skills that we naturally have," she adds. "As soldiers of the corporate machine, we are coached, honored and rewarded for performing the tasks on our scorecards. The CCO



Jeanne Bliss
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role is about reaching across the organization and creating a system so that the other parts can be successful. Your job is to create heroes in the other operating areas—and that is one of the most misunderstood parts of this role.”

Collaborating with leaders across the organization, as well as your board of directors, is essential for establishing influence within the organization, says Green. “You will need influence with people who do not report to you and have no linkage to you, so communication and building relationships and partnerships is key.”

Bingham agrees. “The ability to influence, motivate and encourage an organization is imperative,” he says. “Most CCOs don’t have a great deal of line authority, so they have to manage and lead by influence. That comes through speaking, communication, having the executive presence and practice.”

To be a successful business partner, it’s also important to have an in-depth knowledge of analytics, and be able to provide meaningful analysis into customer behavior.

“Some may not feel that a customer service role is an analytical role,” says Green. “I do. Not only do you want someone with great customer service skills who understands the strategic positioning and what customer service really means, you also want someone who has the business acumen to drill down into the numbers and to understand the details behind the company’s financials to help move the organization forward.”

Criteria for Successfully Leading Customer-Centric Change

Because the CCO role is so new to many organizations, Bingham says that it is also the most fragile position in the C-suite right now. (A CCOC survey puts the average tenure at 29.4 months.) CCOs are more likely to be vulnerable “because of the inability to justify the position—not being able to show the CEO that your contribution has increased revenue,

Jasmine Green Shares Insights on Driving a Customer Culture



Jasmine Green, vice president and chief customer advocate for Nationwide Insurance, and the Chief Customer Officer Council’s pick for 2011 CCO of

the Year, has had a long career in customer service. At Nationwide, the CCO role “is basically a way to remind us that we’re here for our customers, and everything that we do is integrated around our customers.”

Green had three specific goals in mind when she took on the CCO role.

1. To put in place a lean Six Sigma continuous improvement methodology using customer data. “The information that comes from your customers is very crucial,” she says. “If you don’t do anything with it, you’re doing a disservice, not only to your business, but to your customers.”

2. Develop a service recovery strategy. “We know we are not going to be perfect in everything that we do, so how do we address service recovery when something happens?”

3. Develop an enterprisewide customer-focused culture. “We have over 33,000 associates with Nationwide,” Green says. “How can we make sure that the culture is in place to provide the best customer experience for everyone who contacts nationwide—no matter whether it’s through our bank or mortgage company, a claims area, or through VPI Pet Insurance?”

“For me, culture is embedded within your organization. Your culture has to tie into your visions, goals and the mission of your company. Customer experience should be mentioned within your goals, and that’s where you build your culture.

“When we talk about our culture, what does being ‘On Your Side’ mean? We have specific ‘On Your Side’ actions: We take ownership, personalize the relationship, work efficiently and make it easy for customers to do business with us—and we do have behaviors that drill down from those four actions.

“So some of the metrics that are important to me are our customer enthusiasm metrics, customer satisfaction metrics, employee and culture standpoint and employee engagement, which is a very important metric. I do believe that, before you can really talk about customer centricity and customer service, you have to talk about the engagement of your associates and your employees. They have to be truly on board—and tie into and believe in your culture and why you exist.”

decreased costs or mitigated risk," he says.

And, indeed, CEO expectations for quick results can spell failure for a new CCO. Bliss has found that new CCOs are often tasked with hitting some type of metric early on, such as increasing customer satisfaction scores by 15% in three months.

But starting with the score is a mistake. Instead, new CCOs should be focused on creating what she calls the "customer experience listening engine." How? "Increase awareness, bring people together to talk differently—and then, ultimately, over time, you can earn the right to a score. But start with changing the behavior and the corporate competencies that will earn the right to the score." She offers the following advice for contact center leaders on how to earn the right to lead the work:

REVENUE = ATTENTION

Create strategic awareness across the organization about the issues that are driving customers away, and thus, impacting profitability. "That gives the organization an understanding of the issues, and starts to flip the belief that you're a cost center to the viewpoint that you are a profitability engine," Bliss says.

MAKE THEM LISTEN

Package the customer information in a strategic and organized way that connects back to the business. Consider sending a monthly customer revenue memo that draws insights from the customer database—the trending of customer issues, who's calling and why. Be sure to translate the data into compelling nuggets of information.

GUERRILLA METRICS

Share the financial impact of customer issues in a way that humanizes the customer and connects it to the business in a meaningful way. Bliss suggests introducing your organization to what she calls "customer math." For instance, report how many new customers you've acquired in a certain timeframe, by volume and value, and how many customers have left, by volume and value. "If you're not talking about incoming and outgoing customers—where they left your company because of the moments of truth and where they're staying—then your business doesn't have relevance, and you can't connect the growth of your customer to experiences," she says.

PERSIST

Learn to be persistent. "Don't be discouraged if you've tried to get your message across, but nobody is listening," Bliss says. The reason can usually be found in the previous three points: The information not connected to the ROI, and you're not packaging it in a compelling way. "So persist," she stresses. "Go back and do it again and again."

BE A CHAMELEON

Understand the other functions in the organization and what their pain points are. Organize the information, and then make it relevant operationally. The marketing department needs to hear the information packaged in a different way than the operations group.

CREATE URGENCY AND FOCUS

"Clarify for the organization exactly which issues and experiences are keeping or repelling customers," Bliss says. "Help people to understand the prioritization of the issues, and then simplify the work to make it easier to take action."

ENGAGE THE EXECUTIVES IN DRIVING REGULAR ACCOUNTABILITY

Bring crossfunctional teams together to work on the issues in a specific way. Then get your top executives involved by having the crossfunctional teams present to the execs what they're doing and what's happening each month.

"If customer contact centers can emerge as the silo connector, essentially duct-taping silos together to do work that they haven't been able to do before and that they can't do alone, the contact center leader can earn the right to the CCO position to connect the work, to create reliability," Bliss says. [📌](#)



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The Chief Customer Officer Council is the first of its kind—a member-led peer-advisory network offering unparalleled insight into the critical issues facing CCOs. It was created to provide a safe environment where CCOs can share ideas, concerns, and build best practices that will help them, their companies, and especially their customers succeed. The Council includes CCOs from diverse industries, purposefully cross-pollinated with the most forward-thinking companies, large and small.

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The Customer Experience Professionals Association is a global, non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of customer experience management best practices. It provides customer experience management professionals with educational and networking opportunities to help them succeed, and facilitates the industrywide advancement of the discipline of customer experience management. Its members include individuals who develop, manage, optimize, and envision how organizations interact with their customers.

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