

BLUE CROSS BLUE SHIELD OF MICHIGAN

An innovative learning experience
designed to help employees walk
in customers' shoes.

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Empathy is one of the core ingredients for providing an exceptional customer experience. When an organization's leaders and employees have a deep understanding of who their customers are—their needs, challenges and motivations—they're able to deliver an exceptional experience from the customers' perspective, not just based on the company's goals.

Developing that type of connection is not always easy to do in today's world of digital communications that limit human engagement. It can also be difficult for those employees who do not deal directly with customers to understand how what they do impacts the customer. So how do you tap into the emotional element necessary to drive organizationwide dedication to optimizing the customer experience?

A crossfunctional team at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan (BCBSM), led by Kathryn Levine, vice president of Corporate Marketing and Customer Experience, has launched an initiative to do just that. How? By providing staff with a remarkably innovative and unique learning experience—a 300-square-foot mobile, interactive customer experience room designed to help its employees “walk in the shoes” of health insurance customers.

“Health insurance is undergoing a radical transformation into a consumer-driven industry,” Levine says. “To succeed, health insurers must be attuned to the expectations of people, make their coverage easy to understand and solve problems well. We developed our customer experience room to reflect the real hopes and headaches that people in Michigan have with their health insurance.”

The room was designed as a mobile unit to allow it to travel to all of the BCBSM sites. “We took it on the road, visiting 10 Blues' locations in 90 days to interact with thousands of our employees,” says Levine.

BCBSM's customer experience initiative was recently honored by the Customer Experience Professionals Association (CXPA) with its 2013 CX Innovation Award, which recognizes new practices that improve customer experience, result in strong business impact and advance the field of customer experience for other organizations.

“BCBSM created a way for thousands of employees to truly understand their different customers as human beings, and they did it in just three months,” says Yvonne Nomizu, leader of the CX Innovation Awards Committee. “Instead of describing the customer in just words, employees got to know their customers through physical objects, audio tapes, interactive digital stations, visuals and maps. We had never seen anything that was so impressive and oriented around employees learning and participating, not just understanding. The level of detail was amazing, and the room catered to different learning styles—visual, audio and kinesthetic—and learning situations: Those with some time, and those with just a few minutes to spend. The result was that BCBSM built a markedly stronger employee commitment to the customer experience.”

From B-to-B to B-to-Me

The mobile customer experience room is part of BCBSM's journey from being primarily a business-to-business organization to a business-to-consumer model—or, as Levine puts it, “B-to-Me.”

“The consumer world that we live in today is very much driven by personalized, real-time information, which is pushing the traditional health care industry model toward more of a consumerism focus,” she explains. “We've been taking a much more outside-in look at the world as an organization. In the last couple of years, we have defined a consumerism strategy, and have identified and prioritized a customer experience effort.”

It is a journey, Levine adds, that starts with building a deeper understanding of consumers. To that end, BCBSM has been collecting insights through voice of the customer research (via customer satisfaction surveys and post-call surveys), as well as in-depth ethnographic research (i.e., qualitative research into customers' preferences, needs and motivations by observing them in their own environment using products and services). “We pulled all of this customer data together and looked at it cohesively to tell a story of what it's like to be a customer in the health care industry in general,” Levine says.

Customer segmentation analysis then allowed Levine and her team to develop specific customer personas for three different types of customer. Each persona was given a name and a face, as well as distinct character traits, demographics, goals, desires, behaviors—and a story. The customer personas provide employees with a mental model of the customer, which helps them to better understand the challenges that customers face and helps them to keep customers' needs top of mind. The personas



Deborah Nowlin-Swartz (left), Mary Durrah and Karen Kelly from ODLM Quality discuss the wealth of wellness resources and online tools available to members.

have been widely promoted and communicated in training sessions, meetings and company materials, and their images have become very familiar throughout BCBSM facilities—displayed on the walls, as well as in life-size cardboard cutouts.

Fostering Empathy and Engagement

A large part of Levine's role in leading the customer experience effort has been to help the entire workforce to develop an understanding of and empathy for customers. Levine and her team set out to create an experience that would not only educate employees about who their customers are and what they experience, but that would also engage them in a continuous improvement effort.

The mobile customer experience room was the culmination of a crossfunctional effort involving marketing, IT, call center, customer experience champions and facilities staff, she points out.

The concept for the mobile customer experience room, though, can be credited to Levine's background as a teacher, a marketer and a customer experience professional. Her unique understanding of how people learn combined with a marketer's understanding of how to engage an audience through story-telling and how to reinforce the message through unified communications helped the team to devise an interactive, immersive learning environment.

"As a former teacher, I understand that people learn differently, and as a marketing professional, I know that messages need to be conveyed many times," Levine says. She realized early on that empathy for the customer experience was not a concept that could be delivered in a classroom-style format. "It's not something that can just be taught. It's the type of knowledge that needs to unfold," she points out.

Thus, the customer experience room is one component that supports BCBSM's larger E4 initiative, which stands for Educate, Equip and Empower Our Employees. The first module of the E4 initiative—Educate—focused on building an understanding of who the customer is, what their experience is like, why the customer experience should matter to the employee and the company, and what the company



Kathryn Levine
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Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan's Customer Experience Room.

is doing to improve it. The Educate module included workshops and videos that provided the basics about the customer experience initiative, and the room was designed to reinforce that information.

Walking in Customers' Shoes: An Interactive Experience

Levine felt that the best way for employees to connect to customers and develop the understanding and empathy to engage them in improving the customer experience was to allow them to experience what customers experience. "People need to feel it, because when you feel it, see and touch it, you're going to remember—it's going to stay with you," she says.

Importantly, employees can experience the room's learning exercises in the style that they're most comfortable with—exercises incorporate visual, auditory and kinesthetic elements. It is self-paced—employees can move through the room in 20 minutes or spend an hour in it.

Upon entering the room, employees are introduced to the five major pain points that consumers experience when dealing with health care organizations in general. Scenarios incorporate each of the customer personas showing them in their home environment, which provides a deeper look into their lives and their health concerns. Employees can choose to read the scenarios or watch a brief video of each customer telling his or her story. "As you move through the room, we highlight which one of the pain points is happening in a scenario, how it affects the customer, and what we're doing to mitigate it," Levine says.

In addition to the three personas, employees can put on headsets to listen to different customer calls, and experience what it's like to be that customer—for instance, an elderly caller who can't hear well. In another interactive exercise, employees don a pair of scratchy goggles and try to read text, which simulates what customers with eye and vision problems may experience when trying to read some of the materials they receive.

As employees complete their journey through the room, they're given a takeaway card with information about the three customer personas and reminders about the customer experience pain points.




Jermaine Hardrick, CSR II, National Customer Service, listens to a customer on the call wall, one of the many interactive experiences in the Customer Experience Room.

One panel of the room has the BCBSM customer commitment on it, and a place for employees to sign the panel. Once the room moves on to another location, that panel remains at the facility as a reminder of the staff's commitment to the customer experience.

It's a Continuous Journey

To date, approximately 4,500 BCBSM employees have experienced the room, and the response from staff has been remarkable, Levine says. "People have embraced it. Going through the room has helped them to realize the impact that they have on a member, even if they're not in a customer-facing role. They clearly understand the impact and are able to connect the dots to the business results side of it."

With major changes under way with the upcoming Health Care Reform requirements coming into play, Levine's vision is to launch another road trip for the mobile customer experience room with new panels to educate staff on the next phase of BCBSM's customer experience initiative—Clear and Simple—which will focus on giving employees tools to apply to their work to become more clear and simple as an organization.

The customer experience initiative is an ongoing journey, Levine says. "If we want to be successful in customer experience, we have to have a supportive CEO, which we do. We have to have a team that is focused on it and willing to get out there and push it, and we have to have an engaged workforce. It's a continuous organizationwide effort." 

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