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TOP of MIND

Great Brand Building is Just a Touch Away

By Scott Davis

As my wife and I considered whether to renew the lease on my Acura last year, she humored me by engaging in an intriguing brand exercise.

We talked about our relationship with the Acura sales rep at the dealership, the consistent level of customer service we had received over the previous three years, the Acura magazine that came to our house periodically, the ease with which we automatically debited our account each month to pay the bill, the performance of the car itself, the ratings of the different auto experts, the functionality of the car (e.g., mileage, safety record, etc.) as well as the image of Acura.

As we did this, it became obvious that Acura had done a very good job at managing the way its brand “touched” us, building a holistic relationship with us over the previous three years to definitely warrant us leasing a new model.

This notion of building a more holistic relationship with customers through brands, I believe, will become the next great place for companies to focus on in pursuit of more successfully building brands. Consider the following exercise:

Stop and think about all of the different ways that your brand interacts with and makes an impression on your customers. Next, think about how well you are

controlling all of those interactions or what we call brand “touchpoints” and how consistently they are or are not being managed. Now that you have this expanded perspective, you’ll most likely have one of two reactions.

You are either ready to pull your hair out, as you fear every inconsistently managed brand touchpoint is further denigrating what you had intended your brand to stand for. Or, you are thrilled as you recognize, by design or luck, that you are one of the few companies that has actively taken control of the multiple points of access your brand has with the outside world.

When you think about Nordstrom, Southwest Airlines, The Four Seasons, Lexus, Disney, Harley-Davidson, Virgin, Starbucks, or even one of the newer generation brands, such as JetBlue, you think about one thing—how every interaction you have with that brand reinforces what your beliefs about that brand are. Because of this consistency and predictability, these brands tend to experience high degrees of loyalty, great word-of-mouth, higher price points, greater overall customer satisfaction, and a much higher degree of forgiveness, tied to a mistake the brand makes (“Oh, that was just a one-time event”), than the typical brand receives.

Now think about McDonald’s, The Gap, Kmart and countless others that have neglected the need to

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“show-up” consistently at all of their brand touchpoints. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to note that as the customer experience with the brand goes, so goes the performance and profitability of the company.

In our experience, every company has at least 30 and up to 100 brand touchpoints that past, current and future customers, employees and other stakeholders are experiencing on a daily basis. These range from advertising to coupons to retail partners to customer service representatives to the monthly bill.

To be clear, most companies do not think in terms of brand touchpoints. Thus, the challenge of coming up with a list of all the different ways in which their brand touches their customers is fairly challenging.

One way around this is to think about segmenting all of your brand’s touchpoints into three somewhat distinct categories, with each segment representing the different dimensions of a brand’s relationship with a customer. These include:

Pre-Purchase Experience Touchpoints. All the factors that influence whether or not a prospect will place your brand into their final purchase consideration set, on their way to making an actual purchase. Typical ones include advertising, sales reps, word-of-mouth and the Internet. Most companies spend the majority of their time and resources in this touchpoint phase.

Purchase Experience Touchpoints. All of the elements that move a customer from considering your brand to purchasing it. Typical brand touchpoints here include

direct field sales, physical stores and financing.

Post-Purchase Touchpoints. Everything that is leveraged after the sale, to help maximize the brand experience, such as customer service, customer satisfaction surveys and loyalty programs. This is where loyalty and retention are built and thus greater profitability.

The key to taking control of your highest-impact brand touchpoints and the total brand-customer relationship is to understand: which exist across these three categories; which have the greatest impact/influence on how the marketplace views the brand and their decision to engage/maintain a relationship with it; how the brand is performing against these yardsticks; what gaps exist between expectations and performance; and finally, how to narrow the space between them.

With a clear brand vision, identity and positioning, the ability to standardize your brand touchpoints is fairly straightforward, as is your ability to holistically take control of the relationship you have with your customers and stakeholders. Without a clear understanding of what your brand does and does not stand for, it is most like wading through mud: unpleasant and fairly messy. Now ... on to renewing the lease for our car. ■

Scott Davis, managing partner at Prophet, Chicago, is co-author of the upcoming book Building The Brand-Driven Business (Jossey-Bass, September 2002) and an adjunct professor at Northwestern’s Kellogg Graduate School of Management. His e-mail is sdavis@prophet.com.