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The Convergence of Experience To Deliver Your Brand Promise

By **Tim Asimos, CPSM**

What do winning A/E/C firms have in common? They all have strong, differentiated brands; loyal, raving clients; and a culture driven by engaged, client-centric employees. The secret to success lies at the intersection of client experience (CX), employee experience (EX), and brand experience (BX). These functions work together to deliver your firm's brand promise.

Your Brand Is a Promise, not a Logo

A brand is much more than a logo, color palette, set of fonts, and photography styles (although visual identity does play a huge role in branding). At its core, a brand exists in the mind of your audience—the sum of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with your firm. Every brand, regardless of the industry, promises something. Marketing and branding should reinforce what your existing clients experience when they work with your firm and offer a glimpse of what potential clients can expect.

Strategic Branding Reinforces That Promise

Branding is the process of defining, conveying, and maintaining your firm's core values and differentiators. It's about figuring out who you are, what you stand for, why it matters to your audience, and then reinforcing that promise in a meaningful and consistent way.

The Promise Is Realized Through Experience

Your firm's brand promise is only realized through the experience you serve your clients. No amount of marketing and communications can change what clients actually experience. This is why it's critical to align brand experience and client experience.

Everyone can think of a brand whose marketing makes promises completely detached from what customers actually encounter. In fact, Gallup surveys have consistently found that most companies fail to live up to their brand promises. Experience is where your branding is either validated or discredited.

Employees Deliver the Experience

In professional services, employees are largely responsible for delivering the client experience. While the outcome may be architectural drawings, engineering plans, or a newly constructed building, the client journey is ultimately a series of personal interactions, face-to-face meetings, phone calls, emails, and other communication touchpoints that combine to create the experience. Sometimes a firm can deliver an unbelievable project that meets all the stated goals of the client and yet fails to exceed expectations due to things like communications or responsiveness.

Employees Are Empowered by Culture

Here's the catch—client-centricity can't just be an aspiration! It's not something you can merely pay lip service to, put on your website, or hang on your walls. While most firms may claim to be client-centric, unfortunately research shows otherwise¹. Delivering remarkable client experience is only possible when a firm empowers its staff to deliver that experience. And it takes effort to build a client-first mentality into the fabric of the firm's culture.

Experience Is the Competitive-Advantage Battleground

Most of what many A/E/C firms tout as differentiators have become table stakes for today's buyers. Things such as "on-time and on-budget" and "innovative solutions" are what clients have come to expect. And the industry's focus on people, service

offerings, and market expertise as points of differentiation are short-lived. A firm's competitors can easily neutralize these differentiators by hiring away a key expert, purchasing a new piece of software, or adding another specialty. Sustained competitive advantage exists only when it can't be easily and quickly imitated by the competition.

Client Expectations Are Rapidly Rising

The expectation for what an A/E/C partner should provide a client is rapidly expanding outside of services, plans, and the traditional deliverable. Today's buyers want their business problems solved by collaborative advisors, and they've come to expect a higher level of service and detail. This reflects the radical shifts in consumer behavior and expectations for today's business-to-consumer brands. While your firm may exist in a business-to-business industry, you work with people used to the personalization, customer obsession, and brand experiences they encounter with companies like Amazon.

CX Is the Antidote for Homogeneity

While quality and price will always play a role, buyers are increasingly looking for A/E/C partners who will provide them with an exceptional experience. Forward-thinking firms realize that an unrivaled, exceptional client experience across the entire client journey is the answer to creating genuine differentiation and sustained competitive advantage, while avoiding commoditization. Focus on the client's needs and build a strategy and culture that elevates the client experience. That's how firms distinguish themselves from everyone else.

Building a Truly Client-Centric Culture of Engaged Employees Is Essential

Ultimately, CX begins with a firm's vision and a firm-wide, shared aspiration to delight clients. This has to emanate from the top and extend throughout the organization. Cambell Holt, chief customer officer at Mercer, puts it this way, "Unless leadership has conviction around the primacy of the customer, then there's very little that others can do to create real change." You can't simply resolve to make improvements in client service, as any changes made will eventually devolve over time to reflect a firm's true beliefs about the client. To excel at CX, you have to put clients at the core of your firm and build a culture around that belief.

Prioritize Creating a Stellar Employee Experience (EX)

But it's not enough to focus solely on the client experience. Remember, experience is delivered by employees, so ensuring that you have a firm filled with engaged people is paramount.

Figure 1. The Convergence of the XsSM. © circle s studio. May not be reproduced without permission.

The Convergence of the XsSM



Powerful synergy exists when a firm applies CX principles to its staff—to design and build an exceptional employee experience that drives engagement, retention, purpose, and productivity. Let’s be clear that, just as culture is more than having a Ping-Pong table, EX is more than simply improving morale.

Happy, Engaged, Purpose-Driven Employees Impact the Bottom Line

Engaging your employees by also placing emphasis on the employee experience is a win-win for firms. Whereas dissatisfied employees won’t provide the level of service required for CX, research shows that engaged employees will go the extra mile to deliver for clients. They have the energy and productivity that enables them to deliver better experiences for clients—all with a passion that rubs off on other employees. And what about winning the talent war? Engaged employees have significantly longer tenures with their firms, thereby reducing turnover and all the challenges that come with it. Simply put, firms that invest in their employees outperform those that do not in all categories.²

Strike the Right Balance Between CX and EX

One of the most important elements of experience is balance. Any policies, processes, or changes made to improve CX must also be considered within the context of how it will impact EX. Client experience can’t be to the detriment of the overall employee experience, or both will suffer. All firm-wide decisions should be considered through the lens of what matters for both clients and employees and how culture will be impacted.

Brands Are Built From the Inside Out

Zappos founder Tony Hsieh has said that “culture and brand are just two sides of the same coin.” Culture is instrumental because it either facilitates or inhibits the mission. A firm must establish and commit to distinct brand values, and leadership must ensure that employees at all levels (and in every department) understand the firm’s purpose and can connect it with their individual work. Firms that have a compelling, client-centric brand promise and a desire to deliver on it will need to get intentional about building a purpose-driven culture. The rewards in differentiation and loyalty make it worth the effort.

As CX, EX, and marketing converge (See *Figure 1.*), it’s essential to make sure they’re aligned to fulfill the mission of each and create sustainable competitive advantage for your firm. ■

ENDNOTES

1. “The Disconnected Customer: What Digital Customer Experience Leaders Teach Us About Reconnecting With Customers,” Capgemini <https://www.capgemini.com/resources/the-disconnected-customer-what-digital-customer-experience-leaders-teach-us-about>
2. *The Employee Experience Advantage: How to Win the War for Talent by Giving Employees the Workspaces they Want, the Tools they Need, and a Culture They Can Celebrate*, Jacob Morgan (Wiley, 2017)