Protecting Your Customer Experience from 'the Curse of Knowledge'

By MICAH SOLOMON

The worst person to ask for directions is somebody local, who knows the area too, too well. They'll tell you something along the lines of, “Turn left where the old barn used to be, make a right where Ol’ Sanders was thinking of building a gas station but ended up deciding against it, go 2 miles, and there you are. Don’t worry — you can’t miss it.”

The reason such directions are impossible to follow is that they assume the listener has the same familiarity with the landscape as the person giving directions. In other words, the person giving the direction suffers from what’s called “the curse of knowledge,” a cognitive error that can spring up whenever there’s an asymmetry of information.

The curse of knowledge isn’t just a problem when a driver’s lost on a rural road. It can also be a barrier to connecting with customers in the disciplines of customer service, sales and the customer experience (CX), and it’s a major factor in why the user experience (UX) so often suffers from catastrophic design.

Let’s look at each of these areas and how the curse of knowledge manifests itself.

User experience (UX)
The curse of knowledge can sabotage a designer’s ability to build a user experience that makes sense to first-time visitors. You’ll see this phenomenon, for example, in e-commerce website designs that make sense to the designer (who knows everything about their own business) but are mystifying to anyone who visits the site without such familiarity.

**Customer experience (CX)**

In the customer experience, the curse of knowledge prevents the professional from recognizing the pitfalls a customer encounters. In a physical environment, for example, while you already know where the fitting rooms, cash registers and exits are, none of this is necessarily obvious to the customers. (The only customer who’s never gotten lost at IKEA, is the customer who’s never *been* to IKEA!) Also, the curse of knowledge turns us insiders into too-easy apologists for things that aren’t up to snuff, because we know when the scheduled maintenance is to happen, why the store is temporarily understaffed and so forth.

**Customer service**

In customer service, the curse of knowledge can lead to a lack of empathy for what a customer is going through. Because employees have seen similar situations (delayed shipments, broken components) every day of the year, they have trouble making the leap to what the customer may be feeling when it happens, for the first time, to them. “Hey,” the employees think to themselves, “other customers survived this ordeal, and this customer will too. Why are they making such a fuss about it?”

More subtly, the curse of knowledge can lead to employees not really listening to customers who complain because they feel they’ve heard identical complaints before. So, an employee will jump to interrupt a customer before she’s done with her exposition, end up misdiagnosing their problem and present a solution that may not be what the customer is looking for at all.

**So, what’s the solution?**

The curse of knowledge is a toughie, because, to a large extent, it’s impossible to un-ring a bell. You’re always going to know what you already know, and there’s no magic technique that allows you to un-know it entirely.

But awareness of your inability to un-ring the knowledge bell is actually a key step first. If you can spread this awareness, getting leaders, managers and employees to acknowledge the inevitable mismatch of company and customer perspectives — and the reality that the customer’s view will never be the same as yours — you’ve got the essential prerequisite for action.

Read more about protecting your company’s customer experience in NewVoiceMedia’s whitepaper "Why silos damage customer experience."

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