

What CX investment is really buying

Acquisition, retention, sentiment, and why
traditional CX can only ever reach one of the three.

Introduction

No organisation invests in customer experience because it wants a better score.

It invests because it wants more customers to choose it, wants the customers it already has to keep choosing it, and, usually as a secondary and more easily measured proxy for both, wants those customers to feel good about the choice. Acquisition and retention are the behaviour changes CX investment is actually meant to buy. Sentiment is the receipt, not the purchase.

This paper makes a specific claim about why so much CX investment, even genuinely sophisticated, strategically mandated CX investment, fails to convert into either acquisition or retention behaviour change. It isn't that CX teams are measuring the wrong things by accident, or executing poorly. It's that the dominant tools of traditional CX, journey maps, satisfaction surveys, Voice of the Customer programmes built around pain points, are only structurally capable of reaching one of the three outcomes CX investment is meant to buy: sentiment. They can produce a weak, fragile version of the second: retention. They cannot reach the third at all: acquisition.

Elemental CX exists to close that gap. It sits alongside a mature CX programme, not above it. Every journey map, Voice of the Customer programme and measurement pyramid an organisation has already built stays exactly where it is. Elemental CX supplies the layer of understanding into customer choice behaviour that was always missing. But it's worth being precise about what closing that gap actually means. Elemental CX isn't valuable because it completes an elegant model of customer switching behaviour, interesting as that model is, or because it makes a CX programme more diagnostically complete for its own sake. It's valuable because it is the specific mechanism required to convert CX investment into the acquisition and durable retention outcomes most CX programmes were funded to deliver in the first place: outcomes traditional CX structurally cannot reach. The causal layer is the means. Behaviour change is the end.

None of this is speculative. It rests on Jobs to Be Done methodology, refined over years of strategy and innovation work; on Bob Moesta and Clayton Christensen's four forces of progress, among the most empirically grounded accounts of customer switching behaviour available; and on Richard Rumelt's discipline of diagnosis-first strategy. What follows sets out where this insight came from, exactly what Push can and cannot reach, and what it means for how CX leaders should measure and fund their programmes.

How customer experience became a boardroom priority

For most of the last century, organisations competed principally on the product itself: its features, its price, how reliably it worked.

Marketing described what a product did, and competition was largely a contest of specifications. That began to change as more categories matured and the products within them converged on similar features at similar prices. Organisations noticed that customers weren't only weighing what a product could do, but how it felt to discover, buy and keep using it.

Clayton Christensen distilled that shift into a single sentence in *Competing Against Luck*: “New products succeed not because of the features and functionality they offer but because of the experiences they enable.”¹ It reads today like common sense, but at the time it was closer to an operating instruction: if the experience is what customers are actually choosing, then the experience itself, not just the product wrapped around it, has to be deliberately designed, measured and improved, in the same way a product roadmap already is.

That is the idea customer experience as a discipline was built to act on. Over the last two decades, organisations have progressively built infrastructure around it: journey mapping to understand how a customer actually moves through buying and using something, Voice of the Customer programmes to hear directly from them, and metrics like Net Promoter Score to track sentiment at scale and report it upward. What began with a handful of customer-obsessed organisations became a standard management discipline, complete with its own software category, its own maturity models, and, increasingly, its own seat at the executive table.

Boards and executive teams pay close attention to CX today for a simple reason: in market after market, the experience an organisation delivers has become as competitively important as the product or the price behind it, and in commoditised, digitally-enabled categories, sometimes more so. That attention doesn't land evenly, though. Organisations have built very different depths of capability around it, and what a CX programme is actually built to do tends to fall into one of three recognisable patterns.

¹ Clayton M. Christensen, Taddy Hall, Karen Dillon and David S. Duncan, *Competing Against Luck: The Story of Innovation and Customer Choice*, HarperBusiness, 2016.

The three tiers of CX today

Organisations tend to arrive at CX from one of three starting points.

Some are managing cost and friction: keeping a contact centre affordable, reducing repeat contacts, driving self-service adoption. Some are managing sentiment: tracking NPS, CSAT and CES, reporting them to the board, sometimes tying them to incentives. And a smaller number treat CX as strategic: a genuine source of competitive differentiation, owned at C-suite level, built on journey transformation and cross-functional accountability.

The table below sets out how these three tiers typically look in practice.

	Tier 1 Operational CX	Tier 2 Sentiment CX	Tier 3 Strategic CX
Objective	Reduce cost-to-serve and friction	Track and improve sentiment	CX as a source of growth and differentiation
Forrester stage	Repair	Elevate > Optimise	Differentiate
Owner	Contact-centre / operations leader	CX or insight team, often in marketing	Chief Customer Officer, Chief Marketing Officer, C-Suite
Success metric	AHT, FCR, cost-per-contact	NPS, CSAT, CES	Revenue, retention, market share
Representative players	NICE, Genesys, BPO providers	Qualtrics, Medallia, SurveyMonkey	McKinsey, PwC, Bain, Deloitte
Where Elemental CX fits in	Poor fit; fix the operation first	Poor fit; no growth mandate to diagnose	Its home; the missing half that completes it

Forrester's own CX maturity model describes almost exactly this progression, from "Repair" through "Elevate" and "Optimise" to "Differentiate." Reaching that last stage is rare. Most organisations never fully leave the first two behind, and the ones that do have usually built something genuinely sophisticated. This paper is not a case against that sophistication. It is addressed to the organisations that have built it, because they are the ones with the most to gain from getting the next part right, and, as the argument below shows, the most quietly at risk of not taking it.

Each tier describes a different level of maturity and a different posture toward CX. But the tier an organisation sits in is really just a description of infrastructure and intent. It doesn't answer the more basic question this paper is actually about: whatever tier an organisation is in, what is its CX investment specifically trying to buy?

Why CX programmes struggle to convert investment into growth

Ask a CX leader what their programme is for, and the honest answer is rarely “to improve our NPS.”

It's some combination of three underlying business outcomes. Acquisition: more prospects choosing the organisation over the alternatives available to them. Retention: more existing customers continuing to choose the organisation rather than switching away. And sentiment: customers feeling more positively about the organisation and its brand. Sentiment is valuable in its own right for reputation, regulatory standing and employee morale, but for almost every commercially mandated CX programme, it is principally valuable as a leading indicator of the other two.

The trouble is that sentiment is by far the easiest of the three to measure, and measurement has a habit of becoming the target. NPS, CSAT and CES are quick to collect, simple to trend, and easy to report to a board. Acquisition and retention are harder: they require linking customer-level experience data to actual switching behaviour over time, which most measurement systems were never built to do. So sentiment becomes the proxy the organisation actually manages to, and the assumption, rarely stated, rarely tested, is that moving the proxy will move the real outcomes behind it.

That assumption is the single largest point of failure in CX investment today, and it's worth stating precisely why it fails.

The measurement paradox

A Forrester survey of more than 300 CX professionals found that three in five CX leaders struggled to link their CX metrics to business metrics in 2023.²

This is precisely the pattern we've called, elsewhere, the measurement paradox: CX scores improve, but the growth or retention they are supposed to predict often doesn't follow. Once the reach of Push is mapped against the three outcomes it becomes obvious why. The paradox isn't really a paradox. It's the predictable result of a measurement system built entirely around the one outcome Push can actually reach.

An organisation that has spent years perfecting its Push-reduction machinery hasn't built a weak acquisition and retention engine. It has built a sentiment engine, run it very well, and mistaken its output for evidence of something else.

²Forrester, *The State Of VoC And CX Measurement Practices, 2023*, as reported in Colleen Fazio, [“CX leaders struggle to link metrics to business objectives”](#), CX Dive, 4 April 2024

The logic Elemental CX is built on: what Push can and can't reach

The four forces of progress, Push, Pull, Anxiety and Habit, developed by Bob Moesta and formalised by Clayton Christensen in *Competing Against Luck*, explain why any decision to choose one thing over another happens at all. The combined effect of the push of the old and the pull of the new has to be greater than the sum of the inertia/habit of the old and the anxieties about the new.³

Each of these forces has a precise meaning, and traditional CX captures some of them and not others.

Force	What it means	What traditional CX does with it
Push	Dissatisfaction with the current situation.	Captured in detail. This is what pain-point heatmaps, complaint analysis and dissatisfaction-driven VoC interviews are built to find.
Pull	The attraction of a better alternative.	Not captured. No standard CX tool asks what would draw a customer toward you, or what drew a switcher away from a competitor.
Anxiety	Fear or uncertainty about a new solution.	Not captured. Rarely distinguished from ordinary dissatisfaction in journey mapping or satisfaction surveys.
Habit	Comfort with, and inertia toward, the status quo.	Not captured. Sometimes exploited indirectly through switching costs or loyalty mechanics, but never diagnosed directly.

What matters here is what these forces imply for each of the three outcomes CX investment is trying to buy.

Outcome	Push's reach	Why
Sentiment	Direct.	Sentiment metrics are, by definition, a measure of how much Push has been reduced. This is exactly what they're designed to detect.
Retention	Partial: "retention by default" only.	Removing reasons to leave lowers churn risk, but produces customers who stay because nothing annoys them enough to leave, not because you deliver more of what they value. Fragile the moment a competitor creates real Pull.
Acquisition	None.	A prospect has never experienced your Push. There's nothing for your friction-reduction programme to reduce. Their decision is governed entirely by Pull against their Anxiety and Habit toward whatever they already use.

³Bob Moesta with Greg Engle, *Demand-Side Sales 101*, Lioncrest, 2020; Clayton M. Christensen et al., *Competing Against Luck*, HarperBusiness, 2016.

Lay the three outcomes against Push’s actual reach and the pattern is stark. Push can move sentiment, because sentiment is, by definition, a measure of how satisfied customers feel, and reducing friction and frustration is exactly what improves that feeling. Push can move retention, but only the fragile kind, because reducing reasons to leave is not the same as giving customers a reason to stay that a competitor can’t easily beat. And Push cannot move acquisition at all, for a reason that has nothing to do with how well the CX programme is run: a prospect who has never been your customer has never experienced your Push. There is nothing for your friction-reduction programme to reduce for someone who was never inside the friction in the first place.

Retention by default versus retention by choice

It’s worth being precise about what Push-driven retention actually is, because “CX improves retention” is true only in a narrow and easily misunderstood sense. Reducing pain points does lower the probability that an existing customer leaves. Dissatisfied customers churn more than satisfied ones, and that correlation is real. But the customers retained this way are retained by default: they stay because nothing has annoyed them enough to leave, not because the organisation is demonstrably delivering more of what they actually value. It’s retention by default, not retention by choice.

This produces a specific kind of fragility. Retention by default survives right up until a competitor manufactures enough Pull (a genuinely better price, product or experience on the dimensions that matter) to overcome the residual Anxiety and Habit, keeping your customer in place. Because Push-only measurement systems were never built to track Pull, Anxiety or Habit, this kind of churn arrives with no warning: satisfaction scores can be stable, or even rising, in the exact period an organisation is quietly losing its most switchable customers.

	Retention by default	Retention by choice
What produces it	Push reduction alone.	Understanding and delivering against the dimensions that actually drove the original choice.
Durability	Fragile. Lasts until a competitor manufactures enough Pull.	Resilient. A competitor has to out-compete you on substance, not just be less annoying.
Detectable by	Traditional VoC, NPS, CSAT, CES.	A causal diagnostic. Jobs to Be Done research including switchers and non-customers.

Retention by choice is what a causal diagnostic makes possible: understanding, with evidence, which dimensions actually drove a customer's original decision, and continuing to deliver, visibly, against those dimensions rather than only removing complaints. It is retention that a competitor has to out-compete on substance, not merely out-wait.

Why acquisition is invisible to Push

Retention, even the fragile kind, at least generates a signal.

An existing customer who is dissatisfied shows up somewhere: in a complaint, a declining NPS response, a support ticket, a churn event the organisation's own systems can see and, eventually, act on. Acquisition offers no equivalent signal at all. A prospect who considered you and chose a competitor instead never generates a support ticket, never responds to your VoC survey, and never appears in your CRM. The organisation doesn't just have weak visibility into why it loses prospects. It has none, because the moment of loss happens entirely outside every system a Push-only CX programme was built to watch.

The obvious objection is word of mouth: doesn't a less-frustrated existing customer at least refer more warmly, indirectly helping acquisition? It's worth taking seriously, and worth being precise about why it doesn't change the conclusion. Any effect here is a second-order by-product of retention, filtered through referral behaviour the organisation doesn't manage, measure or control, and running at a much longer and noisier lag than a direct causal lever would. It isn't nothing, but it is a rounding error next to the effect of a competitor who has correctly identified and delivered on the actual dimensions of choice. Relying on happier existing customers to talk you into new ones is a hope, not a mechanism.

This is why acquisition belongs in its own category, not as a milder version of the retention problem. It isn't that Push-only CX is weak at acquisition and strong at retention. It's that Push-only CX has a genuine, structural blind spot on one outcome and a partial, fragile grip on a second. No amount of effort or investment inside that blind spot will close it, because the data an organisation would need was never inside its own systems to begin with. Closing it means deliberately going outside those systems: research built around prospects and recent switchers, not deeper analysis of the customers already inside the CRM.

The missing half, not a fourth tier

It would be a mistake to picture Elemental CX as sitting above strategic CX, as a more advanced tier competing for the same budget and executive attention. That is the wrong model, and it is not how the two relate. Every tool a mature CX function has already built, journey maps, customer segmentation, Voice of the Customer, the measurement pyramid, cross-functional governance, remains exactly where it is. What Elemental CX adds is the layer that was always missing beneath them: a rigorous, evidence-based account of Pull, Anxiety and Habit to sit alongside the Push data those tools already gather so well.

That's the right way to think about where Elemental CX sits. It's worth being equally precise about what it's for, because describing it only in the language of diagnostic completeness (the layer that closes the gap in Moesta and Christensen's model) undersells the point. The reason to build a causal diagnostic is not that it produces a more elegant account of switching behaviour. It's that it is the only mechanism available for reaching the two outcomes Push cannot reach on its own: durable, choice-based retention and acquisition. Closing the gap in the four-forces model is the means. Converting CX investment into the behaviour change it was funded to produce is the end.

Where Elemental CX came from

Elemental CX did not begin as a critique of customer experience practice.

It began in a different discipline entirely. Our work over many years has been in strategy and innovation, helping clients design genuinely differentiated products, services and propositions, and helping them implement best-practice innovation methods to do it. That work made Jobs to Be Done a core methodology, not because it was fashionable, but because innovation and new-product strategy live or die on getting one question right: why would a customer actually choose this, over everything else available to them? Getting that question wrong is expensive in innovation. It means building something nobody wants. Getting it right requires understanding the functional, emotional and social dimensions of the progress a customer is genuinely trying to make, not just what they say they'd like.

It was that expertise, tested and refined across years of strategy and innovation engagements, that raised an obvious question once we looked at how organisations manage their existing customer experience: if this diagnostic is indispensable for deciding what new thing to build, why is it almost entirely absent from how organisations decide what to fix in the experience they already have? Traditional CX had spent two decades building extraordinarily sophisticated ways of finding and reducing Push. It had never imported the discipline that strategy and innovation work depends on for finding Pull, the same discipline responsible, in that adjacent field, for whether customers choose a new product at all.

Elemental CX is the answer to that question. It takes the Jobs to Be Done diagnostic, proven in strategy and innovation, where getting the causal question right is the entire job of predicting whether customers will actually buy, and applies it to the customer experience, sitting alongside the journey maps, VoC programmes and measurement systems that a mature CX function has already built. It is not a competing school of CX invented to displace what is already in place. It is what happens when strategy and innovation thinking, thinking built specifically to predict acquisition, is brought to bear on experience, by people who have spent years doing exactly that kind of thinking for a living.

How Elemental CX works: the methods behind the value proposition

In practice, that means a structured diagnostic: in-depth, non-leading research into the job customers are hiring the organisation to do, and the alternatives they weighed against it (including customers who chose a competitor instead). This research produces a set of Job Specifications: precise, causal accounts of the functional, emotional and social dimensions customers use to decide whether to hire an organisation at all. Those specifications become a performance framework, a prioritised set of dimensions that defines what the experience must deliver for customers to confidently choose it, and to keep choosing it. The organisation's existing journey maps and heatmaps are then read against that framework rather than against pain points alone, which produces a materially different picture: some prominent, frequently mentioned pain points turn out to sit on dimensions that are secondary to choice, while some points of failure customers rarely raise unprompted sit on dimensions that are decisive to acquisition and retention alike. The resulting improvement roadmap is prioritised by causal impact on those outcomes, not by how often an issue is mentioned or how easily it can be fixed.

This is what completing strategic CX looks like: not a replacement discipline, and not an exercise in diagnostic tidiness, but the layer that finally lets a mature CX programme do the job it was funded to do: reduce the Push it already handles well, and manufacture the Pull, address the Anxiety and shift the Habit that Push alone was never going to touch.

The evidence base

The academic foundation is not new or speculative.

Christensen's Jobs to Be Done framework is among the most empirically grounded theories of customer choice available, applied and validated across industries from consumer goods to healthcare to financial services. Moesta's four-forces model, developed alongside it, is the standard account in the Jobs to Be Done field of why people actually switch, and why they don't. Richard Rumelt's work on strategy adds a complementary discipline: real strategy begins with an honest diagnosis of the critical challenge, not with a menu of solutions. Together, these describe an approach that is diagnostic first and causally grounded. Because it names Push, Pull, Anxiety and Habit as four distinct, measurable forces rather than one undifferentiated idea of "customer experience", it is also considerably more falsifiable than either traditional CX or a purely qualitative critique of it.

What this means for CX leaders

1

Separate your success metrics by outcome, not by convenience

Track acquisition and retention as the primary measures of CX investment, and treat sentiment as a leading indicator to be validated against them, not as the scoreboard itself.

2

Research the prospects and switchers your own systems can't see

Retention problems eventually surface somewhere in your data; acquisition problems don't, because a prospect who chose a competitor never generated a ticket, a survey response or a churn event inside your business. Closing this blind spot means deliberately researching non-customers and recent switchers-in, not analysing the customers you already have more thoroughly.

3

Instrument the difference between retention by default and retention by choice

At minimum, this means understanding, through direct research, not inference, which of your retained customers stayed because a competitor didn't pull hard enough, versus which stayed because you demonstrably deliver more of what they value.

4

Fund the causal diagnostic as a growth investment, not a CX nice-to-have

The business case for understanding Pull, Anxiety and Habit isn't "more complete customer insight". It's the specific, missing mechanism required to move acquisition and durable retention, the two outcomes your CX budget was very likely approved to deliver in the first place.

5

Integrate the causal layer into what you've already built, rather than standing up a parallel programme

Elemental CX is designed to sit alongside your existing journey maps, VoC programme and measurement pyramid, feeding a shared performance framework, not to compete with them for budget, ownership or executive attention.

Conclusion

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Take our CX maturity self-diagnostic

Want a clear read on your CX maturity, your growth mandate, and whether your programme has the missing half it needs to actually drive growth?

[Start the diagnostic](#)

About Purple Shirt & Elemental Concept

Purple Shirt is part of the Elemental Concept group, an international consulting business with practices spanning customer experience, operating model design, AI strategy and engineering, and digital product design and build.

Our CX practice is grounded in Jobs to Be Done methodology, developed over many years of strategy and innovation work, and applied with rigour across financial services, energy, education, transport and professional services.

If this paper has raised questions about whether your own CX investment is reaching acquisition and retention, or only ever reaching sentiment, we would welcome the conversation.

Get in touch

Blake Lough

Chief Experience Officer

blake@purpleshirt.co.nz

Find out more

purpleshirt.co.nz

elementalconcept.com

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