Supporter experience: what it is and why it matters.

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Paul, a charity, sport, and CSR leader, joined Oaks in 2023 as the Director of Charities. With a 20-year career in the military and various strategic roles in organisations including The Football Association, Barclays, and Blesma – The Limbless Veterans, Paul brings a wealth of experience to his current role. His expertise lies in national strategy, programme development, partnerships, and consultancy, particularly within the charity and sport sectors.

Across the charity sector, it's widely recognised that providing a positive experience for supporters is a crucial part of fundraising. Blackbaud's 2022 Supporter Experience Report revealed that 93% of charities believe supporter experience is important and 61% say they are committed to improving their supporter experience.

But, what does that actually mean? And how can charities incorporate supporter experience into their own fundraising endeavours? In this article, we define supporter experience, explore why it is so important to attracting and maintaining loyal supporters, and suggest ways to help charities transform the concept into reality.

What is supporter experience?

Supporter experience is the sum of all the interactions a supporter has with your charity across every touchpoint they encounter. It describes the feelings and perceptions that the supporter experiences while interacting with your organisation in any capacity. It is both fluid and cumulative: evolving with each individual interaction and building over time. At its essence, it focuses on building positive and meaningful relationships between charities and their supporters.

There's a tendency to associate supporter experience with individual giving – and that is definitely a fundamental part of it. However, charities are often surrounded by a complex system of supporters, each with unique needs and priorities. Supporters could be individual donors, but they might also include trusts and foundations, corporates, volunteers, and a variety of other stakeholders, whose experience is equally as important to the success of your organisation.

Why does it matter?

Supporter experience is the lesser-known relative of its private sector equivalent: customer experience. Customer experience is an established objective for businesses across every industry, and its benefits are well documented:

- Brands that do customer experience well can bring in 5.7x more revenue than their competitors who perform poorly in this area.
- 64% of customers are more likely to recommend a brand if they have a positive experience.
- 32% of customers will stop dealing with a brand after one bad customer experience.

Although there is often a perception that the approach to and measurement of customer experience is more sophisticated and data-driven than supporter experience, charities are quickly stepping up and reaping the rewards. Organisations who have chosen to prioritise and invest in their supporter experience capabilities report benefits such as:

- Enhanced supporter engagement
- Increased supporter loyalty
- Improved supporter retention
- Increased supporter involvement
- Higher value gifts
- More responsive supporters

At a time when many charities are struggling to stand out from the crowd and acquire new donors, as well as maintain their regular ones, caring about your supporters and meeting their needs can make all the difference.

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How can charities level up their approach to supporter experience?

Despite recognising its importance, only 25% of charities believe they are doing supporter experience well. Of those that do, investing in technology and data appears to be the key to success. The struggle among many charity leaders is indicative of a broader issue in the way that supporter experience is viewed. Charities must shift away from seeing supporter experience as a theoretical concept or a 'nice to have' and towards viewing it as a strategic focus area.

Taking a strategic approach to supporter experience means setting clear objectives, with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that are underpinned by quantifiable metrics. The private sector has recognised this for decades: the primary reason why customer experience techniques are more advanced is their ability to be measured and analysed.

How can you measure supporter experience?

A good place to start is by assessing how well you're currently performing. There are two key metrics to measure:

- Acquisition. Are you attracting new supporters? Look at the number of new donations you receive over a year. Calculate this as a percentage of total donations and compare this to performance over previous years. Track this against events or campaigns that you have held – did a certain activity cause a surge in new donations?
- Retention. Are supporters sticking around for the long term? Look at how many of your donors are giving more than once. Divide the number of returning donors by the total number of donors to get your retention rate. If donors appear not to return to your cause after the initial donation, it could indicate that their experience was lacking in some way.

Other metrics for tracking supporter engagement include:
- Email open and click rates
- Newsletter subscribers
- Event attendances
- Social media engagement

The best way to gauge how well you're doing supporter experience? Ask your supporters. Blackbaud's Supporter Experience report revealed that giving supporters the opportunity to provide feedback is essential when it comes to delivering a good experience. It also enables you to collect more quantifiable data to inform your approach.

A couple of popular ways to track customer experience numerically (which can be adapted to your own needs) are:
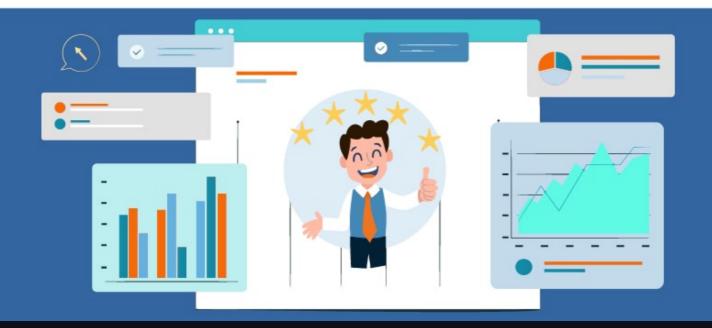
- Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT). A standard CSAT survey asks: "How satisfied were you with [service] today?" on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very unsatisfied and 5 is very satisfied. Ask this question at a particular point on your supporter journey, like the 'thank you' page after an online donation, to understand how you are performing in a particular area. To calculate CSAT, add up the number of 4 and 5 ratings, divide by the number of responses, and multiply by 100.
- Net Promoter Score (NPS). A standard NPS survey asks: "How likely is it that you would recommend [organisation X/service Y] to a friend?" on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not likely at all and 10 is very likely. For charities, this could be adapted to assess how likely supporters would be to donate/volunteer again in future. Calculate NPS by categorising respondents into detractors (0 to 6), passives (7 and 8) and promoters (9 and 10) and subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters. Free online NPS calculators are also available!

You might also want to create a bespoke survey to collect qualitative data from your supporters. Although this information is more difficult to measure, it can provide a deeper insight into the specific motivations and challenges that affect supporters.

Questions might include:
- Why did you donate to/volunteer with X charity?
- Did you make any additional donations?
- Did you receive a thank you after your donation/volunteering?
- How would you like to receive news/updates from us in the future?

The more information you possess on your supporters, the better you can serve them.

Strategies to improve supporter experience

Once charities have shifted their rationale around supporter experience, there are several techniques they can use to improve their approach:

- Map your supporter journeys. Identify each individual touchpoint between your organisation and supporters and evaluate how they tend to navigate between them. What does this journey look like? Are there any obvious pain points? Blackbaud's Supporter Experience Toolkit provides clear guidance to help you map and optimise your supporter journeys.

- Invest in your Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and data collection capabilities. As we've already covered, collecting data on your supporters and managing it effectively is fundamental to providing a positive experience. Even for very small charities, investing in a simple CRM system to help you store and categorise your supporters' data can make a huge difference. Check out Charity Digital's guide to CRM systems for charities to see what options are out there.

- Prioritise personalisation. Linked to the point above: categorising your supporters will enable you to tailor your communications based on their preferences and interests. Examples might include sending relevant volunteering opportunities to supporters in the local area, or updates to donors to a particular community fundraising initiative as it gets underway.

- Gratitude and recognition. It will come as no surprise that thanking your supporters is on this list. Part of a great experience is recognising every contribution supporters make, whether big or small. Showing appreciation will build loyalty by reinforcing their value to the organisation.

- Resolve problems. This is more commonly associated with customer experience, but it's important to use your channels to address any issues your supporters might have. No organisation is perfect, and a problem resolved quickly and empathetically can be a better relationship-building tool than if the problem had never occurred!

Providing a great supporter experience doesn't need to be complicated. It also isn't something smaller charities should feel excluded from. In our experience, it's really about a shift in mindset: taking supporter experience from a philosophy backed up by anecdotal data and sporadic feedback to a measurable objective within your overall fundraising strategy. Ultimately, charities who use the resources available to them to make their supporters feel informed, valued and understood, won't go too far wrong.

Contact Us

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