How to achieve true customer engagement

What exactly is engagement, who is responsible for it and how can it be achieved it in the modern omnichannel market? Senior marketers discuss at Marketing Week's roundtable

By Lucy Fisher

Photo: Tom Campbell

Meet the panel

Ruth Mortimer
Editor
Marketing Week (chair)

Hallie Harenski
Chief marketing officer
AIG

Dominic Grounsell
Marketing director — personal
RSA Group

Alex Bannister
Head of customer marketing
Nationwide

Sudesh Jog
Head of CRM strategy and analytics
BT

Martin Miller
Head of consumer campaign planning
Microsoft

Simon Miller
Head of marketing – individual health
AXA PPP Healthcare

Alistair Welham
Head of marketing
AXA Wealth

Miranda McLean
Marketing director
Ukash

Darren Loveday
Principal customer engagement consultant
Thunderhead.com

Danny Rippon
Chief solutions officer
Thunderhead.com

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Q How would you define customer engagement?

Sudesh Jog: I think engagement has to do with the space a brand occupies in the customer's 'mind map'. Experience fits within and shapes that engagement.

Alex Bannister: I think engagement is driven by the organisation. That said, we have no power over the inbound side of things.

Dominic Grounsell: I'd say it's the outcome rather than the input. Engagement is what you're trying to generate. Through engagement you seek to engender perception change, retention and growth in product holding.

Darren Loveday: There are some 13 dictionary definitions of the term engagement, but often it's about value. It's customer-initiated and it involves co-creation.

Alistair Welham: I'd say it's a structural thing. We have customer experience functions. What does that tell you? Does anyone have an engagement team? If so, why — or if not, why not?

Miranda McLean: At Ukash, we're small enough to enable a focus on customer-centricity. We can do things more quickly and more easily because of our size. We can react. While we don't have a specific engagement function, everyone knows it's one of our strategic pillars. We measure customer satisfaction and Net Promoter Score (NPS). We have also measured emotional engagement through surveys.

Sudesh Jog: Engagement could be done by one function, but in fact it's relevant across the piece. Engagement flows across the organisation.

Simon Miller: While we don't have an actual team focused on this, lots would put their hands up if they were asked whether it was their job. But having a strategy set out is what I would be most concerned about.

Q What are the key metrics that demonstrate you are engaging with your audience?

Alistair Welham: We measure it as part of brand tracking. You can look at things like dwell time, but it's always hard to get engagement in financial services. You have to look across your business. And there's an interesting point around content – I think content teams are often aiming to drive engagement but they can actually focus too much on just producing loads of content.

Hallie Harenski: Getting your own employees engaged with the brand is key – and especially because engagement might be diminished in the arena of financial services products. Getting staff involved helps to create uniformity.

Dominic Grounsell: Yes, that's exactly the challenge that many businesses have if they haven't traditionally been brand-led. It's about trying to get the organisation mobilised in a consistent way. That's the biggest challenge I have as a marketer. There's definitely a need to get leadership aligned to the vision.

Alex Bannister: We talk about engagement at board level but we don't necessarily use the word 'engagement'. If you've got a growth model, one challenge is how to engage with non-customers. There's also the question of how many of your customers are truly engaged. In financial services, customers aren't engaging for the fun of it. We have a core who are truly engaged.

Simon Miller: We're a healthcare company but at a transactional level we're an insurance provider. We need to build trust. Our brand advertising at the moment is focused on trust. Engagement is a key tool to deliver that. Differentiation is also a focus.

> "It's really important to show consumers you can personalise effectively"
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> **Miranda McLean, Ukash**

Danny Rippon: What we see as a key challenge is how you bridge all the different silos. How do we get the company acting as one? And how do you start? It's an enormous thing. How do we bridge organisational silos?

Miranda McLean: It's really important to show consumers you can personalise effectively, that you have all your data touchpoints in one place.

Darren Loveday: Yes, it's about connecting the data elements — the touchpoints. It's about asking, 'How can I show I understand what has just happened in a call centre?' It's about tying history to that moment in time, and that's a massive challenge but it impacts both engagement and experience.

Martin Miller: I think you need to ask, 'What's the order of messages I want to deliver to that customer?' It's about prioritising the next step we want that customer to take.

Hallie Harenski: Yes, that 'next best offer' thing is really important. It's such a great model that customers really understand now, but because of our regulatory environment in financial services, we can't use that or provide that advice. It's infuriating.

Alistair Welham: If you've got really engaged customers they'll sell your products for you. It's about communities, word of mouth and advocacy. That's what we try to foster as marketers.

Danny Rippon: And the key thing is value. If you're always trying to sell, it's not an engaging experience.

Martin Miller: The traditional funnel model is broken in our business. If someone breaks their phone and has to buy a new one within two hours because they want to get back online, we don't

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always know about that. In lots of different sectors you get people who were not previously in the market suddenly coming into market. For instance, someone might walk around Tesco on a grocery shop and walk out with one of its Hudl tablet computer. It's hard to work out how you engage with that. It does come down to brand.

Q Do you have all the data that you need to join up the customer engagement objectives?

Dominic Grounsell: Yes, but it's about linking it all up. That's the rub. That enables things like next best action.

Sudesh Jog: There is also the issue of accuracy. Personalising a communication in the wrong way is completely unacceptable from the consumer point of view.

Hallie Harenski: You also need interpretation skills. We're going through an exercise focused on harnessing data, but you need to interpret it all. Lots of cross-functional teams need to be involved. It's a wider field now than when the marketer owned the whole space. Engagement has changed.

Danny Rippon: We also have that debate around who owns the customer.

Simon Miller: We try to replicate what a shop assistant would do. We try to recognise people. It's important not to forget to listen and not to forget the principles of basic human interactions. You need to find out whether you are talking to a male or a female, whether he or she has kids, and so on.

Darren Loveday: Our research showed that real-time and contextual data can help to deliver something similar to this type of face-to-face experience. How many CRM systems recognise this real-time context? Can it recognise that I've just tweeted something that expresses dissatisfaction?

Martin Miller: Quite often it's just data for data's sake. Microsoft uses people's search terms in Bing [to personalise the user experience], but we have to remember that there are other search engines out there, too. And while our brand positioning is about productivity, that's what our customers use our devices for – it doesn't mean they're not using other devices for the fun stuff. There is a risk of making very bad assumptions.

Alistair Welham: We looked into how [financial] advisers consume information. When you talk about challenges around engagement, we've got advice and support for them around issues such as the pensions transformation. But how do we reach them? There's a lot of noise out there. How do you stand out and get to a position where you're not pushing, you're pulling?

Miranda McLean: We've got a good CRM system managed in-house. But the biggest challenge is to react in real-time to all these interactions in order to continue engagement, advocacy and loyalty.

Hallie Harenski: You have to keep ROI in mind and make sure you've got the basics right. That means, for instance, not putting the wrong address on the envelope. We're all on the journey. Everyone is heading towards this Mecca. But be careful that you don't miss a connection. Watch out for things you absolutely don't want to do.

Martin Miller: The other interesting thing is, has anyone asked the customer whether they want to engage with us? I know I get too many marketing emails.

Q What are the best and worst experiences you have had with brands, in terms of customer engagement?

Martin Miller: I had an experience with an airline, which shall remain nameless. We had booked a family holiday to New York at Christmas. I got a text to say that, due to snow, our flight had been cancelled. When I finally got through to the call centre, they said: "By the way, you'll have to claim the compensation through your travel insurance provider." I'm a huge advocate for that brand, and yet it was a different airline which managed to find me a seat on an alternative flight.

Simon Miller: I'm a big advocate of [hotel loyalty scheme] Hilton HHonors. They don't give me a reason to leave. They focus on the basics and add in a few delight factors; some nice touches of personalisation, like recipes from chefs at the hotels I've stayed at.

But you do need to remember the basics. Some would say, 'Don't send me a magazine; just keep my premiums low'. First Direct is always held up in our focus groups as an example of a brand that gets things right, and I think this comes from a focus on the basics.

Sudesh Jog: I had a good experience at an optician recently. I had worn some glasses for a week and they weren't feeling right. I went into the opticians and the assistant said: "Let me take a look and if they're not ok, we'll get you another pair." She was empowered to say this, despite it being a cost to the business. Having real-time data doesn't help if you can't deliver that type of experience.

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Alex Bannister: I had a positive experience with delivery company DPD. I was pleasantly surprised that its online tracking system gave me a delivery slot of one hour. I was able to follow the parcel online and let my wife, who was waiting in but needed to collect the kids from school, know when it was going to be delivered. You can organise yourself around that kind of information. Sometimes data, in real-time, is really helpful.

Hallie Harenski: I'd say it's also about what the brand has set up in the customer's eyes as an expectation. I've had experiences with brands such as Ocado or American Express where they've set the bar high, and at the back of my mind I'm thinking: "Don't tell me you'll deliver and then let me down."

Alex Bannister: Yes, what was great was that I had zero expectations of that delivery company.

Miranda McLean: Appliances Online [AO.com] is brilliant. If your dishwasher breaks down they can get a new one delivered and take your old one away the next day. And they make a follow-up call, too.

Dominic Grounsell: I like what [subscription snack box service] Graze does. I find its customer communications engaging. It tries to refine the product constantly so that it gets better over time. It asks for my feedback and it's all designed to keep you 'in'.

Alistair Welham: Yes, the closer you can get to your customers and get them involved, the better.

Simon Miller: My frustration as a consumer at the moment is around the lack of integration of devices, channels or platforms. Being agile is certainly a challenge.

Q So what's your biggest challenge in creating engagement?

Darren Loveday: It's getting the top-down buy-in and the change in place that is most challenging.

Miranda McLean: My background is in large corporates, and in large companies you often find everyone has their own key performance indicators. That whole top-down approach needs to be embraced all through an organisation.

Alex Bannister: And we do have to test different approaches. Otherwise, we're all pretending to know what these multiple market segments want.

Dominic Grounsell: I also think it's a slow burn process – one that's relevant to a 10-year role rather than, say, a three-year marketing director role.

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