

BOTTOM LINE

BY TODD SWENSEN

BEYOND THE CLICHÉ: THE CUSTOMER-FOCUSED COMMUNICATION OF NOVELL TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE OPPORTUNITY WITH CONSOLIDATED MANAGEMENT

Some would argue that the term “customer focused” is in danger of joining “paradigm shift” and “thinking outside the box” on the official list of most overused and least meaningful business clichés. Thousands of companies have adopted the “customer focused” mantra and redefined the term to mean everything from opening a few more customer service phone lines to making

that’s much less common and much more difficult to achieve.

Since Jack Messman became Chairman and CEO of Novell, he has championed the latter, infinitely more meaningful approach—and embraced a customer-focused business model that goes far beyond catchphrases and easy, superficial changes. At a general employee meeting

This sometimes led to a sense that developing superior technology was enough—and that businesses would somehow find ways to apply it to their own needs. Making the shift from this engineering-focused model to a true customer-focused mentality has required deep philosophical and organizational changes in how Novell approaches

Suggesting enhancements for Novell products and solutions is fast and easy—and every request you make will be carefully considered by the appropriate product team. *To make an enhancement request, visit www.novell.com/enhancements.*

the “feedback” button bigger on their Web site. Of course, this frequent overuse and misuse of the term doesn’t change the fact that “customer focused”—if it is defined, understood and applied correctly—can have a remarkable, transforming effect on virtually every aspect of an organization, from research and development all the way through sales and marketing. Latching onto the cliché and jumping on the customer-focused bandwagon is easy—nearly everyone is doing it. But building a business where every decision, every process and every offering is governed by what customers want and need is something entirely different—something

held during BrainShare 2003 in Salt Lake City he said, “Novell will place the customer first and drive all aspects of its culture and business based on customer needs and customer feedback. We will try to avoid creating great technical products that do not serve a market based on customer needs.”

Messman re-emphasized the customer focus and fortunately much of the difficult groundwork has already been laid. Traditionally, Novell has been a company with a well-earned reputation for developing solid, innovative technology—and a penchant for pleasing the technical people who appreciate and understand it.

development, marketing, education, sales and support. Many of these changes have already been made. Others are still in progress. But most of the core, fundamental elements of the new customer-focused framework are now in place.

IMPROVED PROCESSES FOR CUSTOMER-DRIVEN SOLUTIONS

One example is a process that drives every research and development project at Novell. Years ago, development efforts revolved primarily around engineering teams and the perceived technical merits of the ideas they generated. Today, a comprehensive Phase Review Process



shifts that focus directly to the business needs of Novell customers. Those business needs are researched and studied. By understanding them, research and development efforts are brought into perfect alignment with those needs, and business solutions are created that address them. During the entire process, activities are coordinated from key functional areas—development, marketing, support, training, education, sales and so on.

This solves a chronic issue that most technology companies have wrestled with for years. Eldon Greenwood, who heads the Common Engineering Services group, agrees. “In years past, you’d sometimes have a situation where an engineering team would develop a new product without doing the research that we do now. This would put certain teams in a difficult position if the product wasn’t inline with resources, strategic direction or the needs of our customers. Nowadays, we ensure every new Novell solution is properly researched, prepared and supported—and that every functional group is actively involved with new projects from conception through delivery.”

Besides staying focused on customers’ business needs, the Phase Review Process also helps keep Novell development efforts in line with corporate strategies and organizational capabilities. The process features distinct milestone reviews that govern projects as they are conceived, planned, approved, developed and marketed. These reviews give Novell Senior Management a consistent view of every project. They also provide Novell

with multiple opportunities to align new ideas and concepts with customer needs and requests. And they focus Novell resources and intellectual energies on projects that advance corporate strategy and deliver the highest possible value to Novell customers.

This marks a fundamental change in the way Novell evaluates, funds and develops projects. Ideas for new solutions now originate in the offices, hallways and server rooms of Novell customers. Instead of developing technology simply because it’s innovative and new, the Phase Review Process makes sure innovative and new technology is always properly harnessed to valid business needs.

THE ART OF LISTENING

Ernest Hemingway once observed that most people never really listen. The same could be said of most businesses. Certainly, no business can legitimately claim to be customer focused until it masters the art of listening to and understanding its customers. At a corporate level, this starts with consistent, effective processes and programs for collecting, analyzing, prioritizing and acting on the needs of customers. Understanding problems well enough to solve them requires more than gathering general market data and collecting third-hand customer anecdotes. As a result, efforts of Novell to become a true customer-focused company include a number of new processes and programs designed specifically to hear and understand what customers are really saying.

One of these is a contextual inquiry program that places cross-functional teams of observers inside real companies to witness problems and issues first hand. They watch people as they work, identify patterns and problems, ask insightful questions and take notes of the surroundings and everything that happens during the day. They consolidate, interpret and analyze the data. Patterns are identified, workflows are defined and insights are discussed. This structured brainstorming—stimulated and validated by mountains of first-hand observational data—helps those involved in developing Novell technology to dive beneath the surface, explore and understand what really happens at different kinds of businesses during an average day.

Intensive focus groups are another tool in the Novell arsenal for listening and understanding. Richard Whitehead, ZENworks Product Line Manager, takes pride in the fact that nearly everyone on his team has earned the highest frequent-flyer level with at least one airline. “We spend an unbelievable amount of time all over the world asking businesses what they think about new interface designs, new solution concepts and proposed improvements to existing products. We’re meticulous about analyzing and using the information we collect, and it makes a real difference.”

Finally, Novell has made it easier for customers to suggest improvements to Novell solutions through an expanded product enhancements request program. Anyone can submit a request simply by visiting www.novell.com/enhancements,

and every request is reviewed and carefully prioritized. According to Whitehead, “We take all the suggestions we receive very seriously. My team reads, reviews and prioritizes every request for an enhancement that comes in.”

These listening tools and processes have already produced some remarkable results. Novell ZENworks—one of the fastest-growing and most successful Novell

desktop management problems we saw these businesses struggling with,” Tanner explained. “It was just a matter of enhancing the technology and putting it together differently.” Since that initial large-scale study, smaller contextual inquiry sessions, focus groups and enhancement requests have continued to guide the direction of ZENworks. In fact, the new ZENworks suite is a direct

requires fundamental changes in the core processes, attitudes and principles that govern an organization. The Phase Review Process and advanced listening tools like the Contextual Inquiry process, global focus groups and the Product Enhancement Request program show that Novell is making all the changes necessary to fully convert itself from an engineering-focused to a customer-focused business—

“Third-hand information, brainstorming, anecdotes from trade shows and speculative talk about ‘what the customer really wants’ within an isolated team all contribute to designs that do not meet customer needs and designs that do not reflect customer work.” *Changing the Rules: A Pragmatic Approach to Product Development*, Huntwork, Muzzey, Pietras

product lines—is a direct result of one of the first full-blown contextual inquiry projects conducted by Novell. According to Ron Tanner, a ZENworks product manager, the initial idea for ZENworks sprang from an extensive contextual inquiry exercise that revealed—in great detail—the time, effort and frustration involved in managing computer devices in large enterprises. “When we looked at the data, we realized that we already had most of the technology we needed to solve the

response to feedback from businesses looking for a single, integrated solution for managing all their servers, desktops and handheld devices.

It’s easy to talk about becoming a more customer-focused organization. It’s easy to make superficial, cosmetic changes and slap a “customer focused” label on them. But in the end, choosing a true customer-focused path—a path capable of transforming an organization and making a tangible difference for customers—

in a meaningful way that extends far beyond clichés and catchphrases.

In the end, this means the needs of your business are driving the direction of every product and solution Novell creates. It means Novell is dedicating more resources and applying better processes to understanding your needs. And it means every dollar Novell spends on research and development, marketing, support and education will be focused on solving real problems at the top of your priority list. **N**