



Everything Communication

Q: I've got a solid logo and look for my business, an ad campaign that works pretty reliably, and a good following on Facebook. What can I do to take my brand to the next level?

A: Try this: Imagine your brand as a source of light. In an ideal world, the light of your brand would shine brightly and directly on your intended customers so they could see very clearly all the wonderful value that your brand offers them.

But the unfortunate reality is that there is a lot of clutter and distraction that comes in between your brand and your customers, diffusing your light or obscuring it altogether. You might use advertising messages and marketing programs to enhance and focus your brand light. But it's important to realize there are so many other filters through which your brand gets expressed, from the way your employees talk to each other to the cleanliness of your Dumpster area, the thickness of your napkins, and the type of carryout bags you use.

Everything communicates. Every way a customer experiences your brand represents an opportunity to enhance your brand image—or detract from it. Every touch point matters.

Consider grocer Trader Joe's. The company differentiates itself and has attracted loyal fans by manifesting its unique brand in all of its touch points. From wooden display cases to hand-drawn signs to Hawaiian-shirted, tattooed employees, everything about the Trader Joe's experience brings to life the brand's quirky personality, sense of discovery, and savvy target appeal. Even the chain's direct mail piece, the Fearless Flyer, conveys the brand's unpretentious character. All of these cues strengthen the Trader Joe's brand and elevate shopping there from a grocery store trip to a cultural experience.

If you want to take your brand to the next level, you've got to sweat the small stuff. Few advertising or marketing messages can ever be as impactful, distinctive, and memorable as a real, in-person brand experience that's been designed down to the last detail. You need to express your brand in the finest details of execution.

Start by doing a thorough audit of your customer experience. I'm not talking about your standard walkthrough. Put yourself in a new customer's shoes and take note of the brand impressions that form as you experience your restaurant. In fact, you may want to bring a friend with you on some visits and ask him or her to complete an honest assessment of the experience. Make your visits at various times of the day and week, because different occasions will shine new lights on your experience. Consider

taking pictures to document your observations. Be diligent; put your brand to the test. Order the least popular menu item. Ask the order-taker for a recommendation. Place a special order. Get a to-go order. Try to drive and eat your food at the same time. Use the restroom. Sit on the toilet. Even the tiniest of details can make a memorable brand impression.

Once you've completed your audit, assemble a list of your brand touch points—all of the different ways your brand is expressed and all of the different individual experiences that you deliver. Share the list with your employees and friends—maybe even a guest or two—to make sure you haven't overlooked anything. Then prioritize the list, designating those areas that make the biggest brand impression, as well as those that are off brand.

From there, focus on the priority touch points. How can they be improved? You may be covering the basics, but how can you make the experience truly distinctive and remarkable? How can you use each touch point to convey your brand values and personality? How can you align each individual experience with your brand vision? Throughout the entire customer experience, consider how to appeal to all five human senses—taste, sight, feel, sound, and smell—to make a real, visceral impact.

Develop an action plan for optimizing each priority touch point. Some changes may require significant investments in new training, equipment, and systems, but I bet many of them are relatively easy fixes. It's just a matter of giving them the attention they're due. After all, great customer experiences don't just happen.

As you work on implementing changes, you'll want to engage your staff and help them understand how all the little things they do (or fail to do) make a big impression on your brand image. Sometimes it's easy for well-intentioned employees to work at cross-purposes if they're unaware how their behaviors affect other employees or your customers. Shining a light on the details of brand touch points can be, well, illuminating.

Inspire your people with stories from best-in-class establishments and ask them to share about their own favorite experiences. Set clear standards, explain guidelines, and provide examples on how the brand should be experienced. Make sure people understand in their heads, believe in their hearts, and are equipped and empowered with their hands and feet to make every aspect of the customer experience a brand-building point of contact.

Finally, consider this an ongoing effort. Sweating the small stuff is a continual process of working on every detail, making your experience better and better. When it comes to building your brand, you're never really done. 