
"...mighty things from small beginnings grow"
– John Dryden

We sat down with Tina Hobart and James Maguire from Mitie to learn how they've used customer research to combine top-level commitment with account-level action planning to transform the organisation's customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Mitie is unusually open about its Net Promoter Score (NPS). As Tina comments,

"We've shared it in our annual reports. We don't shy away from our score, it is what it is. It's more than a number for us, it's about the actions."

This is really important, I believe. Far too many organisations are focused on getting a high score, rather than on making customers satisfied; a subtle but important difference. By acknowledging what their survey feedback was telling them, and doing something about it, Mitie has been able to transform its NPS from -27 to +30 in just three years.

That's no easy feat and demonstrates that Mitie has got a lot of things right. Most important of all, it shows that its customers have noticed and appreciated the efforts its teams are making. As so often in business to business (B2B) relationships, it's by blending together the worlds of customer experience and account management that the real gains are made.

Senior commitment

When we asked Tina about the secret of their success, she was clear that none of it would be possible without commitment from the top to drive buy-in throughout the organisation.

"The fundamental reason we've gone from -27 to +30 is about senior leadership, governance, and buy-in from senior leadership and operational teams all the way down to frontline colleagues. If you don't get that buy-in from the top, their sponsorship, talking about it, you're never going to move a score."

Without that passion from the top, it's very hard to drive through customer-centric change.

When survey results showed that one of the things customers wanted was a more visible presence from senior leaders within the business, this resulted in an immediate call to action for the executive team to be more visible when it came to customer relationships. And customers have noticed:

"We've asked a question this year, 'Do you believe senior management are committed to the relationship?' Some 86% of customers think they are. So that meant all of the actions that were taken by the senior leadership team to get out there and do more with customers have worked, and it's brought us more than just that 86%. I've been able to push things back upwards: What are the things that are not working? What can the senior leadership team do to help?"

There's no question that senior level commitment is necessary, but we know it's not enough on its own. Mitie's CEO, Phil Bentley, sits down once a quarter to meet with account directors, and the customer is prominent in that discussion. Not only does he look at the scores, but he also reads all the NPS comments.

"That level of interest in what customers are saying is how you get traction. And actually being willing to change ways of working, if customers are saying it's not beneficial to them."

Survey approach

The core of Mitie's approach to customer insight is an annual NPS survey with senior clients. Some wanted to increase the frequency of the survey, but Tina, rightly, feels that it doesn't make sense to repeat a relationship survey too often.

"You need to give yourself a chance to act because what these guys will tell you will be quite strategic, quite long term impact; it'll be about your relationship, how you manage your contract. If you go out more than once a year, you're not really giving yourself a chance."

With any customer research it's essential that the survey gets to the right people, and that it asks the right questions, but in the B2B world it's particularly important to make sure the survey is positioned correctly with customers, and that the outputs are used actively as part of account management and development. That starts with the communication that goes out to customers before the survey to warm them up.

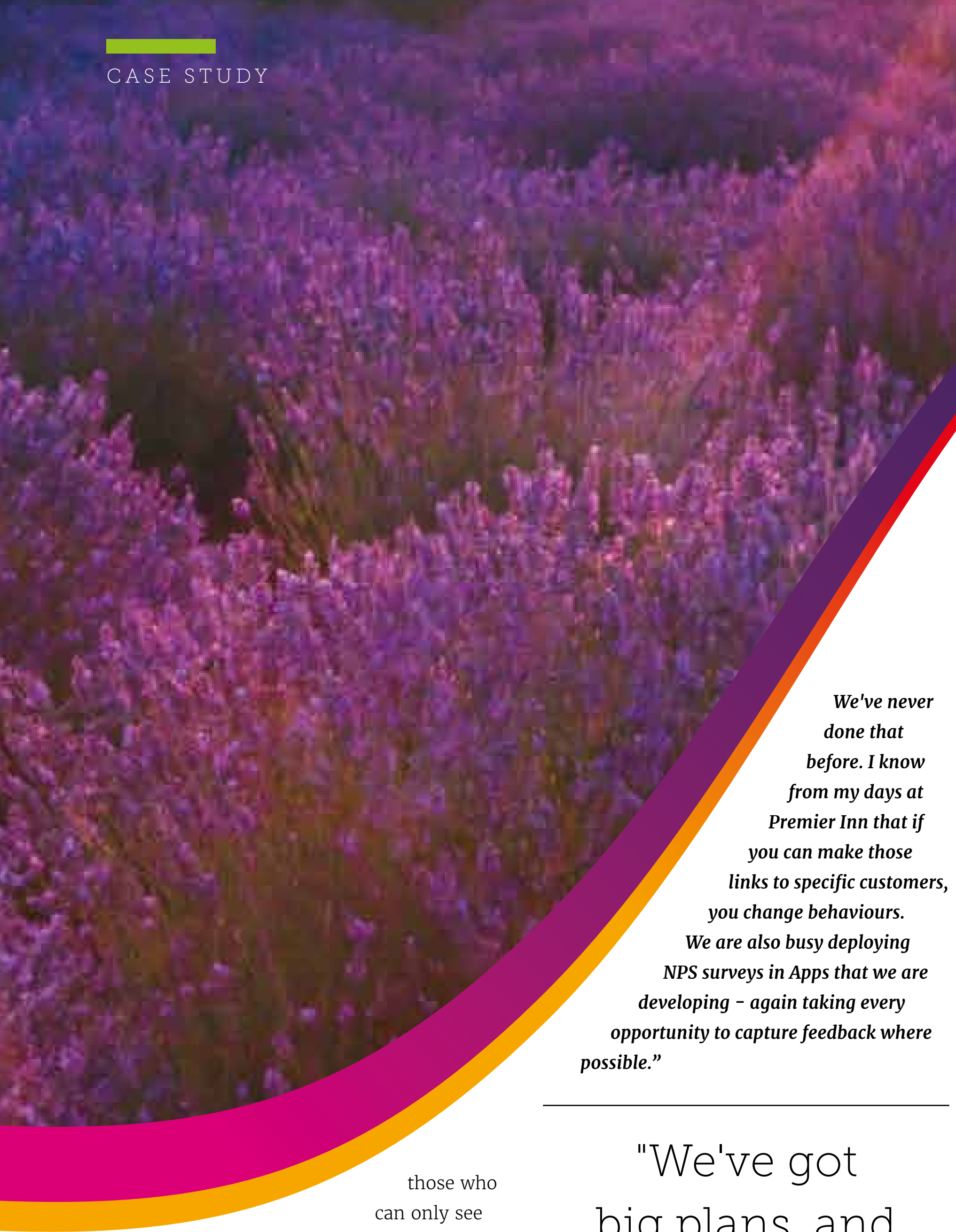
Tina says: "The point for me is that the survey has to be about the actions, it's not about the survey by itself. The work that goes on before is as important as the survey itself. One of the lessons I've learned is that the pre-comms to customers is critical, letting them know what's happening."

And it continues by ensuring that the survey outputs are integrated into tools such as Teams, SharePoint, and Salesforce so that they get to the people who need them.

"Getting the action planning out to people and being able to track 'So what have you done with this action plan?' People have got used to us coaching them and systematically following up actions. It's how we move the dial."

We'll return to the balance of account management versus systematic, organisation-wide, improvement later on.

Perhaps the most important thing of all is to make sure that the survey is getting to the people who really matter. At an account level, that's clearly the main decision makers and influencers, and it's far more valuable to get their opinions, however critical they may be, than to limit the survey to customers who will tell you what you want to hear, or



those who can only see part of the picture.

***Tina says:* “There's no cherry picking. Who are the people that can influence the decision making and retention of this contract? It has to be the people that have a good representative knowledge of the service delivery model that you're delivering. It's quite a complex environment we work in, so making sure that that list of clients is representative of that account’s performance is so important.”**

Relationships and touchpoints

In the future, Tina is making plans to expand that core NPS relationship survey into a programme that covers all end users at every touchpoint:

“We've got big plans, and technology's at the heart of that. We want to build a touchpoint plan with customer measurement everywhere. We've just put live a pilot on our handheld devices in our Technical Services business with our engineers, so that at the end of a job, they ask for feedback on the performance of that job. We've never done that before. I know from my days at Premier Inn that if you can make those links to specific customers, you change behaviours. We are also busy deploying NPS surveys in Apps that we are developing – again taking every opportunity to capture feedback where possible.”

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We find again and again that getting the right combination of relationship and event-driven customer insight is the secret to really cementing the momentum of customer experience improvement programmes. It can be a really powerful force that shapes the culture of the organisation and helps staff throughout the business to understand their role in the customer experience.

With a challenge from the CEO to continue to improve the overall NPS to +40, and then to +50, rolling out the measurement needed to drive behavioural change throughout the organisation is a vital part of focusing the business on the customer.

“Map all the touchpoints, understand where we can capture insight, and build up a best-in-class programme; but centralize the insight, because if you're not tracking it centrally and understanding what the voice of the customer is telling you, you're at risk of doing it disparately.”

As James points out, getting the right balance of insight from end users can help to reframe the conversations that account teams are having with customers, and to reveal where there may be perception gaps which are negatively affecting customers’ views of Mitie.

***James says:* “It also highlights if there's a perception gap between the different levels, and then working with the account teams to understand why there may be one and what we can do to support that. With the annual survey, quite often we'll highlight a customer saying a particular area needs to improve, and then you may discover the end users really rate the service, so it's useful for that as well.”**

As ever, it’s essential that you understand what customer perceptions are as a first step, and then you can set about managing them if you discover that customers have incorrect beliefs about the experience. Customer insight is about understanding how customers feel, and why.

Centralised insight

There can be a real Catch-22 in customer insight, that it is either too centralised, or too splintered and ad-hoc. The secret, we believe, is to centralise the planning and organisation of a customer insight programme, making sure that it is approached consistently wherever it is needed and that organisation-wide initiatives can be taken, but to make sure that the information is very rapidly disseminated to the people who need it.

***Tina says:* “It’s not just about the individual accounts, I call it the ‘Mitie mothership’. What are the things that we're doing collectively across Mitie that are**

adding value, or conversely making it hard to do business? The lessons learned from 2019 were applied systematically across Mitie to deliver change."

From that centralised hub is a cascade of information out to the business, and as Tina comments, one of the best signs that customer feedback is gaining traction is when staff are actively asking to see survey results. Of course, it helps when the survey results are incentivised!

"The encouraging thing is that we get people chasing us up, 'Can you come and present?'. We do a lot of internal comms, we push out good news stories, individual call outs, we do a lot of reward and recognition."

Those individual compliments can be a really powerful message, as James observes:

"This year I went through all the comments to highlight where there are individual call outs, and we're working with the account team to share them so that they can give them Mitie Stars, which is the program we have to recognise exceptional behaviours. This is important as 'The Exceptional, Every Day,' is one of Mitie's core values. It's a great mechanism because they've been called out directly by a key customer, so it's a really powerful benefit we get from the survey."

Data to the people who need it

This is a really important principle of using customer insight to improve—don't just communicate actions to the teams at the frontline who need to make change, but get them the data and the insight that they need to understand customers.

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Tina adds: "I strongly believe that if you operationalise insight and you give it to the people to whom it matters most, that's how you make magic happen. What is the purpose behind doing insight and research if it's not to help our people on the frontline and colleagues drive a better experience for customers?"

In a B2B organisation, that usually means the account teams who are responsible for managing relationships with customers. In order to effectively act on customer insight, you need to create an environment of transparency, accountability, and support.

"Once we have the data, we act. We give them dashboards, we present the feedback to the account teams and help them understand what the key issues are, and then work with them to implement plans against those. It all comes back to how do you then close the loop back with a customer that says, 'We've heard this, this is what we're doing about it'? The Mitie account leads are some of the best account leads I've ever worked with in my career. They're really action-oriented, they listen. Some of the action-planning I've seen is best in class stuff they're doing on the back of what the customers have told them."

In one particular case, with a key account that had started with an NPS of -33, the team worked on customer feedback from surveys

persistently for two years, using a “You said, We did” model in every meeting to update on progress. That account’s score is now +73: a remarkable testament to the truism that customers can be made satisfied and loyal if you show that you are working on their feedback and commit to change.

As James points out, it’s often the verbatim comments that show this realisation from customers, before it works through into their scores.

“It’s reflected in the scores, but also in the comments. The open text is often where you can get the real insights. That's when people say, ‘You've really stepped it up this time.’ Often there are call outs to the account leads specifically, or it could be senior management, or Mitie’s approach to technology. It's changed over the past couple of years, because when NPS was first introduced the comments weren't quite as positive. Now the themes are very different and it’s refreshing to see that. Time and again it’s the account lead mentioned, or the team, and the customer says they value the partnership or working together. That's really powerful.”

One of the distinguishing factors between B2B and B2C relationships is that it is much easier to track the way individual clients and customers change their attitudes from survey to survey. This really helps to get account managers bought into the system, because it demonstrates that it’s effective. If you do the work, customers will notice it and appreciate it. That is also true in B2C markets, but it's much harder to demonstrate it with one impactful case study. Even in B2B, though, part of the process is making sure that customers notice what you’ve done and understand the link to their responses in the survey.

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“Customers can sometimes forget what you've done. You can have done a brilliant job two years ago, transformed part of their business, but they forget about it when it comes to contract time. We therefore do an annual report back to the customer that covers, ‘What have we achieved this year?’”

Account-level thinking

B2B customer experience has to work hand in hand with account management. That's obvious to anyone who has worked in B2B markets, but from a research perspective you immediately run into the issue of confidentiality. What's more important: to preserve the option for customers to give their responses anonymously, or to ensure that account teams can take action on specific feedback?

Tina feels strongly that keeping the option of confidentiality is important, and we agree. Yes, there will be some awkward conversations with account teams, but the truth is that it is still possible to act on anonymous feedback.

Tina says: "You can still deliver an action plan. You can't target individuals, but you can still work with what they're telling you."

Most customers, though, are quite willing to be identified, and it's knowing that their feedback will be read and acted upon that helps to make sure that they are open in the research. That means insight has to be turned into action, and those actions need to be communicated back to customers.

When customer feedback is openly shared within the business, that automatically creates accountability:

"When you get to the level of transparency we've got, the unhappy customers are looked at by the whole organisation, there's no hiding place. So when you've got customers who are just fundamentally not getting the service standards they've been promised, or we've not delivered on our promises to them, this goes up to a very senior level in the business."

That's not to say that the account teams are necessarily to blame when customers are unhappy, but it is their responsibility to work with customers to find a way forward, and to manage that relationship. In order to drive change, they will often need support from Tina, James, Mitie's Customer Insight team and from the business more widely.

"We are there to support our colleagues in the front line facing off to customers. I couldn't do it! I have the utmost respect for these guys."

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One thing Mitie has found—from looking at the comments from Promoters, Passives, and Detractors—is something we've seen again and again. Doing the basics well gets you from Detractor to Passive, but it's rarely enough to get you to Promoter. For that you need to do more, and that's where the account teams really come into play.

"When you look at the Promoters, they're talking about partnership and collaboration, when you look at the Passives they're talking more about service delivery and contract, so there's a real difference in attitude. Then when you get to the Detractors it's about sorting problems out, getting it right."

Tina Hobart
Head of cNPS & Customer Experience at Mitie

Tina has over 20 years' experience in the customer experience field. Her roles encompassed leading the customer experience agenda, managing research & insight, NPS, with a key highlight being the project management of the Good Night Guarantee in Premier Inn. With Mitie she saw lots of cross-over with the service & hospitality industry where her experience could add value. She was encouraged by the Connected Workspace Strategy and could see there was real commitment to not only retain customers but to win and grow new business.

https://www.mitie.com/

What can we learn?

So what can we learn from Mitie's impressive results? The core message, I think, is very simple—in B2B markets you need to get customer insight and account management working together to start to build a virtuous circle of improvement, in which account teams see the value of insight, and customers see that their feedback is acted upon. Transparency, accountability, and support are all essential to make that work.

The foundation, particularly if you're starting from a relatively low position, is to concentrate on delivering the basics brilliantly. Once that's done, you can move on to building lasting partnerships with customers.

There's often an assumption that B2B companies lag behind B2C when it comes to customer experience, which I think is dead wrong. In particular, I can't think of any B2C organisation which has managed to transform the perceptions of its customers in such a short space of time. As Tina says:

"I think Mitie has proven it works."