

Better Customer Interactions with Mauro Carobene

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00:00:06]:

Welcome to Brainfluence. I'm Roger Dooley. Today we have with us Mauro Carobene and he will explain briefly who he is and what he does. Mauro.

Mauro Carobene [00:00:15]:

Thank you very much, Roger. So, as Roger said, my name is Mauro. I'm heading customer interactions with line of business in Tata communication. I'm Italian, as you can hear from my accent, and I've been more or less spending all my life in telecom and in customer experience.

Roger Dooley [00:00:35]:

Great. Well, Mauro, you popped onto my radar because your company sponsored a study with Harvard Business Review on customer experience. And I wonder if you can give us just a little bit of an understanding of how that concept of the study originated and what you're hoping to find from that study.

Mauro Carobene [00:00:55]:

Okay, so what's happened is I joined Tata Communication roughly eight months ago. Nine months ago, as a part of an acquisition, I was running a company doing customer or communication platform, and we decided to create this unit called customer Interaction suite. The idea was really to understand how the enterprise today manage customer experience and how can they improve the way in which they interact with the customer in order to improve customer experience. So what we did was, first of all, to start engaging with HBR and to start collecting some input specific on customer interaction. So we know that customer experience is influenced by a number of things, by the quality of a product, by pricing, by. Let's say number of different parameters, but the way in which every corporate

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interact and engage with their customer clearly has a big impact. Now, today that most of the interactions are digital more and more. And so we decided mainly to cover three aspects in the report.

Mauro Carobene [00:02:07]:

One is, are the corporate aware that today they are not engaging or interacting properly with their customer? Problem number one. The second one is, is it urgent for them to take action to improve their way of interacting? And the third one was, okay, how does a good interaction look like? Because that's really, let's say the key point. So the moment in which a company, a brand, is interacting with their customer, what is the customer expecting in terms of interaction?

Roger Dooley [00:02:41]:

There were 264 participants. Who were these people?

Mauro Carobene [00:02:45]:

We decided to take mainly different group of people. So first of all, we wanted this research to be global. So from geographical point of view, we want to cover more or less all the market. So 45% of the people were coming from North America, 20% from Europe, and the remaining Asia Pacific, Middle Eastern Africa and Latin America. In terms of the seniority of the role in the companies, we wanted to have CXO, let's say board member, CEO, and so on. So people that really drive the strategy of the company. Because for us it was important really to understand is this something important at the board level or is this something managed at lower level? Then we wanted to have decision makers. So roughly 25% board member or CXO, 45% people coming from, let's say decision makers.

Mauro Carobene [00:03:42]:

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So senior manager, executive and so on, and the remaining middle management, because those are the people that really own the process of engaging with the customer. So it was important really to cover all of this in terms of vertical, more or less all the vertical. So if I remember correctly, 1015 percent from technology, 11% from healthcare and let's say all the other industry, manufacturing, retails and so on. So the idea was really to take broad view which was not specific on one market or one specific vertical. On top of these we also involved for expert that are listed in the report, that are experts coming from either because they wrote books or they are journalists, or they take conference on customer experience.

Roger Dooley [00:04:35]:

Maro oftentimes we do a survey and the results turn out well, pretty much as we expected. Was there anything in the results from the survey that surprised you?

Mauro Carobene [00:04:44]:

The short answer is most probably not we expected, or let's say the result that we got was very much in line with what we expected. Most probably the things that surprised me more was the consistency of the answer. I'll give you an example. One of the questions we asked was if improving customer interaction is a priority in the next twelve months and we got 94% of the respondent that said yes it is, we ask if to remain competitive, improving the way in which they interact with their customer, it's a priority. And 97% repetitive. Yes. So most probably the first surprise was the consistency of these. The second part that most probably was maybe unexpected was that once we ask if they feel that they're doing enough today in terms of interacting properly with the customer, only 38% gave a positive feedback.

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Mauro Carobene [00:05:47]:

So on one side it's visible that everybody believes that it's important to remain competitive. You need to do something in the next twelve months, so it's super urgent. At the same time, only 38% believe that they're doing it in a proper way. So there is a clearly mismatch between what they feel that it's important and what they are really doing, or at least what they perceive to do.

Roger Dooley [00:06:12]:

That 38% number stuck out to me for maybe a little bit different reason. And that is so many past surveys have shown that CEO's like 80% think their companies are doing an excellent job of customer service. Delivering great customer experience. And then of course, you look at the customer side of it and it's a much tinier percentage that actually agree with that statement. So, you know, to me, this 38% number maybe, does that indicate that leaders are getting more realistic about what's really going on? Or is it partly the sample that you're checking? Because to me is as long as you've got this huge disconnect where CEO's think things are fine, then you're never going to have real change. But how would you dig into that 38% number? Is it greater realism or is it just that perhaps you got some people who weren't CEO's in that survey who were actually the cxos and other.

Mauro Carobene [00:07:08]:

Okay. We spent time thinking about it. And I think that one important topic compared to other reports that are similar, is that the focus was not customer experience, but the focus was customer interaction, which is clearly only the way in which the corporate interact with the customer. And we know that these specific topic changed dramatically in the last three, four years. Let's say with the introduction of chatbot, with the introduction

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of generative AI, let's say the technology changed in the last 24 months in a way that is really changing all our life. I think that all of us experience bad experience with any form of chatbot voice, such a voice bot or whatever, that don't understand what we are saying or don't understand the problem or whatever. So in my opinion, that's why you see this disconnect between the 38%. And while you ask about customer experience to CEO, they feel that they're giving an outstanding customer experience.

Mauro Carobene [00:08:10]:

Everybody understand that interacting is changing and how it is changing. It's in my opinion really important and one of the most important outcome of this research. So by the way, that connect to the third question I was asking before. So how does a good interaction look like? And the number one priority is that whenever you interact with the customer, you need to make the interaction useful. Okay, so the interaction should drive value, should be easy, should be fast, should be. So the typical example, because then offline we ask other questions like how does a bad interaction look like? The typical example of a bad interaction is once you repeat the same experience, the same information, typical example, you can't technical support, you go through a number of menus saying what is your problem? And so on. And at the end you end over to an agent and you need to start again from scratch telling, I'm Maori, I'm italian, I disservice. This is not working.

Mauro Carobene [00:09:15]:

So this is a perfect example of a bad interaction. Good interaction is the moment in which you call technical support, and immediately they say, okay, I know who you are. So it's super personalized. They know exactly who you are in that moment. They know exactly which service you are using, and

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maybe they know exactly if you have a problem. So, like, we realize that you are in this moment experience problem. The problem is already under investigation. So we will come back to you at the moment in which it is fixed.

Mauro Carobene [00:09:49]:

So that's the first topic. So good interaction versus bad interaction. The second learning that came out was what is preventing today, the corporate to provide a good interaction. And the most important learning for me is the data silos. So, today, most of the corporate cannot expose all the data to all the department. So what's happening, going back to the previous example, could happen that I call technical support for a service, a video service, because I cannot watch Olympic Games in real time, whatever. And there is an opportunity to upsell one service to me, because they tell me, okay, the reason why, it's because your daughter is watching the Olympic Games in another place. The moment in which they moved the call from technical support to sales, they are struggling in passing all the information and all the data to make the sales process quick and fast.

Mauro Carobene [00:10:55]:

That would make my experience very, very simple. So I want to watch today Olympic Games. I want to watch it now. I'm traveling or whatever. I'm ready to pay \$5 to get that service, but I want to get it easy. And then they end over to sales, and they restart the process. So this is a practical example, again, of bad interaction, where data silos. So they see me as a customer of one service with a specific problem, or they see me as a potential new customer, and so on.

Mauro Carobene [00:11:24]:

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But the two don't talk each other. So that's one of the areas that clearly was highlighted as a potential area of improvement coming from his research.

Roger Dooley [00:11:36]:

Sometimes it's even within the same department where you get passed from level one tech support to level two, and you've got to re explain everything. I know that people say, oh, I hate chatbots, but as you pointed out, I don't think people necessarily hate chatbots. They hate chatbots. They're useless. That can answer their questions and are mainly a barrier. And I really think that many companies implemented chatbot technology as a way of reducing the number of interactions with humans and saving some costs without really determining whether it's going to be a better experience for the customer or not. And I personally, if a bot can solve my problem in two minutes. I don't want to talk to a human.

Roger Dooley [00:12:19]:

Let the bot do it. But while we're on the topic of AI and chatbots and automation, how do you see this evolving, say, in the, say, call centers? Call centers are a huge industry today, employing millions of people in the US, in the Philippines, and India. And we see companies now trying to do AI assistant for human representatives, where it can present better analysis, better answers, and so on. But then also, there's the possibility of simply replacing that human element. How do you see this evolving over the next five years? Maru.

Mauro Carobene [00:12:56]:

Okay, that's clearly the biggest trend in the industry. And by the way, I don't hate chatbot. By definition, it's exactly the opposite. So, for me, chatbot represents one of the biggest opportunity to interact better today with

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customer. Now, there are lot of different steps. So, first of all, most of the corporate today implement a very simple chatbot that at the end are very similar to IVR. So they have kind of menu, even if you don't see the menu, the point is, there is a kind of recognition that try to drive you through a workflow that is well defined, like, do you have a problem, yes or no? Then, okay, if the answer is yes, then you move into the technical support area, or do you want to buy new service, then. So, even if it's not any more rigid as it used to be, today, most of the chatbot are kind of, let's call it version 1.0.

Mauro Carobene [00:13:56]:

It's very much about trying to guide you through a decision tree that is well defined, and this is where they are today. And the moment in which you cannot put a person or a specific interaction through a proper tree, they end over to an agent. So there is a moment in which the chatbot is not able to solve your problem, and then they end over to a human. And that's typically where everything get bad. So it's because then they don't end over all the information. They don't. And then you restart from zero. And let's go back to the bad interaction.

Mauro Carobene [00:14:35]:

So, first of all, what I'm expecting and what's happening today, let's say we are dealing with the number of customers. Exactly. Supporting them in this journey is to make sure that the decision tree is not rigid. So the workflow that can be followed is extremely dynamic. So we know that at the end, any interaction should be, either I solve a problem, or I decide that I disconnect from a service, or I buy a new service or whatever. So it sooner or later needs to land in a number of options that are not unlimited. The point is how to guide the person to understand the problem number one, and to solve the problem number two in a very seamless way, in a very easy way,

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where I understand your language, I understand exactly what is your problem. If you speak with me, I'm much better in explaining my problem with my mobile phone than my mom.

Mauro Carobene [00:15:34]:

My mom, she's 85 years old, she's using a mobile phone. But for her, Wi Fi and 5G is exactly the same things. If she calls technical support, she say, wi Fi doesn't work, and maybe it's not under Wi Fi. So the problem is how a bot can be trained to understand, based also on the information that they see in the network and so on, what is the real problem of the person that is speaking. So that's the kind of problem number one, the second, the next evolution, is to understand in a more constructive way how you can solve the problem. Now, technical problem, like technology, technical support, it's very simple. But think about the travel agency. You want to ask advice, where to go, you want to ask advice.

Mauro Carobene [00:16:25]:

So there are a number of things that are not just you set a parameter, you replace a hardware, you do something like this. But it's much more, I'm speaking with someone, I'm engaging with someone, and they want advice. That's the next evolution. But that's required AI, generative AI. They require proper training in terms of LLM. So generic LLM will never work for this kind of use. Cases. There are plenty of examples of big failure from all the big corporate that tried.

Mauro Carobene [00:16:55]:

But if you train properly, LLM, let's say one example, we work a lot in the banking industry. In the banking industry, there are a lot of area fraud management, investment advice, wealth management, and so on, where

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the first interaction can be really through chat, any form of chatbot, is it voice, is it textual? Doesn't matter. And then you can fix 80% of the problem, and then 20% still will require human interaction. One important topic. Every time someone complains with me about chatbot, I always say, keep in mind that the chatbot reply immediately. Five years ago, people were complaining because they've been waiting for 20 minutes, waiting the agent to be available, and then the call was disconnected, and so on. Now people complain. They don't remember the moment in which there was no chatbot, but there was only agent, and they were waiting for hours.

Mauro Carobene [00:17:54]:

Now, clearly, it's possible to solve, even if it's a small percentage of the problem, automatically, that's a big shift AI engine. AI will move from maybe 5% of the problems that are solved today automatically with bot kind of things, to maybe 80%. And that will represent big saving for the company, but huge time saving for the end user that interact with the corporate.

Roger Dooley [00:18:23]:

Yeah, I can see that. Last year I was in Dublin for a speech, and while I was on the street in Dublin, suddenly I lost myself. My mobile data service, it just dropped out. And it was very strange because it's been working perfectly, it's worked seamlessly all through Europe, but it dropped. And so I found a pub, and it took me literally an hour and a half of interacting with three different humans to solve the problem. And ultimately the problem was quite simple. And I kept thinking, you know, if there was a generative AI that had been trained on this company's knowledge base and had also analyzed, you know, a million previous conversations with customers, that solution probably could have been presented in a minute instead of this really lengthy human interaction. And again, I think when people are looking for

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speed, not because they really want that human interaction, they just want to get their problem solved.

Roger Dooley [00:19:15]:

I wanted to get on with my day. This will create, I assume, quite a bit of displacement of human labor. What would you see happening there as those problems are handled increasingly by some kind of AI?

Mauro Carobene [00:19:27]:

That's an interesting. And by the way, I'm not one of the person that believes that AI will replace job and will replace people. I'm expecting AI to provide or to announce service and to ensure that people can work and can focus on activities where they add more value. This is a general principle. So I said before, if today AI can solve 5% of the problem, just to give a number, it depends on the industry, depends on something. And tomorrow this number will become 60, 70, 80%, whatever. Again, it's another number, it will be higher. I don't know exactly what it is.

Mauro Carobene [00:20:06]:

What will happen is that people that today are working on solving specific problem, they can support still, let's say, the remaining part of the problem, and they can be more specialized in all the activities that today cannot be solved automatically. So from that point of view, I don't think that AI, most probably AI, will create a new kind of job. Now, you mentioned about the training before, I was mentioning about the data silos. Now, those aspects in the example that you just gave about your experience in Dublin, let's say, how do you train LLM? How do you train properly to understand how to behave and to fix specific problems and so on, that will be clearly a lot of

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opportunities in terms of giving, let's say reusing experience and reusing people activities in terms of working on those specific topic.

Roger Dooley [00:21:05]:

Well, Mauro, as long as we're talking about employees, getting back to the original survey now, we're going to have employees interacting with customers for the foreseeable future. How important is employee experience in delivering a good customer experience?

Mauro Carobene [00:21:26]:

Customer interaction, we always talk about total experience rather than customer experience. And by the way, this is very interesting and a question, because when I say that I'm managing customer interaction suite, for me, in the customer interaction or in the interaction suite, we call it interaction fabric. There are three different components. One is called, called communication platform as a service. So this is the platform that typically engage with customer over any form of messaging, SMS, WhatsApp and so on. So the typical offline interaction, then there is contact center that is human to human. So the moment in which you interact with an agent and so on. And then there is what is called ucas or unified communication as a service, which is typically employee experience.

Mauro Carobene [00:22:12]:

So it's the platform that is used for employees to communicate with employees. So for us, because all the three comes together. And the reason why it comes together is exactly because employee interaction, employee engagement, employee experience is very often the priority, number one, to give a good experience to the customer. Now, if you speak with a person in technical support and that person is upset, is not happy, is struggling in

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finding data, struggling that your experience will be real negative experience. If that person is happy, you as a customer will get a lot of positive energy and so on. So this really, we always talk about total experience rather than customer experience. And we put together the customer interaction and employee interaction, because that's clearly where most of the successful company manage to increase their engagement internally and externally.

Roger Dooley [00:23:11]:

What is there one piece of advice that you would give to any leader who's thinking about trying to improve their customer interactions and customer experience?

Mauro Carobene [00:23:21]:

I always say one thing that is interaction needs to be efficient and effective. So once we say efficient, I mean that you need really to focus at the, when I say the cost is not the cost of the interaction, the cost of the message or the voice or whatever, but it's the overall cost of that specific interaction you need to be able to quantify. And the reason is that every single company is measured on p and l. And you need to be sure that to deliver a good experience, you, let's say the way in which you interact with the customer can be affordable. Because what we saw in a number of cases is that a lot of CEO that wanted to deliver an outstanding experience. They ended up then after a while to realize that it was too expensive. So that's about the efficiency. Okay.

Mauro Carobene [00:24:17]:

The effectiveness is very much about ensuring that the interaction happen in the right time, with the right channel, with the right content. So those are

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the three aspects that they need to look. I use one on a doctor that I want to take. It takes two minutes. I have two daughters, they are teenagers and they both have. They use a mobile operator in Italy. And of course their SIM card is prepaid and it's on my credit card. What happened one year ago is I lost my credit card.

Mauro Carobene [00:24:49]:

I got a new credit card from the bank. I forgot completely that their SIM card was on my credit card. So what happened? After a while they came to me and they said that our phone is not working. First of all, it's interesting because they came saying my phone is not working. So teenager, they didn't say, and by the way, I can say the brand, it was an iPhone. As I said, the iPhone is not working. So the first connection was not that there is an operator behind, but it was since the iPhone is an iPhone, that was kind of their experience. And then I said, okay, let's look at what's happened.

Mauro Carobene [00:25:22]:

So maybe something happened. Let's wait. Tomorrow morning, tomorrow morning. Again, it was not working. Then I check and then open the messaging application. And they realized that both of them, they have kind of 20 sms that they never readdeze saying, hey, we failed in top up your SIM card. Hey, we failed. Hey, if you don't change the payment method within one week, we will disconnect.

Mauro Carobene [00:25:45]:

And after one month, it took exactly four weeks. After one month they disconnected both the SIM card. Now what is the learning? The learning is they are teenager, they are communicating. They don't know that SMS exists in Italy. I know that in the US is totally different. But in Italy all the

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messaging platform is about WhatsApp. And WhatsApp is only different app. So from their point of view, opening the phone, they never use SMS, they never watch at SMS.

Mauro Carobene [00:26:14]:

So the mobile operator had this kind of information because they know exactly the behavior of my daughter. They know exactly that they never send an SMS, they know exactly that they never open an SMS and so on. So the topic is they use the wrong communication channel. And instead of trying a different plan, let's say after one week I try, I don't get a reply. Maybe I should give a call, I should try another communication channel, whatever. They constantly repeated the same one that at the end was a failure. Now, I take this as an example. And by the way, I discussed with the CEO of that specific company explaining the example.

Mauro Carobene [00:26:51]:

So the moment in which the communication is not effective, so it's not driving the expected outcome, you need to change it. And you need to have a plane, a plane, b plane circumstantial. And you need to have a communication strategy based on the information that you have. Sometimes you have information because in this case they know exactly how people communicate. Sometimes you can have information because maybe the end user is calling the contact center using a phone call instead of using a chatbot, or maybe they engage the first time using a bot on the website, or maybe they go to the physical store or whatever. Those are all information that needs to be reused to interact back with the end user to make their interaction as smooth as possible.

Roger Dooley [00:27:46]:

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Mario, I think we could keep going out with this conversation for another hour or two, but can you tell our audience how to learn more about you and what you do?

Mauro Carobene [00:27:56]:

I think that the easiest way is to go to our website. So personally, as I mentioned before, I'm responsible in Tata communication for this line of business. So if you go to our website, you can get all the information. Tata Communication is part of a Tata group. Tata Group is a huge group. Let's say we have a market cap of 300 plus billion, is an indian company that owns very famous brands like Jaguar and Rover, AirAsia Air India. So it's a conglomerate of multiple company, but we are focusing on, we call it the digital fabric. So helping the enterprise in communicating better, in getting proper networking in security and so on.

Mauro Carobene [00:28:45]:

So the easiest way to know what we do, and by the way, where also the report, the HBR report is available, is just to go to our website, tatacommunications.com and then you find customer interaction and you can find all the information. Of course you can follow me on LinkedIn. And all of this is available and happy to interact with all the people that will listen this interview and eventually the podcast.

Roger Dooley [00:29:13]:

Great. Well, Mario, thanks for being on the show.

Mauro Carobene [00:29:16]:

Thank you. It was really a pleasure. Thank you very much.

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