

Astro: Top 10 Malaysian companies to ace CX

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Manoj Menon

Welcome to Twimbit Podcast. In today's episode, we talk with Martine Williamson, Director of Customer Experience with Astro. Twimbit recently completed a study on the top companies in Malaysia to ace customer experience. We benchmark all companies in Malaysia on four pillars; customer service, digital experience, employee experience, and brand experience. As a result of this study, we narrow down the top 10 companies who ace it. And congratulations to Astro, which is in one of the top 10 companies to ace customer experience in Malaysia. So delighted that Martine Williamson is here to talk to us about what they do at Astro to help them be in the top 10 in Malaysia. So welcome, Martine, and thank you very much for joining us.

Martine Williamson

Thanks very much for having me. Delighted to come and chat about customer experience.

Manoj Menon

Thanks, Martine, so we did a study on the Malaysian market to identify the best companies to ace customer experience. We benchmarked companies on four distinct parameters. We looked at customer service, employee experience, digital experience, and brand story. And we aggregated the score and the performance of companies across about 16 different parameters in these four categories. And Astro emerged as one of the top companies in that regard.

First up, I wanted to start off by asking Martine, well, Martine - tell us a bit about your journey in customer experience. Where did you start your career? How did you end up in customer service, customer experience, and your role here at Astro?

Martine Williamson

Sure. So, you obviously know by my accent, I'm obviously not Malaysian. I'm originally from Scotland in the UK, started my life, I spent probably the best part of 20 years, which makes me sound quite old, actually, when I say that out loud. Working in various different sectors; in finance, in telecoms, in media, transforming companies to focus on customer experience. And last 10 years, I spent at Sky TV in UK, in the media, and they went on a huge transformation journey over a period of seven

years, really focusing in on putting the customer at the heart of their business and transforming their products and their services. And that brought me to Malaysia, to come and join Astro. I've been here for 18 months. And it's been an absolute pleasure to come here. Obviously very different world from where I'm used to. But actually, when you strip it back, customers; actually, their expectations are the same world over. And so, from a customer experience perspective, it's been great to try and understand how can we deliver what customers want to see from a pay TV provider here in Malaysia.

Manoj Menon

What is the biggest difference, Martine, between customers in UK and customers in Malaysia?

Martine Williamson

I would say the only difference is probably time. And actually, they're more digitized in the UK. So, things like automated payments through your banking is the norm now, but it wasn't certainly 10 years ago. And so customers now definitely want to do things more from a digital perspective. But other than that, actually, they just want great content, right? They want great entertainment, they want to be able to watch on various devices. But yeah, they've got more similarities than differences, I would say.

Manoj Menon

And you moved here, right in the thick of the pandemic, just as the pandemic - so how easy or difficult was it for you to settle in? And then, immediately after you joined, you had a challenging situation with, maybe potentially agents not able to come to office? How did you navigate this entire spectrum?

Martine Williamson

Yeah, very good question. It was a bit of a baptism of fire. I guess nobody expected that. Right. I guess every company had to respond very quickly to a developing situation that none of us had experienced. And I guess, what we wanted to do was to make sure that we continue to provide a service to customers, particularly because everyone was going into lockdown, and you're at home. So, the one thing you do have is your TV, your entertainment, and your broadband. So, it was really important that we kept those services going for our customers. And it was really important that we could balance doing that as well as looking after our staff. So one of the things that we were quite proud of that we were able to do for our customers was keep our operations alive by keeping stuff coming in, and making sure that we could continue to play out our content. And where customers needed us from a customer service perspective, we were there. It wasn't easy; we had some challenges, particularly with our installers, couldn't go into customers homes, because of COVID. And that was the right thing to do. So, it meant that we had to delete some of our services, but our customers were, were fantastic.

They really supported us, they understood, the situation that we were in. And I guess, from an Astro and a team perspective, I'm really proud of actually the team, because we all had to really step up our game. And really think about what was important and what, where we need to focus, what small time and effort that we had. On the things that were important for our customers.

Manoj Menon

So, Astro is, for you, now, your competition is global content companies, internet platforms is competition. You are transforming rapidly from being just a satellite provider to getting into other digital services, streaming services, commerce. So how is this transformation taking place? What are the results, early results that we are seeing, so far?

Martine Williamson

Yeah, I mean, listen, we are very lucky. We've got a really supportive CEO in Henry Tan, who has been a huge advocate for Astro. In terms of customer experience, he's very clear that we need to make sure that we put the customer at the heart of everything we do. And so everything we've worked out, in terms of our experiences, not just even a bit of customer experiences, but a product experience, as well as digital experience. In our product side, we've done some great things over the last 18 months that I've been here. We've launched the, the 4K Ultra HD, which you can get on our Ultra-Box. We want to become a streaming aggregator, as you've just mentioned. And we've recently just announced the partnership with Disney+ Hotstar, and we will continue to build on that, with our HP goal, and also IT. So we want to do more in that space. And you'll see more as we, as products and services, coming through the next few years. And then I guess on top of that, we also have our customer service experience. So, the customers just expects the basics from you, things like working across our customer, touchpoints, or whether you contact us through the contact center, or online or your service centers. Just be there, be there when we need you fix our problem, or give us the information that we need and make it seamless and make it simple. That's all customers want. So, we've been looking across a touch, at touch points, to try and improve how the customers engage with us across each of those different areas. A big part of that has been particularly in the contact center. One of the things that customers didn't like about Astro when I joined was it's really difficult to get through to customer service. So we redesigned our IVR, made it much simpler for customers to get in and speak to our agents when they needed to do that. And that's been well received from our customers. And then for those customers that just don't like talking to us and much prefer actually having something digital, we launched the WhatsApp service. So WhatsApp is a way for customers to get information and contact us from a digital perspective. So it's now, again, very nice, very easy. And, we've got thousands of customers to interact with, on that channel every day. So it's been really popular. And you know, I'm, one of the things we've done is around our bill. We've simplified our bill, customer service, quite complicated some things to work out - what I'm paying, and what, what my bill is every month. So we simplify that for customers. And we tested that out with customers before - we wanted to make sure that was something that, was going to be well received. So those are the sort of types of things that we've been working on. We've got more to go, we've got lots, certainly lots that come down the pipeline. In terms of measurement, when you're doing something right, when you can ask your customers for feedback, which we do. Every quarter we

do some surveys around customer experience, in our customer experience score, is very healthy. Customers are telling us you're on the right tracks, keep going, keep giving us more.

Manoj Menon

How, let's see, how would you measure? Do you measure customer success or customer experience success as, the CSAC scores, or Net Promoter Scores? Is there a particular benchmark that you are using and you gravitate more to?

Martine Williamson

Yeah, we do. We use the NPS and CSAC, as our two main scores for customer satisfaction. So Net Promoter Score, obviously, is around how, customers recommending our products and our services to other customers. And we measured that, you know at group level, across all of our content, our products, value for money. But we also measure that actually on an interaction level. So if anybody interacts with across our touchpoints, we will survey our customer to see, how was your interaction? Have we fixed your issue? And would you recommend us? So that we just know or not, on a regular basis, everybody that's delivering customer service at the front line, is doing a really good job and is making sure that all of the stuff that we talk about is being translated in that front line, and delivered to our customers every day. So that's the heartbeat that we use to check that we're on the right tracks.

Manoj Menon

Do you see any difference? In the customer experience scores, even digital versus the traditional voice channels? Are you seeing any difference? Do you see any trends there?

Martine Williamson

I would say that we see slightly higher than the digital score, just ever so slightly than the traditional. And I guess, part of that is, people that engage with us in the digital channels tend to complete the score more often, because they're a bit more digitally savvy, a bit more engaged, to be able to give feedback. But, credit to all of our customers, actually. They're very good at giving us feedback, in our service, and they're very honest with us around what they like, what they don't like, what they want to see more of? And that's what we use to feed into our strategy and our transformation plans.

Manoj Menon

How do you see the transition from voice to digital? Is it happening rapidly? Did the pandemic, in a way, accelerate it? Are people willing to do more self-service? What are the trends you're seeing, getting accelerated as a result of this?

Martine Williamson

Yeah, so really good question, actually. Yeah, we did see that, right. Because obviously, it was quite difficult to get through to human beings. When we were, we were in lockdown, because we had a reduced workforce. And we did see customers engaging with us on more of our digital channels. And that's helped us accelerate more of our digital plans, so that customers can stay in that channel. We did see some customers drift back, once they, once the lockdown was up, the status to engage us again, through the more traditional channels. But, we're hoping that we, the more we can push, more of our great content, more about our great services, through the digital, through our apps, then that's where customers will choose to engage with us. And we see that with other companies, are moving more in that direction. And I guess that will just become this sort of wave of customers to start changing the behavior?

Manoj Menon

How about employee experience? You talked briefly about the importance of making sure staff is safe? How is the emphasis on employee experience changing? And what role does it really play in your ability to deliver great customer experience?

Martine Williamson

Yeah, I'm a huge fan of people experience. I believe that actually, you can have the best products, the best services, but actually what was behind them, as the human beings. And so for us, it was making sure that everybody loves coming to work at Astro, and that they feel responsible for the delivery of customer experience. It shouldn't matter whether you work in technology, or whether you work in finance, or whether you're on the front line. Ultimately, you're there to deliver a great customer experience. So we've created a really good culture program at Astro in order to try and make sure that we align with our brand program, as well as our people program, are aligned together, and do quite seamlessly working together to make sure that we've got, the customer at the heart of what they do. And I know, it's sometimes that can be difficult if you're working in a particular area that feels it's a bit intangible, because the customer seems far away from where you are and the work that you do. But actually, the culture program that we work in and, bringing that to life has helped those people to feel really connected to the customer.

Manoj Menon

Are there some specifics in terms of things that you do that could be interesting for other companies to learn, especially from a people experience standpoint?

Martine Williamson

Yeah. I mean, so, for us, it's, as I say, we've created this program that's focused around sort of three pillars. How do we make our people more creative, in order to make sure that we can value their views and their opinions, some of them have worked in other companies. So what can you bring to the table? So, that creativity around what are the things that we can do to make things much better for our customers? So we have given them the space to be able to be creative, and that, to be able to add value to some of that those transformations is what we've tried to do. We also make sure that people feel inclusive, that everybody's treated equally, when everybody has a voice, and we also make sure that everybody's accountable, right, so do what you say you're going to do and deliver what you say you're going to do for customers. So, really feel like, I have a responsibility for making sure that Astro, as a whole, can deliver on our customers. So I think creating some programs around that, creating some visuals around that, building into their, their KPIs for the year, how can they contribute throughout the year as part of their performance in, to the culture of what we're trying to do for customers, is a good way for us to keep it front and center. And also, a way for you to maybe measure it with your employees, that they are actually contributing.

Manoj Menon

How do you tie the importance of the brand to customer experience? Is there, how do you? How does the two come together? And what do you see, let's say, as a customer experience leader, and customer service leader, how do you integrate that effectively with the brand strategy or the brand experience?

Martine Williamson

Yeah, I mean, the two things have to go hand-in-hand, right? You either, they're not mutually exclusive, they go together. Our brand, out in the marketplace, is measured through our NPS, right? Is measured about how, what do people think of our brand? What did they think of us? Would you recommend us? How loyal are customers to us, to our brand? And all of that placed through in the way in which you deliver your customer experience. So if you're delivering poor customer experience, your brand is going to be impacted. And so, the two things absolutely have to go together. So what we've done quite well, and quite seamlessly here, at Astro, is had, our sort of brand, roadmap and our customer experience merged together, along with an employee culture program, so that they all link together, very well. And it's a nice story to tell both our customers, as well as be able to tell our employees, how these things link together.

Manoj Menon

So, Martine, what are your key priorities moving forward? And where do you, let's say, what is the ideal customer experience that you want Astro to be able to do a couple of years from today, or a few months from today, or a few days from today?

Martine Williamson

Yeah, customers expectations are getting higher, right, they have so much choice now. And we need to be able to be responsible, be able to respond to them very quickly. So, for me, actually, I want to get much closer to our customers. So, I want to make sure that we do much more, customer closeness events, really testing things out with our customers, that we've got a really good beta program that's up and running just now. So when we do have a new product, new service, we actually bring our customers in to test it out before it goes mass market. And that gives us a good view of whether the, some of the assumptions and the designs that we've done, are actually going to hit the ground running. So we want to do more than that space, absolutely. Absolutely do more than the digital space, particularly with the, as we continue with the sort of COVID situation, when we see more of our customers moving into that digital space. So really pushing on our apps and our websites, to make sure that we can drive traffic and customers to engage with us more on our digital manner. And then I just want the customer to be excited about, the new products, services and content that we're going to be bringing to them. We've got some really exciting plans, and we just hope that the customers love it. And if they don't, then we will get feedback, we'll understand why. And then we'll rethink and we'll go back out again, and we'll just keep back, come back around that loop.

Manoj Menon

Martine, in your personal opinion, other than Astro, which are the other brands that you look up to for customer experience. Who inspires you? And what is it about them that inspires you? So, that is a great learning list for people.

Martine Williamson

Yeah, I guess there's a couple of brands, right? I mean, there's some obvious ones, like your, Apples of the world, who, I guess, when you look at some of them. Like Apple, they come across as being a quite a creative organization, willing to try things that are new and different. And from a customer service perspective, they're not very traditional in the way that they deliver customer service. For them, it's all about the sort of experience that, when you, particular when you go into their shops, you get a, you got a feeling that you are important, when you go into the shop. So, irrespective of what you want to do, and I guess all customers love that, right? The love that, to feel like they are important and in that space. And I guess there's a couple, a couple of travel places. A couple of the airlines are very good as well. I think some of their particular loyalty programs that they do, that rewarding loyalty and looking after the customers. It's all about feeling right, as a customer, you want to feel special, you want to feel like, every time I engage with this

particular brand, I really enjoy it. I'll walk away with a warm, fuzzy feeling. And I, I think there are a few the airlines get that very well, you do that very well.

Manoj Menon

Martine, in the time you've been with Astro, what is your, what do you think is your proudest moment, or the biggest achievement that you have seen or heard so far?

Martine Williamson

So, that was an easy one, actually. It was probably our toughest time that it was during the MCO, when we had to respond obviously, very quickly to the situation. I'm right across, Astro, we all pulled together, and delivered some amazing things for our customers. So we gave them complimentary viewing for customers, because we knew they were going to be stuck at home with families, which we know is difficult, at any given time, never mind for a few months, day and night. We also give complimentary use so that people could keep up, to keep up to date with what was happening with the MCO, which was important. So people knew what the changing situation was. We also created some new learning channels. We knew that, people's kids were at home, they weren't at school. So it was important to give them something, to do with their, with their families. And we actually created some stay-at-home concerts, which was great. These concerts that felt like a bit of normality for people sitting at home and getting some entertainment for them. And we also actually offered some Astro Go channels, to non-Astro customers. So, we give 22 channels for people to watch for free, just as a way of saying, keep your chin up, but everyone, we're all in this together. So I think that coming together was amazing for us. And we know that there are some customers, were disappointed because their favorite sports went on, because all the sports things were canceled. So, we gave them rebates, because, there was no sports. So therefore, we, we give them some money back so they didn't have to pay. And, as I said earlier, this stuff, you were coming into the office to keep the broadcast and keep our customer service running through that time. So I'm hugely, hugely proud of the team Astro. It was a massive team effort. And as difficult as it was, is definitely the best time that I've definitely had here.

Manoj Menon

Thanks, this transition from being a satellite provider to being a streaming provider, can you help us? Can you distill it a bit more for us?

Martine Williamson

Yeah, I mean, it's a good question, right. So, I think what you're seeing, really, with a lot of the pay TV providers and ourselves, Astro is, typically people sit down to watch TV, in the living room, at home on their big screen. And more and more what we're seeing with customers that actually, they want to be able to watch, when they want to watch, on any device that they want to watch. And so that's where

our transmission is going. That's where we're starting to invest for our customers, because we have to be able to respond to that. And actually, if you look at the households - the needs are changing, the younger generation in the households, either go to YouTube, to watch whatever they want now. That's sort of, younger age. So, they want something different, in terms of the viewing and their entertainment, and that's what we need to respond to, and that's what we're building towards.

Manoj Menon

Thank you very much, Martine. I think that was an excellent, inspiring discussion. The key takeaways for me are clearly - one, the focus and the rigor on operational metrics of customer service. The simple measures of CSAC and NPS. The people transformation initiatives you talked about are, I believe, extremely relevant for every organization, as well. And finally, the transformation of Astro from being a satellite television provider to becoming an online streaming company is something that all of Malaysia will be very closely watching. Wishing you and Astro the very success and looking forward to talking to you a year from today, to continue to see the progress Astro is making in its transformation. Thank you very much again, Martine.

Martine Williamson

Thank you very much. It's been, it's been great talking to you today. Thank you.

Thank you