

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE APRIL 21ST, 2014



Brand Building Through Customer Experience

by Guest Author

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Business leaders generally underestimate the power of customer experience. Brand management firm Prophet released a State of the Market study in 2011 showing that only 13 percent of executives believe the purchase experience is the most critical driver of future brand equity, whereas 36 percent said product and service quality would be the top driver.

Most marketing executives think about customer experience, but they also acknowledge that their companies don't value it as a critical component of the brand experience and develop it as a core competency. According to a study by the Chartered Institute of Marketing, seven out of ten marketers believe that investing in customer experience is more effective than investing in marketing communications, but only 13 percent believe that their company "excels" at delivering a day-to-day brand experience that matches up to what the brand promises. A third of organizations were found to not use the brand guidelines that are in place, while half of organizations don't use customer experience or employee brand behavior guidelines. Managers seem to continue to emphasize product quality and attributes, failing to acknowledge that the entire experience – and every detail in it—shapes customer perceptions of the brand.

Shaking executives out of their myopia takes some effort. A brand revitalization effort I led for a fast food chain began with a special work session for the executive leadership team. The goal of the session was to help everyone make an honest assessment of the brand execution as expressed through customer experience. For most of the work sessions I lead, I assign special tasks for the participants to undertake prior to the session. For this particular client, the tasks involved making a series of restaurant visits with specific instructions to follow.

One task was to visit the same restaurant location at various times of day and night, to help the participants assess the consistency of the customer experience. Another task was to bring a friend along on some visits and ask the friend to complete an assessment of the experience, to help the executives see things that an insider might miss. The final step was to visit the restroom at a restaurant and sit on the toilet, to get a truly authentic experience of the facilities. We believed this step of essentially telling the CEO and her executive team to “take a crap” where their customers have to go would be a real eye opener—and indeed it was!

When the work session began, participants shared their stories and pictures (part of the assignment) that revealed just how poor their brand’s customer experience was. The CEO admitted that she usually sampled the company’s food by visiting the drive-thru window. Because her attention had focused on the product, she had rarely been inside their dining rooms and it had been years since she visited a restroom, much less sat on a toilet. By following the detailed pre-work instructions, she and her colleagues had to confront how dirty and unkempt their locations were—a truth they had heard many times before but didn’t internalize and accept until they experienced it themselves. All their sobering reports were uncomfortable to hear, but their collective frustration helped give us a much-needed grounding in what was wrong with the brand. When difficult issues arose, no one felt the issues could be sidestepped. The restaurant visits had provided them all with a common understanding of the company’s customer experience problems, which made it easier for them to commit to solutions.

Managers of great brands view every consumer contact with the brand – right down to the restrooms – as an occasion that might either enhance the brand’s value or undermine it. They continuously seek out opportunities for brand expression in even the finest details of execution, because they know that each interaction, each touchpoint, communicates a valuable message.

The people behind great brands need to think big, but they try not to let those big thoughts distract them from sweating the small stuff. All the little things you do—or fail to do – for your customers in person will out-communicate the big things you may claim through mass media. Few advertising or marketing messages can ever be as impactful, distinctive, and memorable as a one-on-one brand experience that’s been designed down to the last detail.

Contributed to Branding Strategy Insider by: Denise Lee Yohn, excerpted from her book, **What Great Brands Do** with permission from Wiley Publishing.

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