2009 1to1 Customer Champion: Stuart Roesel, Director of Customer Loyalty and Retention, EarthLink

Who is the customer? What do they want? Why do they stay?

Those are the three most important questions for EarthLink’s Stuart Roesel. As director of customer loyalty and retention for the Internet service provider, it’s his job to understand the changing needs of customers and meet them over the long term.

“Customer retention is our number one priority as a business,” Roesel says. EarthLink grew popular during the days of dial-up Internet, but as consumers moved to broadband, the company had to adjust its business model, as well as its approach to customers. Roesel says that having a firm commitment from the top helps keep the entire company focused on customer centricity.

Recently, for example, EarthLink created a customer experience council. It’s an internal, cross-functional group composed of about 40 employees who collaborate on customer retention strategies.

“It’s a platform to make sure we’re all contributing to the right efforts, that there’s no duplication throughout the different lines of business, and that we can prioritize different programs to improve customer relationships,” Roesel says.

For his part, Roesel has combined churn numbers with customer analytics, predictive models, and other metrics to develop a true understanding of individual customers. He also crafts segmentation and targeting strategies to assist with loyalty marketing and engagement programs. “I had to merge all these different silos together to tell one story with a 360-degree view of the customer,” he says. “We know what our ideal customer is, and who is a good fit for EarthLink, and we go after that share of the marketplace.”

Roesel defines customer strategy as the blueprint of how EarthLink handles customers at every touchpoint across the lifecycle. It starts with acquiring the right customer, then understanding what customers want, and meeting those expectations. He combines more than 700 customer data variables and matches that with third-party demographic and psychographic data to gain insight on customers. In addition, the company runs private online communities where customers share their preferences. Roesel and his team also survey customers on loyalty and advocacy and conduct one-on-one interviews, asking customers about the EarthLink service and how they use the Internet in general.

Roesel says it’s crucial, even in this economy, to maintain the resources and investment that build the customer relationship. “Even with our challenges right now, you shouldn’t be pulling back,” he says. “You have to look at it as creating opportunity for yourself. If you’re doing the right thing and you’re investing in your customer, long term it’s really powerful.”