



---

## Make Room for the Chief Customer Officer

**Make room at the top of your team: Behind the rise of the chief customer officer.**

By April Joyner | Apr 3, 2012

**More and more** companies are reconfiguring their C Suites to accommodate a new kind of chief: the chief of customers.

The CCO has one key responsibility: to ensure that the customer is taken into consideration at all times, in all departments, and in all major decisions. The title emerged in the late 1990s; back then, customer chiefs functioned primarily as advocates for customers. But CCOs have begun to play a much more important strategic role, says Curtis Bingham, founder and executive director of the CCO Council, a professional organization founded in 2008. That makes sense, given the growing importance of customer relationships in maintaining a business's competitive advantage, says John Abele, a global managing partner at executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles. "Ownership of the customer has become just as important as, if not more important than, operations," Abele says.

What does a CCO look like? Voxeo, an Orlando-based telecommunications software company, appointed Anne Bowman as its CCO last October. That was a promotion for Bowman, who joined Voxeo as president in 2009. She now oversees sales, marketing, customer service, and human resources; the heads of each of those departments report to her. The idea is to make sure that all Voxeo customers have a positive experience, no matter which department they happen to be dealing with. A big chunk of Bowman's time is spent developing training programs to teach employees to put the customer first. "It's the foundation of the house, making sure we have a customer-centric culture," she says.

The company changed Bowman's job description to send a clear message to employees about its priorities. "We decided to take a lot of what we were already doing and formally package it up," says Jonathan Taylor, Voxeo's founder. Taylor has worked hard to ensure that the CCO is more than a figurehead. Bowman, for example, controls the company's marketing budget, as well as a special budget for customer-related programs, such as the company's monthly Customer Obsession award, given to employees who excel in their duties.

Not all CCOs have the same authority as Bowman. In fact, nearly half of CCOs are not part of their company's executive-management team, according to Forrester Research. In many cases, the CCO is head of a department, often sales, and dons the chief's hat to remind colleagues that their initiatives ultimately need to benefit the customer. Whatever the CCO's place in the hierarchy, when the needs of the business conflict with those of the customer—say, a decision to cut costs by limiting call-center hours—it's the CCO's job to resolve the conflict.

That isn't easy unless the CEO and other top execs invest the customer chief with actual authority, Bingham says. And to keep that authority, CCOs must establish ways to quantify their results. "There has to be a clear correlation between what they do and what the CEO cares about: increased revenue, decreased cost, mitigated risks," Bingham says.

At Voxeo, one of Bowman's first priorities was to develop specific initiatives, along with metrics, for each of the company's key constituent groups: employees, customers, and end users (essentially, the customers of its resellers). The company had been using Gallup's employee survey and Net Promoter, the popular software system that measures how likely customers are to recommend a service or product to others. But Voxeo had seen diminishing returns from Net Promoter, mainly because Voxeo had inconsistent processes for reporting and acting upon the data. Bowman formalized the system by tying results to employee bonuses and asking customers to rate their support calls. She also introduced a survey for Voxeo's resellers.

The company also introduced monthly account reviews for larger customers, whose organizations often require multiple points of contact. Internally, Voxeo has made efforts to share information on sales and departmental projects at weekly staff meetings. Taylor expects the new CCO to sharpen Voxeo's competitive edge. "It's such a simple statement," he says. "We're doing whatever we need to do to make sure customers are exceptionally happy."

---

Copyright © 2012 Mansueto Ventures LLC. All rights reserved.  
Inc.com, 7 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007-2195.