

We Say We are Customer-Centric. But, Are We?

By Frankline Kibuacha

"We are customer-centric." Think about the number of times you have heard this statement. I would bet it has come up so often that you no longer pause to reflect on what it actually means.

It is said in boardrooms, in strategy meetings, in brand presentations, and in marketing plans. It has become one of those phrases that everyone agrees with, no one challenges, and very few people take the time to define.

The reality is, at some point, customer-centricity stopped being something brands strive for and became something they assume they already are. And that is where the problem begins.

Because once something becomes assumed, it stops being interrogated. We stop asking what it looks like in practice, how it is measured, and more importantly, we stop asking whether the customer would agree.

Customer-centricity, in many organisations today, has quietly shifted from a discipline to a declaration.

But through this article, I want to challenge us to take a step back and think deep about what being customer centric means. The simple meaning and spirit of the term: Being customer-centric means putting the customer at the center of every business decision, strategy, and interaction. It is a long-term business strategy and a company-wide philosophy that prioritizes understanding and fulfilling customer needs over short-term sales or internal processes.

The Data Comfort Zone

Part of the reason this illusion persists is that we are living in a time when data is more accessible than ever.

Today's marketer has visibility that would have been unthinkable a decade ago. We can track customer journeys across platforms, measure engagement in real time, analyse conversion funnels, and segment audiences with increasing precision. We can see what people click on, how long they stay, what they buy, and when they leave.

There is no question that this has made marketing more informed and, in many ways, a lot more effective. But it has also created a certain level of comfort.

When you have this much visibility, it is easy to believe that you understand your customer. You have good AI-powered Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software, so the dashboards are detailed. The numbers are precise. The trends are clear. Automated and super-personalized emails and WhatsApp messages are going to clients at just the right time and touchpoint. It gives a sense of control. And that is where we need to be careful, because visibility is not the same as understanding.

For example, a customer clicks on your ad. We interpret that as interest. Another one makes a repeat purchase. We label them as loyal customers. Another opens your app frequently, we put them in the "engaged customers" pot.

But each of these is an interpretation layered on top of behaviour. And behaviour, on its own, does not always tell the full story. What we are often looking at is what customers did, not why they did it. And that distinction matters more than we sometimes acknowledge. In my work, I have seen how easy it is to build confident narratives from incomplete signals.

The data, in all these cases, is accurate. But the meaning we assign to it is not always. This is not a limitation of data itself, but a reminder of its role. Data shows us patterns and shifts, and points us in a direction. But it does not always explain the underlying cause.

And when we rely on it as a complete picture, rather than a starting point, we risk making decisions that are technically informed, but strategically misaligned.

When Interpretation Becomes Truth

We have established thus far that the challenge is not the availability of data, but how quickly we move from observation to conclusion.

Over time, the patterns we see in our reports start to feel like explanations. Teams begin to build narratives around them. The issue is that once these narratives take hold internally, they become difficult to challenge. They shape strategy, influence decision-making, and guide investment. And because they are backed by data, they carry a level of authority that makes them feel unquestionable. These interpretations



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are not always wrong. But they are not always right either.

I have seen numerous situations where teams were convinced they understood their customers because the data appeared to tell a consistent story. It was only when they stepped outside the dashboard and engaged directly with customers, whether through surveys, activations, or through social, that they realised how incomplete that story was.

In one case, a brand assumed declining sales were driven by reduced interest. In reality, customers still wanted the product. It simply was not available where they expected to find it. In another, a business celebrated strong engagement metrics, only to discover that most of that activity was tied to short-term promotions that had little impact on long-term preference.

In both cases, the data was accurate. But the interpretation had led them in the wrong direction. This is how the illusion of understanding takes shape. Not through bad data, but through incomplete interpretation.

The Context We Often Miss

This gap becomes even more apparent when you consider the environments in which many of our customers operate.

The reality is, in the markets most of us operate in, consumer behaviour is influenced by factors that do not always fit neatly into structured datasets. Purchasing decisions are often shaped by timing, access, income cycles, and social dynamics. A product may be chosen not because it is preferred, but because it is available. A brand may be trusted not because of its messaging, but because of a recommendation from someone within a community.

In many cases, what looks like strong engagement in the data may simply reflect shared access. What appears to be declining demand may actually be a temporary constraint. What looks like loyalty may be driven by convenience rather than genuine preference. These nuances matter, and they are not always visible in the data we rely on most heavily.

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Understanding them requires going beyond observation. It requires asking questions, listening carefully, and placing behaviour within the context in which it occurs. With out that context, it becomes easy to misread the signals and draw conclusions that feel logical, but are not entirely accurate.

When we misinterpret what the data is telling us, the consequences are not always immediate, but they tend to compound over time. Campaigns are designed around assumptions that do not fully reflect customer reality. Products are improved in areas that may not matter as much as we think. Marketing efforts appear effective on the surface, while underlying issues remain unresolved. Over time, this creates a disconnect.

Customers engage, but do not stay. They purchase, but do not commit. They interact, but do not build a relationship with the brand. And because the data continues to show activity, it can take time before the deeper issue becomes visible. By the time itdoes, the gap between perception and reality is often significant.

Research consistently shows that trust and perceived relevance play a critical role in customer decision-making. When customers feel understood, they are more likely to stay, recommend, and engage. When they do not, the opposite happens quietly. And it often happens so quietly it's worse that Nairobi floods, or whatever they said about still waters.

The Anatomy of a Real Customer-Centric Company

If customer-centricity is not simply about having data, then what does it actually require? When you step back and look at organisations that are genuinely customer-centric, a few patterns begin to emerge.

It is rarely about a single initiative or a particular tool. It is about how the organisation thinks, consistently, about the customer.

At its core, it requires a shift in how we approach understanding. The Core Principles to put in mind here are:

Deep understanding: Investing in data and direct interaction to grasp customer behaviours, pain points, and desires beyond surface-level demographics. And it's not surface-level data. They invest in understanding behaviour, but also in understanding motivation. They ask customers directly about their experiences, their frustrations, and their expectations. They are not satisfied with knowing what is happening, but want to understand why.

Anticipatory action: That understanding then informs how they act. Rather than waiting for issues to appear in the data, they use insight to anticipate what customers might need next. They look for patterns, signals, and early indicators, and they respond before problems become visible at scale, rather than just reacting to complaints.

Seamless experience: Customer-centric organisations do not treat marketing, product, and support as separate experiences. From the first interaction to ongoing use, the journey feels connected. Expectations set in marketing are delivered in the product. Support reinforces, rather than repairs, the experience.

Culture and values: Perhaps the most important difference is cultural. Customer-centricity is not owned by one team. It is embedded across the organisation, so much so that even functions traditionally removed from the customer, such as finance, operations, and accounting, operate with an

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awareness of how their decisions ultimately affect the customer experience.

In a nutshell, they recognize that data is a starting point, not a conclusion. It means being willing to question what we think we know, even when the numbers appear to support it. It involves combining quantitative insight with qualitative understanding and treating both as equally important.

They are also always building mechanisms for listening. Not occasionally, but consistently. Surveys, interviews, and direct feedback are not just research exercises, but tools for grounding our assumptions in reality.

In many cases, the most valuable insights come from simply asking customers to explain their decisions in their own words. Why they chose a product. Why they stopped using it. What frustrates them. What matters to them. These are things that cannot always be inferred.

I remember reading Tony Hsieh's book on Zappos some years ago, and it shifted how I think about this entirely. What stood out was not just their focus on customer service, but how deeply it was embedded into the culture. It was not a department. It was actually the business.

organisations that claim to be customer-centric from those that actually are. I recommend you read that book.

Why Does This Even Matter?

This article will be incomplete without looking at the practical side to this that is worth acknowledging.
When customers feel understood, they behave differently. They stay longer. They spend more. They are less sensitive to price changes. And perhaps most importantly, they become more forgiving when things go wrong.

This has a direct impact on business performance. Acquiring new customers is expensive. In many cases, significantly more expensive than retaining existing ones. So when organisations focus on building stronger relationships with the customers they already have, the financial impact compounds over time.

At the same time, in competitive markets such as the ones we operate in, experience has become one of the few areas where brands can still differentiate meaningfully. Products can be replicated. Pricing can be matched. But a consistently good experience, one that feels understood and intentional, is harder to copy.

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And in times of uncertainty, that relationship becomes even more valuable. Customers who feel a connection to a brand are more likely to stay through difficult periods. They are more likely to give the brand the benefit of the doubt, and more willing to continue the relationship even when conditions are not ideal.

All of this reinforces a simple point: Customer-centricity is not just a philosophical idea. It is a business advantage. Bring this up in your next company meeting and watch how it goes. Tell me on LinkedIn.

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