

Great Customer Experience
Comes from Operational Excellence



Every CEO feels the pressure: deliver a better customer experience while driving greater operational discipline. Grow with efficiency. Do better with less. It's tempting to treat these as parallel tracks—one about delighting customers; the other about running lean. But customers don't experience these levers separately. To them, it's simple: did your organization deliver on its product experience promise or not?

The reality is simple: customer experience (CX) and operational excellence (OX) are two sides of the same coin. Disney's magic relies on flawless park operations. Delta's reputation depends on punctual departures. FedEx builds trust by marrying guarantees with logistics precision. Apple's sleek devices only impress because of a world-class supply chain. Starbucks' app only feels seamless when the barista hands over a custom latte in minutes.

Per McKinsey & Company, more than 70% of digital transformations fail—not because of tools or technology, but because leaders underestimate or aren't equipped to do the human work of alignment, culture, and talent. Put bluntly: [change without adoption isn't transformation; it's failure in slow motion.](#)

We argue that customer experience (CX) and operational excellence (OX) must be designed together, led from the top, and reinforced through leadership behaviors, culture, and talent strategies. Technology enables—but people make transformation real.

Why transformations stall — and what CEOs must do differently

1. Focus and simplify

When leaders run separate initiatives, complexity multiplies. More work spins up, more money is spent, and trade-offs emerge. Too often, the instinctive response is to “simplify;” however, without addressing the real root causes, simplification becomes cosmetic. Complexity vanishes from the board deck but lingers inside the business, only pushing the pain deeper. Diagnose what really creates the drag. Cut what customers won’t feel and reinvest where they will.

2. Create a single conversation

Siloed reviews produce siloed wins. If marketing celebrates a campaign while delivery silently slips, that win is hollow. Your customers notice immediately. Require joint reviews where promise and delivery are presented together — and celebrate leaders who bridge silos, not just optimize inside them. As one executive put it: “Creating demand you can’t deliver isn’t growth—it’s brand damage.”

3. Align leadership to establish trust

Without strong leadership from the top, it’s nearly impossible to set a clear path forward. When trust in leadership erodes, teams fracture and push different agendas. Customers feel those cracks. As one executive said, “Execution is culture in action.” When CEOs take the time to [identify the right leaders for both current and future challenges](#), take steps to actively [measure their organization’s culture](#), insist conflicts are solved at the table, and prevent politics from taking root, they help ensure that trust in both sides of the house remains strong.

4. Be present on both sides

Employees spot imbalance fast. Cutting ribbons at customer launches means little if leaders never walk the warehouse floor, or if efficiency obsessions overshadow the customer journey. Chair joint reviews, visit call centers and distribution hubs, read customer and employee feedback, and share stories that highlight the importance of both functions.

5. Don’t chase too much at once

When customer experience (CX) launches outpace operational readiness, employees burn out and customers see inconsistent delivery. Small, visible wins build confidence for bigger shifts. Enforce ruthless focus on priorities that serve both functions, publicly stopping projects that don’t connect promise and delivery. When you redeploy talent to higher-impact work, it’s not a failure; it’s progress.

6. Balance the talent equation

Too much creative flair without operational grounding fails. So does operational muscle without customer-first DNA. Upskill insiders to span both sides. Rotate leaders across functions. Bring in external hires who’ve led integrated transformations. The winning formula is creativity plus credibility.

The leadership work only you can do

Leadership is the coin's edge—the connective tissue that holds promise and process together.

The companies that win are led by CEOs who make clarity contagious, unifying promise and process completely.

Your team doesn't need you to have all the answers. They need you to set the vision, show up on both sides of the coin, and prove through your presence that alignment matters. Do that, and complexity becomes manageable, execution gains momentum, and belief spreads faster than resistance. That's when transformation stops being a program—and simply becomes the way your company works.



Authors

Kristi Maynor is a senior member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Consumer practice. She is based in Dallas.

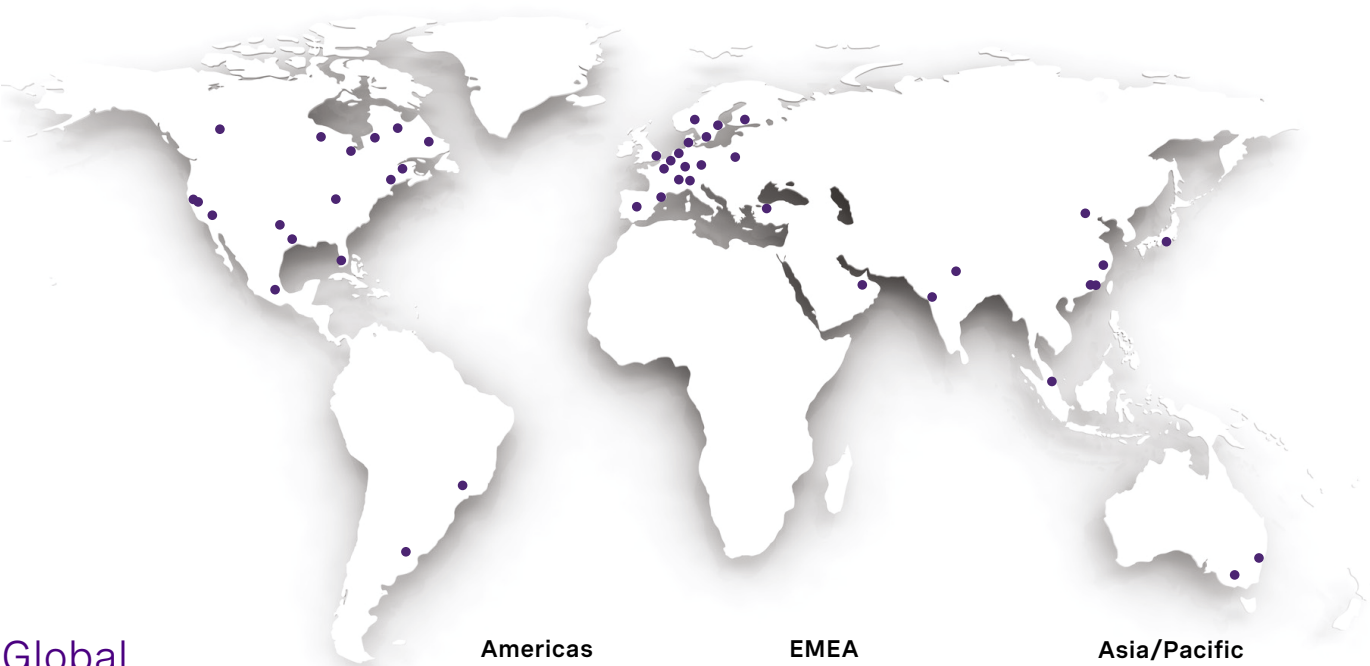
Guhan Selva is a senior member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Consumer Technology practice. He is based in Los Angeles.

Norm Yustin leads Russell Reynolds Associates' Customer Activation & Growth practice. He is based in Chicago.

About Russell Reynolds Associates

Russell Reynolds Associates is a global leadership advisory firm. Our 500+ consultants in 47 offices work with public, private, and nonprofit organizations across all industries and regions. We help our clients build teams of transformational leaders who can meet today's challenges and anticipate the digital, economic, sustainability, and political trends that are reshaping the global business environment. From helping boards with their structure, culture, and effectiveness to identifying, assessing and defining the best leadership for organizations, our teams bring their decades of expertise to help clients address their most complex leadership issues. We exist to improve the way the world is led

www.russellreynolds.com



Global offices

Americas	EMEA	Asia/Pacific
• Atlanta • Boston • Buenos Aires • Calgary • Chicago • Dallas • Houston • Los Angeles • Mexico City • Miami • Minneapolis/St.Paul • Montreal • New York • Palo Alto • San Francisco • São Paulo • Stamford • Toronto • Washington, D.C.	• Amsterdam • Barcelona • Berlin • Brussels • Copenhagen • Dubai • Frankfurt • Hamburg • Helsinki • London • Madrid • Milan • Munich • Oslo • Paris • Stockholm • Warsaw • Zürich	• Beijing • Hong Kong • Melbourne • Mumbai • New Delhi • Shanghai • Shenzhen • Singapore • Sydney • Tokyo