"It Takes a Leap of Faith"
(to become customer-centric)

I love Bruce Springsteen. And I love this lyric more than any other of his classic lines. At least I did. But now, thanks to an unfortunate random thought, every time I hear these words I think of CRM. Now, I love CRM, too, but not to the point of wanting it top of mind while driving to the supermarket or out to dinner with my wife.

Companies with Lead Feet That Can't Jump

But think about it I do, thanks (or no thanks) to an unwelcome association. Over our time in business, we've worked with clients that successfully leaped over the chasm separating customer-centric business from business-as-usual. And we've discouraged others bound to fail from even trying. But there's a third set—the bane of us CRM consultants—that just won't jump. They act like they have lead in their feet. They're living proof that achieving customer-centricity does require a leap of faith.

Credeping back from the edge

At least some of these executives and their companies even start out on the right path. They develop customer-centric strategies. Then they correctly align process to strategies. Then, having wisely waited to buy software, they properly align technology with process. Only to creep up to the edge and flinch. And shuffle. And prevaricate. And finally turn back because they can't take the risk, or perhaps more accurately <i>won't take the risk</i>. All that work to wind up doing business-as-usual better. In other words, doing the wrong stuff visa customers more effectively and efficiently.

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Hell, we even worked with one financial institution that leaped over—but then leaped back again after a new “dominant traditional” executive arrived (and no, that’s not a Meyers-Briggs type).

A matter of personality

What gives? Well, there are two basic types of executives and corporate cultures: those that can visualize success and act on their vision; and those that need to count their success before they can act. And we don’t have to guess which is the problem set.

Executives and companies successfully taking the leap have one thing (at minimum) in common—they can act on their gut instinct. Take Best Buy for example. A perfectly customer-centric company? Of course not. But miles ahead of all their national competitors, to the point of nearly putting all of them out of business. When Best Buy began its massive conversion from customer nightmare cost-cutter to customer-friendly purveyor of higher quality goods, executive management made the leap of faith without benefit of statistical near-certainty. Likewise Southwest Airlines. Likewise Amazon.com. Likewise Hilton and Marriott, which understood that building customer relationships through quality service was becoming the primary competitive differentiator—but couldn’t prove it on paper before initiating huge investments in upgrading the customer experience.

Intuitive decisions

This doesn’t mean that companies taking “the leap of faith” don’t build statistical models or run a slew of financial projections. That’s just good risk management. But they’re willing to roll the dice based on their vision of customer-centric success.

Unfortunately, such executives and companies form a very distinct minority. Their majority brethren can’t (or won’t) accept the premise that adding new value to customers will add value back to the company. Despite all the customer-centric talk floating about, most executives and companies cling to the concept that customers must “lose” for the company to “win.” They’re mired in the vision of one glass of water that companies and customers must fight over. So they have to calculate how much of the glass each side will seize, and see with near-statistical certainty how the contest will end—before it’s played.

Hey, no guts no glory. But from a customer perspective, it disappoints. And from the distance of customers not living and breathing CRM, it baffles. You betcha it does.