Engaging, Enlightening and Empowering Members Helps Solarity Credit Union Increase NPS by 40 Percent

Nurturing People’s Financial Dreams

Solarity Credit Union is a financial cooperative with more than 50,000 members. The institution is committed to nurturing people’s dreams and engaging them in achieving their financial aspirations, enlightening them to limitless possibilities, and empowering them to reach life’s most important goals. The company provides a suite of banking products and services including savings accounts for the entire family, free and dividend checking, free online banking, and mobile banking.

Solarity has more than a $900m dollars of assets under management and provides business loans and services, automobile loans, mortgages, RV loans, credit card services and a host of other services.

From Myths to Method

The Solarity team was working hard but didn’t feel they were working as smart as they could. They knew the importance of listening to members, but at the time, all they had was anecdotal evidence. The team wanted to hear from members more often, and in a more systematic way and have a way to surface and understand what their feedback was saying about the business. They also needed a way to share the insights within the organization.

“We really see customer experience, or as we refer to it, Member experience, as our competitive advantage,” said Ralph Cumbee, Senior Vice President and CXO at Solarity Credit Union. “Without a good Member experience I don’t know how you can be successful. We know that being able to listen to their perceptions in real-time was critical if we were going to stay competitive.”
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An Experience to Remember

Solarity’s foray into member experience began about seven years ago with a small survey program. “We certainly did not approach member experience in a holistic way in the beginning,” said Cumbee. “Twice a year we’d randomly select members and send them a survey by mail. We then compiled the results manually. We knew that this method wasn’t capturing what members thought about their experiences in a comprehensive way.”

Almost two years ago Cumbee was traveling for business and had a bad experience with an airline employee whose behavior almost caused him to miss his flight. As he sat down and prepared for takeoff, he was convinced he would never fly this airline again. With his frustration level peaking, Cumbee had no idea that this experience would change his view of member experience and the way he tackled Solarity’s program. At that moment a survey popped up on his phone. He was able to vent his frustration back to the Airline but thought that it would go no further.

“Later that day I got a call from an executive at the airline,” said Cumbee. “I was surprised and caught off guard by the call and even more surprised by the concern and interest the executive showed as we talked. I could tell he was sincere in his desire to hear about my experience and do what it took to retain me as a customer. His concern and interest that day turned me into a loyal client and I fly that airline all the time now.”

It was a great success story for the airline, but even more importantly, it was a pivotal moment for Cumbee and Solarity Credit Union.
“After I hung up with the airline executive, I sat there and thought to myself, ‘This is what we need to be doing for our members,’” recalls Cumbee. “I set out to learn as much as I could so that we could implement a member experience program that could take even the most ardent detractor like me, and turn them into loyal members.”

Raising the Bar

As he thought about his airline experience and the actions of the executive, Cumbee came to an important realization. “I realized that we were simply compiling a score with our existing program, and a suspect one at that” explained Cumbee. “We didn’t really dig in or analyze the meaning behind the numbers. Our score bounced around. Then we went through a merger and our score fell. But because we didn’t have the right listening technology and analytics tools in place, we didn’t know why. I realized that NPS is about more than just a score.

Cumbee and his team at Solarity partnered with InMoment to implement a member experience optimization platform that allows them to listen to, understand and share member and employee insights throughout their organization.

“Most organizations that work with NPS still focus primarily on the score,” said John Sperry, CEO and Founder of InMoment. “And while a score can certainly provide good direction, there’s a lot it can’t do. Most importantly, helping companies understand why their members feel the way they do so they can take the best actions, whether that’s fixing a problem, or tapping into an opportunity. Solarity Credit Union is a great example of how to implement and execute NPS as a system, not just a score. By having the right culture and technology in place, along with a focus on execution, they’ve been able to achieve remarkable results in a short time.”

Tapping into Member Wisdom

Solarity Credit Union understands that “Member experience” is comprised of many interactions and “journeys” their members have with the organization over time. So one major change they made was to set up multiple listening posts to ensure they understand which elements of their overall experience are most important, and how to shape them to meet and even exceed member expectations.
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When they started the new listening initiative, Solarity set out to identify pain points, understand their root causes, and eliminate or transform them quickly. One example is the cooperative’s drive-through services. According to Cumbee, “Our drive-through service is very popular because it simplifies and speeds up member transactions. In an attempt to make things even quicker, we installed a remote drive-through that we thought would really appeal to members. Turns out, we were wrong.”

“At one point, we started seeing a negative spike in sentiment around that drive-through, which surprised us,” explained Cumbee. “We then drilled into the comments where we found members voicing concerns about delays.”

Armed with this insight, Cumbee dispatched his team to observe the drive through. “They determined that the placement of the remote facility only showed the Member in front of the stand and that tellers had no feedback on how long the line was. We rely on those tellers to open up new lines when we get busy to make sure members can get through quickly. While our initial thinking was good, the execution was counterproductive. Thanks to our ability to listen to members, we were able to act quickly to resolve the problem by installing cameras that allowed tellers to have a better view.”

In-the-Moment Action

Cumbee admits to becoming so attached to listening to members, that he often keeps one eye on the meeting he’s attending and the other on the feedback reports. “During one meeting, I received a real-time alert indicating a member had experienced less-than-stellar service. I mentioned this to the colleague with whom I was meeting and it turned out he knew the member personally. We called her right away to thank her for the feedback and ask how we could help. She was stunned that we had called so quickly and appreciative that we took her feedback seriously enough to reach out personally and address her concern.”
Cumbee and his team are able close the loop on individual Member issues, as well as more systemic challenges quickly and thoroughly utilizing the InMoment platform. “Prior to working with InMoment we made decisions about the member experience primarily on anecdotal evidence,” said Cumbee. “With InMoment, we have authentic feedback from real members that allows us to understand their needs in real-time and make changes quickly, often in less than 24 hours. We can also address longer-term trends and opportunities, all based on exactly what members want and need from us.”

Support from the Top

An essential component of a successful Net Promoter System is getting leaders to support member-centricity as both a cultural and budget priority. Without their commitment, improving member experience becomes more challenging, if not impossible.

Solarity’s executives were invested right from the beginning. “As an executive team, we looked at our industry two years ago and quickly realized that the only real place to differentiate ourselves was in Member experience,” recalls Cumbee. “When the executive team heard my experience with the airline it confirmed that we needed to step our game up, and they all expressed their complete support. Once we had this commitment from the executive team, it turned the whole paradigm on its head.”

This step is often the most challenging but the most impactful. “Securing executive buy-in is important, however maintaining and growing their investment requires constant attention and communication of what we’re hearing from our members, how it is impacting our business, and what actions we’re taking,” explained Cumbee.

Diving In

With top-level support secured, Cumbee and his team decided to jump into the deep end and rolled out their new member experience and feedback program throughout the organization.

“It was a little overwhelming at first,” admitted Cumbee. “It forced us to do some things sooner and make a big difference right up front. Having that torrent coming at you really forces you to act. When those first insights started rolling in, our senior management team took a month and personally
called every detractor. That made a statement to all our members, as well as to our employees, about their level of commitment to creating a very different experience. I’ve learned so much talking directly to members.”

Cumbee admits that when they first started, the process was a real challenge. Because Solarity hadn’t been listening in a comprehensive way, members had some pent up frustrations.

“We finally gave our members a chance to give feedback and they did,” said Cumbee. “We had a list of multiple areas we had to address and improve quickly. Once we did that our members saw our commitment and knew that we were serious about listening and acting on their feedback.”

Solarity was able to get some quick wins with members by eliminating several processes that were very painful for them, and didn’t do much, if anything, to help the business. “Thanks to our ability and willingness to listen and take quick action on what members were telling us, we were able to increase our Net Promoter Score by 40 percent over a very short period of time period.”

After a successful start, Cumbee and his team are more convinced than ever of the massive benefits of delivering a great guest experience “There is no limit to what you can spend on things like advertising and marketing to boost your brand’s image. However no amount of money can beat the insights we’re getting directly by listening to our members,” concluded Cumbee. “Our initial success, added a dedicated member advocate charged with responding to every detractor and promoter, and then taking what they find and passing it back to responsible parties to close the loop on every interaction. It’s making a huge difference to our relationships, and our bottom line.”

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Since partnering with InMoment, Solarity Credit Union has achieved tremendous success, including:

- **Transformed the culture** into a member-centric environment, including buy in from the entire organization, from the executive team, to the tellers who interface with members on a daily basis
- **Gained the ability to close the loop** on individual incidents, and identify, address and close the loop on root causes
- **Increased NPS scores by more than 40 percent**