

# Customer Loyalty and the Importance of Brand Messaging

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**Today's consumer has immense power of choice. Countless companies vie for customer attention. Those who succeed in doing so distinguish themselves through strong brand messaging.**

There's an expression in German—*die Qual der Wahl*—which translates to “the agony of choice.” Chances are you've experienced it. Have you ever gone to the store to buy something simple and ended up spending half an hour comparing different products? And when all was said and done you kept asking yourself “Am I happy with my decision?” *That* is the agony of choice.

If consumers had to repeat this process for every product they buy, they would forever be standing in the aisles of stores, mulling over their options. Fortunately, most people already have a pretty clear idea of what they want. And for many shoppers the final decision is influenced by one thing—brand.

## The Definition of Brand

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So what is this brand thing that guides our decision-making as consumers? If you type “what is a brand?” into Google, you'll find a variety of responses.

According to Collins Dictionary, for example, “A brand of a product is the version of it that is made by one particular manufacturer.”

David Ogilvy, widely regarded as the father of advertising, was quoted as saying that brand is “the intangible sum of a product’s attributes.”

While both of these definitions do answer the question, they still leave a little something to be desired.

The following definition from HubSpot, on the other hand, is a little more insightful: “A brand identity is made up of what your brand says, what your values are, how you communicate your product, and what you want people to feel when they interact with it. Essentially, your brand identity is the personality of your business and a promise to your customers.”

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*HubSpot*

Personality paired with a promise. Now that sounds like something capable of influencing consumer behavior. If individuals with charming personalities and powerful promises can hold sway over us, then certainly brands—communities of such individuals—can, as well. It might sound like a simple and straightforward concept, but in practice it requires careful thought and a relentless desire to connect with your customers on a personal level.

## Putting Personality and Promise into Practice

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Since 1964, the Nike company has been manufacturing high-end sporting goods. Their patented swoosh logo is one of the most recognizable emblems in the world and has become synonymous with quality and championship calibre athleticism.

There’s far more to Nike than running shoes and sports jerseys, though. There’s a personality and a promise. The company’s mission statement is to “bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world.” Those might sound like hollow words, but the company has demonstrated through their actions that they take their relationships with their customers, the athletes of the world, seriously.

Point in case: Colin Kaepernick. The former NFL quarterback garnered widespread media attention in 2016 for kneeling when the U.S. national anthem was played at the beginning of games. Kaepernick did this to protest racial injustice.



<https://youtu.be/Fq2CvmgoO7I>

His actions were heavily criticized by fans, the media, and NFL administrators. After the 2017 season, he opted out of his contract with the San Francisco 49ers. Kaepernick's personal politics were ultimately the demise of his career, however, as no other professional teams showed interest in signing him.

The one entity that did support Kaepernick was Nike. The company expressed their solidarity with the shunned quarterback by having him narrate their now-famous "Dream Crazy" ad, which encourages athletes of all backgrounds and abilities to strive for their personal best and adhere to their identities.

This move was met with mixed reactions. Some applauded Nike's decision, while others harshly rebuked it—going so far as to burn Nike sportswear. As Brian Sheenan wrote in an article for Adweek: "By standing with Kaepernick, Nike is saying to athletes, 'We are more than a sponsor—we have your back. We support what you believe in.' In other words, Nike is willing to act on its values, which are the same as the values of its athletes."

This is a perfect example of a brand putting their personality and promise into action. It might have come at an expense, but ultimately it strengthened the company's relationship with its customers and elevated their identity above their product. This will leave a positive, indelible impression of Nike in the public mind far longer than any discount, logo, packaging, or short term fad would.

## 7 Habits of Highly Effective Brands

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As mentioned, putting personalities and promises into practice is easier said than done. But that doesn't mean it's impossible, and you don't have to be a major company like Nike to do so, either. How is it accomplished, then?

In her book *What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest*, Denise Lee Yohn answers that very question. Lee Yohn analyzed major brands like Starbucks, REI, IBM, and Lulemon and found that there are seven important principles that drive the success of these organizations.

Image Source: Denise Lee Yohn

**WHAT GREAT BRANDS DO**

## The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest

Your brand is not what you say you are - it's what you do.

Great brands rely on the "brand-as-business" management approach to drive their culture, company operations, and customer experiences. With brand as business, the brand is the central organizing and operating idea of the business.

- Great Brands Start Inside**



Start brand-building by cultivating a strong brand-led culture inside your organization
- Great Brands Avoid Selling Products**



Develop emotional connections with customers instead of relying on product superiority alone to generate demand
- Great Brands Ignore Trends**



Anticipate and interpret larger cultural movements so your brand has enduring resonance
- Great Brands Don't Chase Customers**



Embrace and celebrate what your brand stands for and accept that you're not for everyone
- Great Brands Sweat the Small Stuff**



Design your customer experiences to express your brand values and attributes in the finest details
- Great Brands Commit and Stay Committed**



Drill down to your absolute brand aspirations, lock them in, and execute on them relentlessly
- Great Brands Never Have to 'Give Back'**



Create shared value for all your stakeholders by designing your business to make a positive social impact at its core

Growth in brand equity and influence comes from an entirely different way of thinking about and using brands. Great brands operationalize their brand as an integral way of managing and growing their business.

The bestselling book *What Great Brands Do* by Denise Lee Yohn is available at major bookstores.  
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## 1. Great Brands Start Inside

Lay the foundation for your brand by first establishing a strong, positive brand-led culture at work.

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## 2. Great Brands Avoid Selling Products

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Your product is only part of the brand equation. Use it as a vehicle to connect with your customers on a personal level instead of solely relying on it.

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## 3. Great Brands Ignore Trends

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Fads come and go. Your brand identity shouldn't. While it's important to be mindful of the culture surrounding your product, it shouldn't govern your brand's strategy.

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## 4. Great Brands Don't Chase Customers

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Find your target audience, pay attention to their wants and needs, and use that information to build solid relationships. You can't please everyone, everywhere, all of the time—so don't even try.

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## 5. Great Brands Sweat the Small Stuff

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Great brands pay attention to the details and they take it upon themselves to provide their customers with authentic, personalized experiences that create value and lasting trust.

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## 6. Great Brands Commit and Stay Committed

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Be a mission-driven company. Pinpoint the values that matter most to your brand and embrace them, even when it means you're going against the grain.

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## 7. Great Brands Never Have to "Give Back"

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Social responsibility should be a genuine, integral, and ongoing part of your brand's values and mission. It shouldn't come as an afterthought or be done halfheartedly.

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Of course, each of these principles could be discussed at length (and Lee Yohn does so in her book), but even in bite-sized form they offer clear, actionable advice on how to build a customer-centric brand. And what's great is that adopting these principles is not dependent upon having access to abundant corporate resources. The seven things that great brands do are seven things that any honest, compassionate, and thoughtful human being would do.

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## The Art of Communication

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Implementing the above mentioned principles will take time, patience, courage to make mistakes and humility to learn from them. That's perfectly fine. Remember, if you're genuinely interested in developing a brand, the overarching goal is to build value-driven, long-lasting relationships with customers. That doesn't happen overnight.

Your relationships with your customers, like all relationships, will experience highs and lows. Communication is the glue that will hold them together through thick and thin. It's what will allow you to craft your personality, make your promises, develop emotional connections, stick to your values even when it's difficult, and create personalized experiences for your customers.

Always bear in mind, though, that communication is a two way street. You shouldn't talk *to* your customers, but *with* them. By allowing them to actively participate in discussions about your brand, you'll bring them closer to your product and the community that surrounds it.



Take online retailer Zappos, for instance. Following public discussion about the fur industry, and due to customer concerns, the company adopted a no fur policy. Here's an excerpt from their official statement:

"The Zappos.com website is now fur friendly and committed to staying that way. Thank you all for your feedback and participation in the Zappos Family Core Value #6: Build Open & Honest Relationships With Communication."

There's a reason that Zappos is considered to be one of the best brands in America. They actively listen to their customers and take their opinions and values into consideration. And studies show that this is something the majority of consumers of want. According to a recent study from Wunderman, 56% of consumers said they feel more loyal to brands who

“get me” and show a deep understanding of their priorities and preferences. Additionally, 89% are loyal to brands that share their values.

Taking the time to have frank and constructive discussions with your customers is essential to the success and longevity of any brand. And thanks to industry wide shifts in marketing communications, it's becoming easier and easier.

For at least a decade or more, there's been a wide gulf between the way that brands communicate and the way that everyone else communicates. The former have been reluctant to give up antiquated channels like postal mail, the telephone, and email. The latter have embraced better, more personal modes of communication like messaging. Thankfully that gulf is narrowing.

The fact that brands are starting to adopt messaging may seem inconsequential to some, but it's actually pretty significant. Foremost, it indicates that forward-thinking companies are actually paying attention to the preferences of their customers and adopting their marcom models accordingly. Fewer and fewer people use phone or email—so why should brands stubbornly cling to those channels?



Secondly, messaging allows for conversation that is truly frictionless. Let's say that you're a loyal Nike or Zappos customer and you'd like to share your thoughts on Colin Kaepernick or the fur industry. In the past you would have had to call a customer service hotline, wait on hold for who knows how long, potentially get disconnected, and then have a window of only a few minutes to offer your two cents. Then both parties hang up, the conversation is over, and it's hard to follow up or know if your opinion was really taken into consideration. That wastes everyone's time.



With messaging, however, customers and brands now have instant access to one another. If I'd like to reach out to a company that I regularly do business with, all I have to do is pull my phone out of my pocket, open whichever messaging platform said company uses, and send them a message. I'm not required to wait, there's no threshold to overcome, and the discussion doesn't actually have to come to a close.

Messaging allows for casual, flowing conversation—which is exactly what brands need if they want to forge emotional, value-driven relationships with customers. Of course, these connections will never be meaningful in the way that friendships or romances are, but they'll help carve out a place for your brand in the hearts and minds of your customers.

And it might even help tip the scales the next time someone's agonizing over their choices, asking themselves, "Am I happy with my decision?"