

A chat with Malcolm Gladwell

The best-selling author is never short of words, but don't expect to find him on Twitter

CURT CHEREWAYKO

Bestselling author and *New Yorker* contributor Malcolm Gladwell has found fame in part through his ability to pluck out seemingly insignificant moments in history and show how they've influenced people and events today.

For example, in *Outliers*, one of his three bestselling non-fiction books, Gladwell discovers that an exceptional number of the most powerful corporate lawyers in New York City have almost the same upbringing.

Gladwell, who was raised in Canada and now lives in New York, visited Vancouver last Wednesday to give the keynote speech at the F5 Expo, a business conference about how Internet technologies such as social media, search marketing and mobile applications are evolving.

A few days before the expo, Gladwell shared his thoughts with *BIV* via e-mail on Canada's banking system, Vancouver's Insite program and why **Twitter** is and isn't a meaningful form of communication.

The Canadian banking system is viewed by some as a template for "new" banking systems being built in the economic recovery. In that context, does the Canadian banking system fit your definition of an "outlier" and, if so, what has made it so?

Both Canada and the U.S. set up a set of regulations for the banking system in response to the wave of financial institutional failure during the Depression. The difference is that in the U.S. that system was gradually disman-



Malcolm Gladwell: "I'm a terrible blogger. I never sign onto my Facebook account"

tled in the name of "deregulation" and in Canada it wasn't. There are many reasons for that. But I suspect that it has a lot to do with the Canadian aversion to purely ideological diagnoses of problems. We tend to be a bit more pragmatic. Why? Maybe if you are a small country, living in the shadow of someone larger, you have to be a bit more sensible and practical minded to survive.

In *Million-Dollar Murray*, you explore homelessness. What are your thoughts on the effectiveness of controversial initiatives such as Vancouver's

Insite program, in which addicts have a government-supported location to shoot up?

The idea in *Million Dollar Murray* was that a small percentage of people in any situation account for the lion's share of the cost and pathology. It was basically an argument that said it is cheaper to "solve" the problems of the chronically homeless than ignore them. I don't think that there is any one answer, however, to what "solve" means. I think that that is something that has to be worked out one person at a time. Some people may be best served with harm reduction. Some may be capable of kicking drugs entirely. The lesson is simply that it makes good economic – as well as moral – sense to devote the resources to the chronically homeless necessary to make those determinations.

How do you use social media and what tools, if at all?

I don't, I'm afraid. I'm a terrible blogger. I never sign onto my Facebook account and I've never tweeted. I think they are all very useful tools, but I'm lucky enough to have a large number of outlets already to reach my audience, between the *New Yorker* magazine and my books.

How do you see social media tools like Twitter transforming business communications?

I think they have a place. But at the end of the day what people really want when it comes to the things they care about most are meaningful, personal, face-to-face interactions. If Facebook and Twitter and social media can make those kinds of interaction more likely and more meaningful, then they are a powerful force. If not, I suspect they'll end up, in large part, just generating more of what we have too much of already in our society, which is noise.

Are social media changing the conversation or are they simply making it easier to converse?

I guess it depends on who is using those tools and why. If I know you and work with you and am having an ongoing collaboration with you, e-mail, for example, is an incredibly powerful force. But we can all think of situations where the ease of communication afforded by these new tools just makes it possible for people to engage in meaningless communication. ■

cgc@biv.com



BOARDROOM STRATEGY

MIKE DESJARDINS

Your business strategy needs to focus on what your customers care about

As you go about your day-to-day business, it's easy to get caught up in a flurry of activity that doesn't really mean a thing to your customer.

Making the decision to be more "customer-focused" is easy, but making the shift toward a customer-focused approach is another story. It requires putting customers at the centre of business decisions, company-wide, and consistently thinking about what you can do to meet or beat your customers' expectations. It's not an initiative that can be taken on by one department alone, but one that sees the customer become the driving force behind everything your company does.

A pro-active plan to be more customer-focused can generate trust in your brand and create a partnership between you and your greatest asset: your customers.

Here are five ways to move your strategy toward a customer-focus.

■ **Make it authentic.** If I had to pick one thing that can either make or break a customer-focused initiative, it's authenticity. A customer-focused initiative that's authentic shows up in a corporate culture in different ways.

Money, resources, passion and accountability are all powerful signals from management that the customer experience is a priority. It requires getting people passionate about the business you're really in – so much so that your customers get wrapped up in

the experience of doing business with you. Every member of your team is critical to the customer experience.

■ **Get everyone on the same page.** This might seem like stating the obvious, but it's easier said than done. Uncover the multiple interpretations of customer-focused initiatives and ensure everyone understands what is required to be truly customer focused. Take a

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look at cross-departmental initiatives. Do they work together from your customers' perspective? Limit the initiatives that run counter to your customer focus and reduce the silos by communicating what needs to be done across the organization so customers are not getting lost between departments.

■ **Consistently ask, "What's in it for me?"** Evaluate decisions and actions by continuously putting yourself in your clients' shoes and asking, "What's in it for me?" Make WIIFM part of your culture, and commit to understanding how everything you do affects your customer. Evaluate goals by asking how they show that you understand and value your customers.

■ **Try a new approach.** When it comes to customer-focused

initiatives, ask yourself: are we doing things this way just because it's the way we've always done it? What used to work, might not work anymore. Are your new initiatives just adjusted versions of things you've already tried, with a different name? Make a change. Instead of spending time looking for opportunities to make more money from your customers in the short-term, be on the lookout for opportunities to build loyalty and trust.

■ **Turn ideas into action.** Two of the best ways to guarantee action on any initiative are relevant resource allocation and metrics. Send a message about what's important by setting up measures of success that are focused on the customer experience, satisfaction, retention and loyalty – and give them as much value as sales and marketing metrics. Then, consider how your resource allocation might be running counter to your customer-focused initiatives, and rework them to support your efforts.

If you're looking for inspiration from companies that have excelled at making the customer their No. 1 priority, pick up a copy of *The Starbucks Experience* or *The New Gold Standard* (about the **Ritz Carlton Hotel** chain), both written by **Joseph A. Michelli**. ■

Mike Desjardins is the CEO at ViRTUS (www.virtusinc.com), an organizational development consulting firm. This column was co-written by Shannon Lawder, content director at ViRTUS.

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