

# The Ingredients of a Sustainable Customer Experience

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What are the ingredients of a great customer experience? Which ones are important for its sustainability?

## A “New Guy” in Town

A new supermarket has opened in my Toronto neighbourhood earlier this year. “Well, yawn!” – you may think, “what’s exciting about that?” This supermarket is a new entrant into the already saturated grocery marketplace, with

players from No Frills to Loblaws to Whole Foods to Pusateri’s. Who would enter these bloody waters? It’s an Ottawa-based chain called Farm Boy – and, actually, they do not consider themselves a supermarket. They are a self-proclaimed “food experience”.

Since the inception of supermarkets a century ago, supermarkets experienced their golden era of wide parking lots, deep shopping carts, and broad choice of packaged goods. But lately the consumers’ preferences have been shifting.

People still want convenience, they want to have family meals – but they also increasingly demand fresh, preservative-free, low-fat, low-sugar, and low-salt choices. They question what exactly went into their Chinese take-out or pizza delivery or frozen burgers.

Grocery stores have been reinventing themselves in response to these changing demands. The “perimeter” departments (traditionally situated along the walls of a supermarket) such as bakery, produce, meat, fish, and dairy have been growing. The ready-to-eat counters have been introduced, offering salads and sushi and Chinese and soup. More and more supermarkets are building eat-in areas with tables and chairs. Some give cooking classes to introduce customers to better, healthier eating – and educate on good nutrition. Even giants like Wal-Mart have been noticing the trend, launching their own meal-kits.



## Great “Food Experience”

Farm Boy, the newest Toronto grocery player, went one step further. They zoned in on food exclusively. Specifically – on those “perimeter” departments. You won’t find cat food or tooth paste or laundry detergent in their stores. They say you can get that on Amazon. And you will find very few packaged foods (and most of what you find are private label, like jars of preserves

and jams and “healthy” chips). What you do find in abundance is ready-to-eat meals, ready-to-cook meats, and food stations where they make sushi, pizza, and stir-fry to order.

In each interview that the chain’s CEO Jeff York has given, he talks of the chain’s focus on great product – and great customer experience. The chain is known for focusing on local and organic, supporting Ontario farmers. The executive chef used to cook for the prime minister.

I went on a tour on their opening day. Seemingly half of the store is given to its impressive ready-to-eat bar of hot and cold food options. Everything is \$2.19 per 100 gram, hot or cold, meat or pasta, salad ingredients or prepped and dressed salads. I counted 8 soup options – and the kale mushroom soup that I bought was great.



The store has a very upbeat vibe (not only due to it being its opening day, I’ve visited since). It has subtle luxury cues like terracotta coloured tiles and lots of wood in its interior design. Food is presented in a very appealing manner, and meals in the self-serve bar smell enticingly.

The employees seem happy and all smiles. And trained to please. I asked for a polish sausage to be sliced. This request, while simple on the surface, puzzled the staff: apparently, they don’t slice polish sausage. Or weren’t trained on what to do if asked for such a thing. They whispered between themselves and quickly moved on to fulfilling my request, even if that’s not something



they are supposed to do. Nice? Next time I came, I was told they don’t do that. So... small inconsistencies, but still – aim to please.

The cashier noticed that my salad container wouldn’t close tightly and made the effort to wrap it in an extra plastic bag. As it turned out later, while focusing on this task, she forgot to introduce me to the salad bar card that allows me to earn points towards a free lunch. But again, that hardly affected my overall experience with the store. They were trying very hard to be nice. I felt giddy with all the fresh produce, the abundant

salad bar, and the ready-to-cook meats.

### **Power (or Weakness?) of Employee Experience**

Customer experience is the current buzz word, and anyone focusing on Customer Experience is expected to succeed and beat competition. Because anyone can enter the market and copy you, offering the same products and service... but it’s almost impossible to copy your customers’ experience. So Farm Boy seems to be on its way to great success, right?

One of the foundational ingredients of a successful – and sustainable – customer experience is employee experience. Happy, engaged, and empowered employees, armed with the right tools and processes will do what’s best for the customer. And the customer will pay it back by buying more, shopping more frequently, and bringing friends. In fact, a [recent HBR research](#) found that companies identified as “best place to work” on Glassdoor outperform the S&P 500 companies by considerable margin.

As I went online to learn more about Farm Boy, I stumbled upon the company’s employee reviews on glassdoor. And, frankly, they gave me pause. Most employees start off with the “pros” section, saying that the products are great, and customers are great (well, for the most part), and their colleagues are great. So far so good? Aligned with Farm Boy’s strategy?



As you read their “cons”, you find yourself wondering if Farm Boy is delivering the exceptional customer experience at the expense of their own employee experience. Review after review described micromanagement, petty criticisms – and feeling sorry for the stressed out and over-worked store

managers (those managers felt sorry for themselves, too).

Indeed.ca employee reviews continued on the same note.

Farm Boy started as a privately held company. The chain has been expanding aggressively, doubling from 13 stores in 2013 to 26 stores now (and more announced to open shortly). And earlier this year, it was purchased by Empire Co. Ltd that already owns Sobeys and FreshCo. It is possible that the organization’s focus had shifted to financial metrics in light of their accountability to the investors. It is possible that overtime and high employee turnover are simply the by-product of rapid growth and change. It is possible that once the growth spurt settles, the company will be able to renew its focus on its current employees, rather than pouring all resources into the next opening location. It is also possible that it’s not that bad at all – after all, websites like glassdoor and indeed are not necessarily a scientifically representative sample of the employee population.

But in case it is, I hope it is not too late by then. Customers are already weary of what the acquisition by Empire will do to the beloved chain. Enforcing training and rigorous quality assurance programs into new store locations can keep you in the Customer Experience game for a while. But in the long run, true Customer Experience is a mindset. And mindset needs to be carefully cultivated, rather than enforced. Coaching, frontline empowerment, and career development opportunities need to be added to the focus on product, process, and in-store experience. Those are the ingredients of a great, sustainable customer experience.