



The Pursuit of Customer Happiness

Introduction

The Importance of Happiness in the 21st Century

How can such a simple concept such as happiness be such a difficult and often elusive state to so many of us? I don't have all the answers to this question. All I know is that many pressures in the 21st century are creating obstacles for many of us and preventing many from obtaining *our* happiness. The first concept about happiness is that it is different for each person. However, we all know that there are commonly accepted characteristics that make people happy. The United Nations publishes its World Happiness Report that measures the state of each country and measures the happiness of its residents along six key variables that have been found to support well-being: income, healthy life expectancy, social support, freedom, trust and generosity. The 2018 World Happiness Report identified Finland as the number one country followed by Denmark, Switzerland and Norway.¹ It should be no surprise that people living in Syria are the least happy people. The mass migration we have seen in the past five years highlights how important happiness is to people. Migrants often risk life and limb to get to countries where there is an opportunity to have a happy life. The pursuit of happiness for many of us is simply about a better quality of life.

Sadly for many people around the world, government and industry leaders have diminished the ability to live a happy life. Happiness is not merely about what how much you earn. The United States, for example, was identified by the 2018 World Happiness Report as having stagnated or declining happiness amongst its people. The report defines this as the Easterlin Paradox: income per capita has more than doubled since 1972 while happiness (or subjective well-being, SWB) has remained roughly unchanged or has even declined.² The report goes on to highlight the health crisis in the US. More Americans are suffering from obesity, opioid abuse, and clinical depression.³ The decline of quality of life in the US is based on these hard numbers.

Many factors are contributing to this decline in happiness in the 21st century. In the past eighteen years we have witnessed terrible events such as 9/11, the Financial Crisis, the rise of urban terrorism, Iraq/Syrian/Yemen/Afghanistan wars, the rise of ISIS and explosion of migration into Europe. Also, we live in heightened uncertainty brought on by such events as the Arab Spring, the unpredictability of politicians such as Trump politics, trade wars, the threat of nuclear war on the North Korean peninsula, food

¹ <http://worldhappiness.report/ed/2018/>

² P.150: <http://worldhappiness.report/ed/2018/>

³ PP. 151-158: <http://worldhappiness.report/ed/2018/>

sustainability issues, and reduced employment opportunities due to automation and digital transformations. All of these are of course perpetrated by a media that feeds us an overdose of negative news on a daily basis. The negativity is made worse by the mere fact that many of us are glued to our mobile devices and receive constant reminders on social media of what we are missing out on. Numerous research into social media have concluded there is a direct correlation between the rise of social media usage and the number of cases of depression and mood disorders.⁴

Every generation has had to deal with their fair share of challenges preventing happiness. There is no doubt many forces in the 21st century are acting as a hindrance to our happiness. If we stay on the same path, it will continue to worsen and reduce the optimism of people and their hope for a better future. Proactive action is required to make countrywide changes that will reverse the tide of negativity and promote the environment leading to a better quality of life.

Happiness in the UAE

The United Arab Emirates is a country currently running one of the most significant initiatives on a global basis towards achieving happiness. Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, has led the happiness vision for the country. Clearly articulated in his book titled *Reflection on Happiness and Positivity* Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum outlines the importance of happiness in the world and in particular the Middle East region. The Middle East is a region that has continuously had the wind knocked out of it by uncertainty, war, and political tensions. The UAE government is working on reversing this negativity by creating a beacon of hope not only for the region but also the rest of the world. The government of the UAE has not just issued some document on the importance of happiness but has financially backed numerous new initiatives to deliver on its goal of making Dubai the happiest city in the world by the end of the decade and the UAE to be in the top five happiest countries by 2021. The mandate is to ensure all government's policies, programmes and services contribute to building a positive and happy community.

The UAE has even hired a Minister of State of Happiness and Wellbeing, Her Excellency Ohood bint Khalfan Al Roumi. A national charter for happiness exists, and a number of initiatives are being implemented under this charter:

⁴ <https://psychcentral.com/blog/does-social-media-cause-depression/>

- Appointing CEOs for happiness and positivity at all government bodies
- Establishing councils for happiness and positivity at federal entities
- Allocating time for happiness-related programmes and activities at the federal government
- Establishing offices for happiness and positivity
- Transforming customer service centres into customer happiness centres
- Including annual indexes, surveys and reports to measure happiness in all community segments
- Adoption of a standard form for corporate happiness and positivity at all government bodies.
- 60 Chief Happiness and Positivity Officers from federal and local government entities will undergo training to understand the 'science of happiness' and implement it.
- UAE University (UAEU) in collaboration with the National Programme for Happiness and Positivity established Emirates Center for Happiness Research.

From the time you enter the country at Dubai International Airport through to the taxi ride on Happiness Street on your way to the Dubai Mall, you know that that this government is making the most proactive effort to achieve greater happiness for its people and give them hope for the future.

The leadership taken by the government on the happiness directive has extended to the private sector. Many private sector organisations, grateful for the opportunity of operating from the UAE, have adopted the happiness mantra initiated by the government and are now focused on contributing towards making the UAE one of the happiest countries in the world. What does this mean for private sector companies operating in the UAE? For large organisations like the telecommunications operator, Du, part of the answer is to hire a medical doctor as their Employee wellness and happiness senior director. Dr Mansoor A Habib from Du told us at the 2018 Customer Happiness summit that Du takes employee happiness seriously and even goes as far as linking bonuses to the achievement of wellness targets.

The private sector has fully backed and endorsed the UAE government's pursuit of happiness directive. Some have supported this move because they only want to remain relevant in the local marketplace. However, for business practitioners who have studied the customer research and reviewed the evidence, the direction taken by the UAE government is right economically on many fronts. There is a plethora of evidence now linking higher profitability and productivity with initiatives that elevate customer happiness.

Customer Happiness

What is customer happiness? It might be easier to answer this question by firstly outlining what it is not. It is not your customer satisfaction results from your call centre, and it's not your survey results after a purchase is made. It's also not about how superior your products are in the marketplace or how low your prices are in the marketplace. Customer happiness is a much broader concept that is designed to reflect the emotional relationship a person has with your brand. The idea is, in fact, difficult to measure through quantitative questions because often the questions we ask customers give us the answers we are looking for, but they do not answer the real question of how someone feels about our company. For example, we can ask a retail customer a series of questions about how good the store looked and how polite the sales assistant was when they were served, but the underlying question about the emotional relationship remains elusive. The customer may respond positively to all the questions leading us to falsely thinking we have a promotor for our business. What we don't gather from the questions is that the customer only purchased from the store because it was on sale and it was a spontaneous decision. In this example, the customer has no emotional connection with the brand and is unlikely to recommend the store on the quality of its product or service but only when there is a sale. Competing on low prices alone can achieve long-term business growth but requires every aspect of the business to also operate on a low cost model. It is achievable, but we know it does not lead to employee or customer happiness at the end. Ryanair is the optimal example of this. The discount airline in the UK has numerous stories of unhappy customers and staff⁵. Business growth has been achieved for Ryanair on the basis that cash-strapped customers are willing to put up with the poor service to save on the cost of the airfare. The emotional relationship with the discount airline for most of its customers is utilitarian at best. It suits a purpose at a time but can be easily replaced if a better alternative is offered.

Customer happiness aims to form a deeper and stronger emotional relationship with the company brand. This relationship we are seeking to build leads customers to not only be happy to pay a slightly higher price than your competitors, but they openly promote your brand to friends and family. Customer happiness leads to what marketers would term as customer advocacy. Going beyond the loyalty of your customers to the next stage which is advocacy requires the whole of the company to take a proactive strategic direction to transform their organisation in every area so that they can be customer-centric and can deliver an experience for customers that is tightly aligned with your brand promise. Every interaction customers have with your organisation, at every stage of their life cycle, shapes and determine the emotional relationship they have with the organisation. Customers are loyal to your brand only when there

⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/ryanair-workers-strike-eu-labor/571447/>

is a very tight correlation between what your brand promises and what customers experience. This loyalty becomes advocacy when you can demonstrate consistency in your products and services. Consistency leads to advocacy because it establishes trust in the relationship. Trust is earned over time and organisations can build trust with customers through consistent delivery of quality products and services.

Customer happiness is only one outcome from having an effective customer experience management program. Customer experience management aims to create a unique bias for an organisation's products and services by meeting and exceeding customer expectations. Organisations that have mastered the creation of this bias for their brand have achieved this by focusing on creating a culture in their organisation that is authentic around the desire to delight customers. The authenticity is the challenging aspect of creating this culture with staff. When you have staff that genuinely want to help others, have respect for people, and tolerate differences in others, then you will have the essential ingredients and attitude for a culture that can deliver customer happiness. Fabricating a culture that can deliver customer happiness with people that are not aligned with your belief systems around how customers should be treated will not lead to a successful implementation of customer happiness.

The pursuit of customer happiness is an ongoing journey. It has no end destination. Like any long-term rewarding relationship, we need to develop and deliver on our promises constantly. We need to take a proactive role in fostering a positive relationship by continually looking for ways to improve the experience for our customers. This active effort requires our creativity through innovation, commitment to the brand promise, and our persistence to continually improve our products and services as our customer expectations change.



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CEO, Joe Tawfik, wrote the CX book *Experience My Brand*. The book is available through all major online book retailers.

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