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CX-LINER: DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF A DIAGNOSTIC TOOL FOR CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT IN SMES

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Abstract: Customer Experience Management (CEM) is gaining in attention from organizations that want to provide value to their customers. In particular, mass customizers as well as companies that innovate following an open innovation approach will benefit more from customer experience management than those who don't apply it. However, the road to implementing CEM is very strenuous and requires dedication and resources in terms of financial means and workforce. SMEs lack such resources and have trouble in deciding how and where to start. This is why this design science research project for a scientifically based self-assessment for SMEs was conducted. Development and testing took place with a select number of SMEs The assessment tool is named CX (Customer Experience)-Liner and serves as a compass for SME to determine their course in CEM.
Keywords: Customer Experience Management, Design Science Research, Small and Medium Enterprises, Open Innovation

INTRODUCTION

Customer focus, customer orientation and a perfect customer experience are virtues that many companies desire or aspire. Customers are no longer regarded as rational deciders with mere interest in functional and financial product properties and benefits. A satisfied customer is not a guarantee for loyalty, extra turnover or a larger market share. To increase loyalty and customer advocacy, companies have to consider delivering a positive customer experience. As observed on a case of the demise of a retailer: "At heart, the message is relatively simple: if you sell undifferentiated products, you compete solely on price; but if you provide experiences that consumers want, you offer a differentiated service for which a premium can be charged. The difficulty, of course, is how to create and manage these unique experiences. How to create relevant 'customer experiences' [9]?" We therefore observe an increasing attention from business organizations for Customer Experience Management (CEM) in the past decade. CEM perceives customers as both rational and emotional beings that are looking for positive experiences [15]. Companies will profit if this is done in a proper way. Companies are therefore eligible to adopt ways, methods and best practices in CEM.

Literature on the practice of CEM is however limited to conceptual approaches by practitioners in practice-oriented literature, e.g. Berry et al. [1], Meyer and Schwager [8], Shaw and Ivens [16], Smith and Wheeler [17]. These publications tend to focus on the practical managerial aspects of customer experience management for large, mostly global operating firms, operating in the B2C. Such aspects entail systems and staffing that require large investments and a plethora in resources – both qualities that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) usually do not possess. Practical research intended to guide SMEs in developing effective CM seems to lack, particularly in the B2B. SMEs that also wish to create awareness for and focus on CEM are left in oblivion and confusion on how and where to start with CEM and how to make it work in their case.

As part of the practice oriented research of the Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in Zwolle, the Netherlands, this lack of a practical guide for SMEs inspired us to design and develop a practical diagnosing tool for Dutch SMEs, the CX-liner. In this paper we report on this research, for which we first will describe its design, followed by a review of the literature on CEM

from which design propositions were derived and to finish with the result: the CX-Liner that was validated.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The main research question that directed this study was: 'How can a SME establish its position and status on customer experience management and possible directions for improvement, taking the most relevant and important aspects of customer experience into account?' The supporting sub questions fort his main question, aside from the fundamental question what customer experience really is, were:

- Which factors or aspects have influence on customer experience?
- Which ones are important and relevant in creating good experiences?
- Which of these factors and aspects can be controlled by the SME?
- How can these factors be integrated in a management approach?

Three customer experience experts and practitioners were interviewed to obtain answers to all these questions and to develop design propositions [12]. In addition to these expert interviews an extensive literature study was conducted in both academic and management literature. Because both literature and expert's opinions are focussed on large, B2C companies [6], additional interviews were conducted with potential users of the research results. For this latter step six entrepreneurs participated in the research to get insights on their view on customer experience management and the requirements they have for a possible tool that will guide them in the establishment of their position and directions for improvement. Based on these interviews, literature study and user requirements a self assessment tool, coined CX-Liner, was designed, using the principles of Design Science Research [18]. As an essential part of this research methodology, the design was tested in practice [21], although it took some time to accomplish this.

RESULTS FROM LITERATURE STUDY, EXPERT AND USER INTERVIEWS

Literature review

Both academic and management literature were consulted to find out what customer experience (CX) and customer experience management (CEM) entail. A large amount of articles as well as books were systematically researched, for example academic articles like Gentile et al. [5], Frow and Payne [4], Berry et al. [1], Carú and Cova [2] and Verhoef et al. [19]. Management books that were consulted came from several internationally renowned practitioners, who base their writings on academic research, e.g. Shaw and Ivens [16], Smith and Wheeler [17], Manning and Bodine [7], Schmitt [14] and Pine and Gilmore [11]. We observe that these are only a few of the large amount of literature that was used. Journée and Weber [6] conducted a similar systematic research, for a more detailed list on literature see this publication. Journée and Weber also provide a model for CEM and describe many aspects of CEM extensively, based on their literature study. We therefore refrain from repeating this literature review in this paper and refer to Journée and Weber for these results. We suffice with a summary of the most imported aspects and factors that have to be taken into account when commencing the CEM journey by a company, regardless of its size, business sector and nationality:

- Customer Experience Management aims at creating great experiences for customers, for which the company does not only focus on functional product and service quality, but try to trigger emotional quality as well [5].
- Although experience always occurs, whether intended or not, it can be managed. Management entails a systematic approach, usually following the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle from a multidisciplinary perspective, i.e. taking into account the welfare of employees, customers and other stakeholders by controlling aspects like systems, technology, processes strategy and soft aspects, like corporate culture, humanistic treatment, and such [6].
- CEM provides a company with a distinctive approach from its competitors (that do not have any interest in CEM) which leads to competitive advantages, like more profit, loyal customers and employee empowerment [19].
- Customer experience takes place in customers' minds and is therefore personal. Yet, it can happen as a result of both direct and indirect contacts with a company or a brand [8]. It is therefore important to not only focus on the interactions a customer has with a company, but on the customer journey as a whole [13].
- To positively influence the customer experience a company can use so called experience providers (communications, visual and verbal identity and signage, product presence, co-branding, spatial environments, websites and other electronic (social) media, and – finally – people or employees) [14].
- Within a company CEM requires cooperation between all disciplines and a leadership style which is consistent wit hits CEM-aspirations [7, 17].

We observe that CEM requires a systematic approach, structure and strategic thinking by the company. For an effective result in this approach and thinking, management has to have a good knowledge of the context the company operates in, which entails customer insight (what do the customers want and experience), employee empowerment and competitive insights. Systematic approaches for the implementation

of CEM are provided by several authors, e.g. Schmitt 2003, Smith and Wheeler 2002, but seem to be intended for large companies. But these approaches can also be used as a basis to develop an approach, which is suitable for SMEs. Since we have based the CX-Liner for a large part on the Smith and Wheeler approach, we will briefly describe Smith and Wheeler's model here. According to Smith and Wheeler there are two ways to structure CX, i.e. 'experiencing the brand' and 'branding the experience'. The first way entails the translation of the brand into a brand promise. This promise refers to the value the company wants to provide to its customers while simultaneously emphasising its position. This will result in the 'branded customer experience' which is what customers are intended to experience. Conditional tot his effect is that interactions between company and customers are consistent with this brand promise. Smith and Wheeler have depicted their approach in a model, see figure 1.

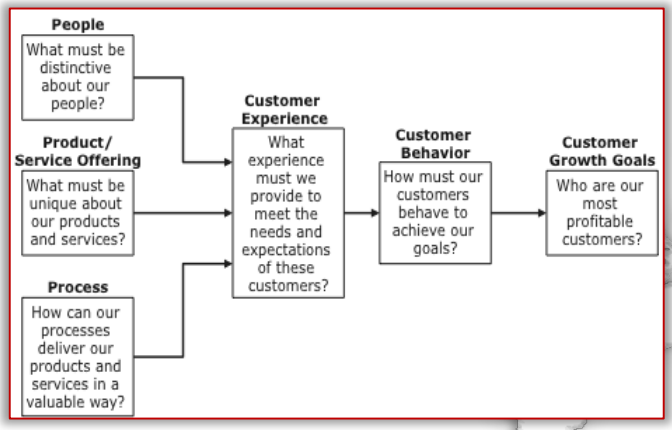

Figure 1. Branded customer experience management model (adopted from Smith and Wheeler 2002:20)

To implement this concept Smith and Wheeler have developed a checklist with questions that accompany the process model in figure 1 and a cycle – which reminds us of the Deming's PDCA-cycle – that supports a company in the development of customer-centered strategy. This cycle consists of four stages:

1. *Define* customer value, by obtaining insights on the customers you want to target, what they appreciate, and how they are influenced in terms of buying and loyalty behaviour. Based on these insights the company can define a differentiated brand promise for each group.
2. *Design* 'the branded customer experience' by mapping customer interactions, adapting employees' behaviour on these interactions, ensuring that the brand promise is fulfilled. This could result in organisational change and development for the company.
3. *Equip* employees for the realization of the brand promise, which entails that leadership has to support employee behaviour through coaching, training and education, but also by providing means for giving insights in customer feedback, i.e. measuring the realization of customer experience.
4. *Sustain* performance, by systematic analysis of customer, employee and market feedback. All systems and process measurements within the company should support the CEM efforts.

Experts' opinion

As observed in the research design, three experts, one academic and two consultants on executive level, were interviewed on their stance on CEM for the SME. The goal of these interviews was to complement literature review for the development of design rules [12].

Although these three experts mainly served larger companies with the implementation of CEM, their opinion was appreciated because of their experience and knowledge on CX-principles and practicalities. These expert interviews confirmed literature that showed that CEM is a concern for the whole organization. CEM and CX are therefore trans-functional. Every discipline within the organisation should take an outside-in stand, that is (re-)viewing their roles and behaviour from a customer's perspective. When being engaged for consulting or advice by a client company, before looking at systemic measurement results, like CSAT, NPS, and other indicators, they first try to get an impression of a company's position on CEM intuitively. "I act like a customer. I am not interested (yet) in the financial or market achievements of the company. I try to get a feeling of how the company feels." To get this result they usually look at social media communication and interaction, get in touch with an arbitrary employee to experience how the interaction flows. This way they get an impression of the client company and the trans-functional integration of the CX-strategy before the first formal contact. When the first formal contact follows, they observe employees and managers, their interactions, their behaviour, to get a feeling whether CX is "part of their DNA, their genes". Only after doing this they proceed with more traditional diagnostics, like interviewing, process and system auditing, and documental research. Thus, this qualitative experience of the CEM efforts from a company precedes the more formal and traditional diagnostics. In these formal diagnostics, managers are interviewed on the company's brand aspirations and promises. A step that usually follows is that the customer journey is mapped. It is very common and important to involve customers in this step, because they are the ones that can truly tell what they experience. Most companies lack these qualitative customer insights, regardless of their previous efforts in customer journey mapping. Only after this has been done, quantitative indicators like volumes and lead times, are integrated in the customer

journey map in order to evaluate effects and consequences of failures and good practices.

Experts indicate nine categories of aspects that are essential for CEM implementation within organisations. These nine categories are briefly described and identified through *italics.* All organisations that want to excel in CX and CEM should be intrinsically motivated to search for (1) *distinction;* they must have the aspiration to differentiate their strategy in order to create superior experiences. To accomplish this they should clearly define (2) *common values,* also known as core values or brand identity. When these values have been defined the organisation has to get insights on how to please its (potential) customers. One should look for those triggers that make the customer experience more pleasure with one's organisation than other organisations through an experience study. Subsequently, one has to think about how to root CX in the organisation's genes, in its DNA. It is therefore important that (3) *top management takes lead and act as an apostle* in the initiatives. Otherwise, failure will be inevitable. On deciding in immersing in customers' experiential world, an organisation should be (4) *aware of an over-estimation* of its extant achievements. If this reality check exposes different results than expected, the organisation could be devastated, resulting in a negative alteration of its view on customers. Regardless of the results from such an experience study, they have to be shared with employees, in order to ensure rooting in the genes. As a matter of fact, (5) *employees* also have to be *involved actively* in experience studies and other activities on CEM-implementation (bottom-up). (6) *Support and facilitation* are key to the success. That requires (7) *customer knowledge and involvement*. To sustain the implemented CEM is troublesome and not without difficulties. A way to cope with this is to make customer experience and programmes an (8) *integral part of a company's core values*. And, in order to verify the effects, the organisation has to develop (9) *metrics* and embed them in the organisation.

User interviews

In addition to the previously mentioned parts of this design research, five potential users of the tool were interviewed to collect their stance on CEM and possible user requirements they have for the future tool. These interviews confirm and acknowledge that most entrepreneurs are confused by what literature and consultants state on CEM and CX. They have trouble with jargon and in establishing what of the actions that are recommended are applicable for SMEs. They also lack the resources (time and money) to engage experienced and competent consultants to guide and assist them in the journey of CEM implementation.

In these interviews we have therefore been able to discuss the requirements for use of the tool-in-design with the entrepreneurs. We have charted all these requirements and categorized them into use requirements, functional requirements and conditions for use. The list is very comprehensive but also of such a size that we limit our elaboration on the most important ones. We refer to a local publication for the SME for the complete list [20].

One important requirement is that the SME is capable of understanding language and pragmatics of the tool. This requirement revealed that SMEs are also looking for a way of self-assessment in their CEM efforts. To engage with an external party that also fixes shortcomings or implements improvements which result from the assessment, will give the transaction a commercial bias, and is therefore subjective in the eye of the entrpreneur. Tool use in itself should be intuitive, easy. In order to facilitate a self-assessment, the time and costs needed with the assessment have to be low. Otherwise it can become an obstacle in using the tool. Results have to be presented in a simple graphic way instead of in bulky reports, but have to indicate directions for improvement in a clear way. And – somewhat contradictory to the self-assessment requirement – results preferably have to be benchmarked for the sector the company operates in. This indicates that the tool has to submitted to a central platform – online or physical – in order to integrate the input in sector results. It also means that the assessment survey has to be generic and not company-specific – a certain level of abstraction is inevitable. Three keywords depict these requirements: clear, consistent and adequate.

THE DESIGN: THE CX-LINER

Foundations of the design

The creative step in this research was the translation of the theoretical and practice insights, elaborated on in section 3, into design propositions that will lead to the intended design: a self-assessment tool for the SME to establish its position on CEM and to provide directions on improvement for CEM. The propositions are depicted as the most central and important elements that a sound CEM implementation should consist of. This implementation is based on two foundations: one for the process of CEM staging, and the other one for the (organisational) aspects that have to be considered. The process foundation has been briefly described in section 3.1, which is the Smith and Wheeler –model for a CEM strategy. This model consists of the stages: (1) *define* customer value; (2) *design* the 'branded customer experience'; (3) *equip* employees to fulfil the brand promise; and (4) *sustain* performance

This process foundation can be coupled to or mixed with our second foundation which is based on the McKinsey's 7S-model [10]. This choice is based on the theoretical and practice finding that CEM is trans-

functional and involves all levels, systems, leadership style and culture of an organisation. These aspects are comprehensively covered in the 7S's from the model: strategy, systems, structure, skills, style, staff and shared values. We will refrain from elaborating on the 7S-model, since we expect it to be fairly known with scholars.

The coupling with the Smith-Wheeler model is motivated as follows. The Smith-Wheeler (process) model as a whole is coupled with a first "S", the company's strategy, and is reflected in the design as a whole: the tool is a diagnostic for a company's CEM strategy. The remaining six elements of the 7S can subsequently be coupled to the four stages in the Smith-Wheeler model.

Shared values and Style with Define

An organisation can only be successful with CEM when CEM strategy is acknowledged and supported by top management (Style). And to root in the genes of the organisation CEM has to become part of an organisation's culture (Shared values). Smith and Wheeler's Define-stage entail the creation of a foundation for CEM by mobilising both management and employees in order to acquire an outside-in attitude.

Style, Structure and Staff with Design

Once the foundation has been established, the CEM strategy can be *design*ed by connecting the brand promise with organisational behaviour. This has to be achieved by management's role (Style) in establishing structures (Structure) for organisational change and employee behaviour (Staff).

Staff and Skills with Equip. Subsequently the SME should start fulfilling the brand promise by *equip*ping employees (Staff) with the necessary competences (Skills) to evoke the intended customer experience.

Skills, Systems and Shared values with Sustain. To *sustain* the efforts in creating distinctive customer experience in the long term, it is important to train, educate and develop employees do they can keep meeting changes in customer demands (Skills). Systems like employee appraisal, improvement methods, management metrics are also needed for this longer term approach (Systems). This has to be embedded in such a way that the whole organisation takes part in the CEM strategy and that CEM becomes an important part of organisational values (Shared values).

We visualize this coupling of the two foundations in figure 2, which will serve as a means for a graphic representation of a company's position on CEM later on.

42 propositions in the self-assessment

The two foundations, Smith and Wheeler's process model and McKinsey's 7S-model for CEM elements, serve as a basis for the self-assessment. The idea is that there is an ideal order of process stages and steps in which the several elements of a strategy can be implemented. For each step one can assess whether this step has been addressed and carried out by means of a proposition that represents the ideal situation.

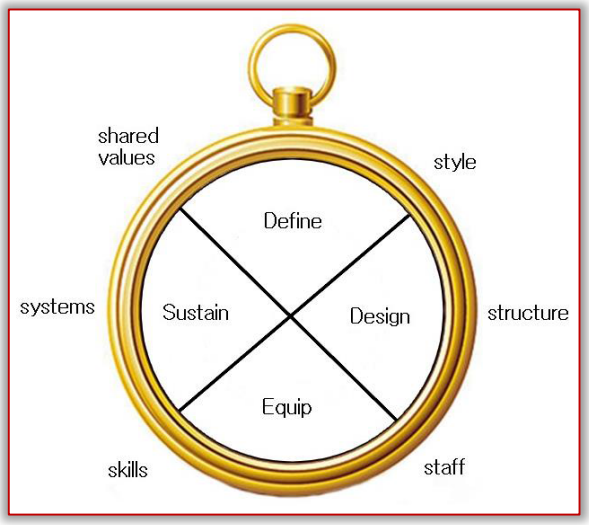

Figure 2. "Brand Customer Experience" integrated with 7S-model

For each stage of Smith and Wheeler's process model we have defined three propositions. However, these propositions are stated in an order, which reflects the incremental progress of implementation. This means that if the strategy implementation has been carried out in a right order, the choice for a certain proposition entails that one also has to fulfil the previously stated propositions. We, thus, obtain a total of 12 propositions, that all have to be met in the given order to be acknowledged as a mature CEM strategist. These 12 propositions also cover the first S of strategy, as explained earlier.

For each remaining S we have also defined five propositions, again in such an order that they best reflect the sound approach and order for these elements in CEM implementation. For these 6 S's we come to a total of 30 propositions. Along with the 12 process or strategy propositions we get a grand total of 42 propositions that entail order and comprehensiveness of the CEM approach and implementation.

The propositions are in Dutch and stated in such a style that they reflect the ideal situation regarding the stage of implementation or the aspect for ideal CEM within the company. A company that wants to diagnose itself merely has to agree or disagree with the proposition, as a whole or partially. It can be used by any SME, regardless of the industry it operates in. The propositions have been developed to state CEM aspects for SME's. The proposition are not incorporated in this paper, but can be supplied upon request.

Maturity levels and directions for improvement in CEM

The company scores each proposition on a scale of 1 ("I do not have any clue, unaware") to 5 ("We fully comply to this condition") to reflect its current position in CEM. The scale reflects a maturity scale from beginner (level 1) to expert (level 5): the more one agrees with a proposition, the higher the score for that aspect of CEM will be, and – therefore – the more mature the company is on that proposed aspect. The resulting score is not obtained by adding the individual scores per proposition, but totalled per quadrant of the diagram in figure 2. Each quadrant consists of specific propositions: three for each stage in the Define-Design-Equip-Sustain process model and five for each S coupled to that quadrant – some quadrants consist of two S's and some of three – varying the total of propositions per quadrant from 13 tot 18. The results can be graphically depicted in the diagram of figure 2.

Each proposition has an embedded set of actions that have to be executed in order to comply with the proposition. And, in addition, the order in which these propositions have been integrated in each quadrant and the quadrants are dimensioned is of such nature, that it also reflects a progress in maturity. For instance, it would be very unlikely for someone to score high on proposition number 8 in the first quadrant, when he has a (very) low score one or more previous propositions, e.g. propositions numbers 3 and 5. Thus, although he might get a good total in that quadrant, scoring his company as 'advanced', it reflects the omission of certain steps or actions, in this case embedded in propositions 3 and 5. Similarly, the quadrant order also reflects the ideal order of implementation. It would, example given, also be very unlikely for a company to score as 'expert' in the 'Equip' stage, while it scores as a 'beginner' in the 'Define' and/or 'Design' stage. Both outcomes, however, give direction to the improvement program the company has to follow in order to score as 'expert' on all aspects. In addition, it gives priority rules in case of non-compliance with more propositions.

How to use it: an example

Figure 3 shows the fictitious case of a company that has applied the CX-Liner. In this example the respective quadrant totals (blue dots) are: Define 27, Design 42, Equip 41 and Sustain 32. The lower score on Define, compared to the higher scores on Design and Equip indicate that there is something missing in this stage for a sound CEM-implementation and that the company has to make improvements in defining its brand promise. The score of 32 in Sustain also show that more work has to be done in sustaining its efforts. The exact aspects that have to be improved can be found by looking up the propositions with the lowest scores in this quadrant.

The S-values (yellow dots) on the other hand are Shared values 14, Style 8, Structure 11, Staff 18, Skills 16 and Systems 13. This result is indicative for a company that has put a lot of effort in its employees through selection training and organizational culture, but has somewhat neglected the importance of leadership (style) and change management (structure). In combination with the stage scores, this company has to have (top) management take a responsibility in defining what the organisational and brand values are and what customers to serve. It then has to make employee programs consistent with this strategy.

Ergo, the diagnosis shows what the company has been doing well on CEM but has not been doing it in the correct order and has left out some important organizational aspects like leadership and brand promises, but that can still be recovered, when given the proper attention.

VALIDATION OF THE CX-LINER

As for any design, the DSR methodology requires the testing of the design as a means to validate the research.

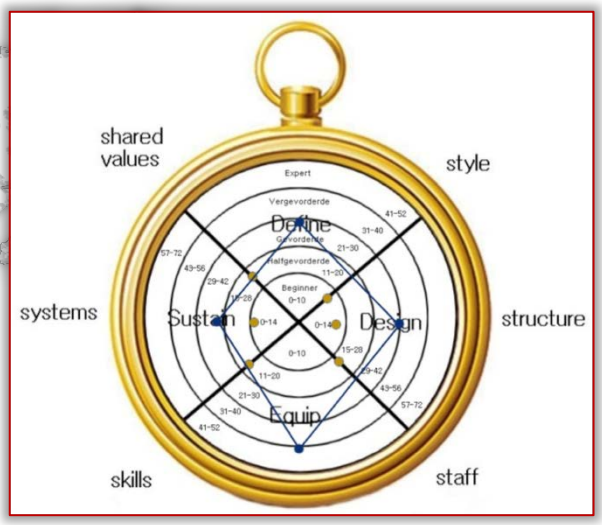

Figure 3. Application of the CX-liner, an example

In our research testing did not immediately take place. And to be completely honest, we even was launched the design before it was even tested. We did this because we strongly believe that the CX-liner is a useful and powerful diagnostic tool that many SME will appreciate. And in addition, at the moment of the completion the design, we were running out of time, leaving us no room to set up a test program. Nevertheless, testing is regarded as an obligation in DSR [18]. But fortunately, DSR testing doesn't need a large amount of respondents as in randomized controlled trials required in the medical field, but can be based on a pragmatic number of cases [3].

Three SME companies have tested the CX-liner, of which one was a B2B company. All test participants

were service providers. Testing took place by going through the process of self-assessment, receiving and interpreting the resulting diagram and directions for improvement, evaluating the CX-liner and reflecting on the whole process. The evaluations were conducted through surveys and personal interviews with the applicants of the CX-liner. It can be observed that all applicants evaluated the CX-liner in a positive way. They thought it is useful to diagnose oneself en that it provides good insight for the improvement. However, there is also room for improvement of the tool. To start with, respondents stipulated that a benchmark for the business sector would be useful. They argue that it is probably not a matter of getting the highest score on CEM as a whole, but to distinguish oneself in a positive sense from others in the same business. We support the idea that each business has its own peculiarities and that it could imply that partial perfection can also be regarded as distinctive. But, on the other hand, insight in business sector benchmarks could also lead to procrastination where improvement is needed from customers' perception. Another suggestion was to do an additional survey among the company's customers, so that over-estimation by the respondent can be avoided: self-reporting can lead to bending the truth, although the company is fooling itself. Finally, two participants found that the propositions are sufficient for the assessment, since each proposition has the improvement action embedded. It their view the graphic representation is a cosmetic feature that can be left out.

CONCLUSION

The research objective was to design and validate an assessment tool for Dutch SMEs to establish their status on CEM strategy implementation and to provide directions for improvement in the journey of reaching great customer experiences. The design process was based on literature review and synthesis, expert interviews and user interviews. The process resulted in the CX-liner that is based on two ideal foundations: the Smith-Wheeler process model for CEM strategy implementation and McKinsey's 7S-model identifying the management aspects for CEM. The CX-liner is a self-assessment tool, which is carried out by diagnosing one's own situation through 42 propositions that represent the ideal implementation actions for CEM. The more propositions the company agrees with, the better it is diagnosed as an expert on CEM strategy. Propositions that do not meet any or full compliance indicate the directions for improvement. The order in which the propositions are presented is a means to prioritize improvement actions. Testing has proved the CX-liner to be useful and insightful from user perspective, but has also resulted in some insights for improvement of the tool. These improvements will be considered in an update and redesign of the initial tool.

Note

This paper is based on the paper presented at The 7th International Conference on Mass Customization and Personalization in Central Europe – MCP–CE 2016 – Mass Customization and Open Innovation, organized in Novi Sad, SERBIA, September 21-23, 2016, referred here as [22].

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