

Stop selling products and start making emotional connections

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We humans are emotional creatures. We make our purchase decisions based on how products promise to make us feel. That's why great brands succeed by seeking intimate emotional connections with customers. Either the product satisfies an emotional need I have ("I want to feel healthy and successful") or it offers me access to a self-identity that I want to experience and express ("I'm an athlete.").

Product features are usually of secondary importance to these emotional connections, and managers of great brands plan and take action accordingly. They first shape their brand identities with emotional values that differentiate their offerings and connect with consumers, and use product efficacy only to support those values. They then prioritize long-term customer relationships over short-term sales because they know customers who are emotionally connected to a brand are more valuable. And finally they use their brands – not product categories – to scope and scale their businesses. Their focus on emotional connections fuels product innovations and brand extensions. Moreover, they constantly address the question, "What business are we really in?" Through this type of commitment to create emotional connections, great brands are always redefining consumer expectations and challenging the traditional norms of their industry categories in these four ways.

Few companies are as disciplined in linking products to emotions as Nike. Many of Nike's competitors try to beat Nike's products on the basis of innovation and style. But Nike's success has much more to do with its focused use of athlete relationships and innovative brand experiences to inspire its customers to *feel* like athletes. Its products and technologies are always linked to values such as aspiration, achievement, and status.

Most Nike products are functionally cool and technologically advanced enough, but the story Nike sells is entrancing. "Nike is more than performance," Heather Amuny-Dey, Nike's design director for North America once said. "Nike is also about how we live. Nike focuses on innovation, style, story and experience to create the emotional connection."

The ethos that produced "Just Do It" is the ethos Nike continues to pursue today. All you have to do is compare its 2012 London Olympics ads with those of Adidas, a chief competitor. Adidas ran high energy, fun spots that highlighted its products. Nike's commercials, by contrast, were quiet and moving. They made an emotional connection through a new call to action: "Find Your Greatness." It's no small wonder that the Nike's ads generated 15 times as many Internet conversations as did the Adidas ads, even though Adidas had paid \$155 million to be official Sportswear Partner of the Olympics.

In this century, emotional brand-building requires you to develop a personal dialogue with your customers on the issues that are most meaningful to them. Herbert Muschamp once observed in a *New York Times* essay on product design, "[In] the last 50 years, the economic base has shifted from production to consumption. It has gravitated from the sphere of rationality to the realm of desire: from the objective to the subjective, to the realm of psychology." Muschamp's point was that in a post-industrial society, material satisfaction is so easily attained that emotional fulfillment is now the true challenge for providers of goods and services. The key purchase question has moved away from "What does it do?" and toward "How does it make me feel?"

Even in business-to-business categories, emotions are highly influential. Despite the many warnings, businesspeople still rely on their guts more than their heads. RFPs are issued and vendor rosters are developed based on respect and risk-aversion – both emotional considerations for buyers. A manager makes a statement about herself and her

values whenever she selects a supplier, expressing “I am an innovative thinker,” “I am a respected authority,” or “I am an aggressive risk-taker,” depending on her desired identity.

In our commercial landscape, brand power is no longer driven by product efficacy. Instead brands form strong customer bonds through developing mind share and heart share, and to accomplish those ends, only emotive propositions will resonate. This is true today and it will likely be even truer tomorrow. The rising generation of Millennials, for instance, is not just looking for tasty treats at a good value when it comes to their restaurant choices. In the estimation of one food industry research firm, Technomic, what Millennials want is much more complex: an emotional connection to a brand that is socially responsible and sustainable. If they feel this way about fast food, we can only imagine their demands when making more consequential purchases. These consumers of tomorrow expect brands to inspire them and express their values so well that being a customer should be a source of pride and joy for them.

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