Breakthrough. All marketers strive to make their offerings stand out, be noticed and gain traction. Few achieve their goals—categories are competitive, media is cluttered, budgets are limited, and customers are moving too fast to notice.

In pursuit of breakthrough, many marketers repeat worn-out methods or fall prey to the latest digital fad. Many believe breakthrough can only be achieved through big advertising budgets or by putting blind faith in the power of innovation to sell itself.

Some savvy marketers succeed. At Electrolux North America, MaryKay Kopf, Marketing Vice President, and Keith McLaughlin, President, led the breakthrough of the Electrolux brand of premium kitchen appliances.

It was important to reconfigure European products for the U.S. market and fashion a compelling message featuring Kelly Ripa as spokesperson. But success came from finding new ways to engage customers in the showroom, on the web, and among kitchen designers—the three touchpoints that are most important to kitchen remodelers. Kopf and McLaughlin created traveling designer showcases featuring Kelly Ripa, redesigned the in-store environment, and built a highly engaging web experience. These all became Signature Touchpoints for Electrolux.

The results were impressive. In less than a year, despite the recession, the Electrolux brand vaulted from a 1-share to gaining more than a third of the premium kitchen appliance market in North America. Today, Kopf is the CMO and McLaughlin is the CEO of the global Electrolux enterprise.

What is a Signature Touchpoint? It is a bundle of related customer touchpoints that have been redesigned to improve the customer experience and foster a unique, proprietary customer connection. Signature Touchpoints can help customers at different steps in their path to purchase. They can assist customers early in their investigation of potential solutions to explore alternatives and find advice, or they can help customers later in the experience discover new ways to use a product or service or facilitate troubleshooting or claims if things go wrong.

The most successful B2B and B2C marketers around the globe invest in turning important points of customer interaction into Signature Touchpoints that engage and motivate. They understand that Signature Touchpoints provide a platform for products and services to bypass customer filters and competitive noise to achieve breakthrough.

Imagine 3M without its successful top-to-top executive relationships with the leaders at its customers’ customers. Would Apple be as successful without the Apple Store to entice customers to play with its products? Where would IBM be had it not turned consulting touchpoints into a competitive advantage? Can you imagine a Crayola brand that did not have the trust of teachers and students fostered by years of programs to support art in schools?

The days of everyone gathering in the conference room to flesh out the customer engagement plan are over. Transforming important engagement points into Signature Touchpoints takes just as much rigor and inspiration as new product development or building a communication campaign. Creating them relies on insights into how customers gather and filter buying information as well as innovative approaches to engaging customers along their path to purchase.

Here are the steps to build Signature Touchpoints:

Step 1: Mapping the Path to Purchase
The path to purchase can vary based on the category and the purchase occasion. For example, a purchasing agent making a routine copy paper purchase pursues a rapid, price-driven path. The same purchasing agent will embark on a far more considered path to source a high-tech material for use in a novel manufacturing application.

The key to success in mapping the path is understanding the role of influencers, the barriers that clog a customer’s
movement along the path, and the places in the path that are most important to customers’ decision making. Hill’s Pet Nutrition, for example, became the global leader in premium nutritional foods for dogs and cats based on its depth of knowledge and ability to exploit the important role that veterinarians play in recommending a specific pet food. Hill’s has created an array of Signature Touchpoints with veterinarians. Among them: the nutrition education that Hill’s provides at no cost to veterinarians which lets them fulfill their post-graduate learning requirements while building their understanding of emerging pet nutrition issues such as obesity or joint disease.

Step 2: Developing Innovative Ideas for Connecting
A systematic and inspired innovation process is required to develop Signature Touchpoints. Co-creation is one effective way to create innovative Signature Touchpoints by engaging cross-functional teams to re-examine customer decision-making and generate customer connection ideas. Thinking should focus on ways to transform, replace, enhance, or extend existing touchpoints so they become Signatures (see “TREE: Branch Out Your Thinking” below). Zurich’s HelpPoint is an innovative Signature Touchpoint that resulted from co-creation. HelpPoint simplifies information gathering for customers evaluating insurance by creating a one-stop resource for all insurance planning needs, helping them at steps in their path to adoption when they are most confused.

Step 3: Building Integrated Plans
The last step in achieving breakthroughs is integrating Signature Touchpoints with products and messaging so the Touchpoints become a platform for products that break through the clutter and bypass customer filters. Integrated plans must be concrete, well sequenced, and include specific progress measures. Integrated planning always appears simple on paper but drafting plans that

**TREE: Branch Out Your Thinking**

| **Transforming** | a touchpoint into a Signature Connection often involves helping customers make decisions in new ways or with new information. For example, large commercial customers of UPS were increasingly confused about the benefits, features, and costs of long-term shipping contracts. UPS transformed the customer dialogue by creating thenewlogistics.ups.com. It’s a new online tool that made the costs, benefits, and features of each shipping program transparent and easy to understand so that clients could determine on their own which program best matched their needs. |
| **Replacing** | a touchpoint with a new, more convenient, or engaging alternative is an effective way to turn a touchpoint into a Signature Connection. When GE customers became frustrated with all the contracts, price quotes, and bureaucracy involved in the purchase of major equipment, GE replaced the entire procedure with Deal Hub—a cross-functional team of sales, marketing, operations, and legal with decision-making authority to respond to customers quickly and eliminate red tape. |
| ** Enhancing** | touchpoints in ways that create Signature Connections can happen in many ways. A hot spot right now is the use of real-time digital information to improve B2B and B2C sales representative interactions with their customers. Salesforce.com’s cloud computing platform is a great example in the B2B space. By making customer relationship data available practically anywhere and anytime, the interaction between sales rep and customer is more accurate, more timely, and accompanied by better follow-up. |
| **Extending** | existing touchpoints is one of the most common ways to form a Signature Connection with customers. Kohler, for example, relies on its engaging website featuring a plumber avatar that helps prospective buyers find information to prepare for a visit to a showroom, as well as to investigate their interests in more detail after their visit. The Kohler website can provide the detailed specifications that contractors need, while at the same time providing the images and videos consumers require to match faucet styles to their décor or examine the merits of a new tub. |
are inspired and actionable is a difficult task.

Three simple practices can help:

– Keep the plan short. Brevity forces the prioritization crucial to effective execution. Doing a few things well is the formula for effective implementation. Be sure that the plan calls for a pilot, so you can test your Signature concept fast, and use your learnings to fine-tune how it plays out.

– Build a balanced scorecard early in the planning process that includes metrics of execution across product, message, and customer connection. When metrics are decided early in the plan, they help ensure that the entire team is aligned on achieving results not just on activities.

– Focus on behavior as well as attitudes. Increasing brand consideration is great only if it is accompanied by a real product search. For every investment, ask two questions: What do we want customers to do? How will this investment help them do it?

The Power of Signature Touchpoints

Signature Touchpoints are not new. Macy’s created the Thanksgiving Day Parade to kickoff the Christmas buying season. Hallmark supported elevating Mother’s Day into a card-giving occasion.

What’s new is a proven approach to building Signature Touchpoints based on mapping the path to purchase, understanding decision-making insights, creating innovative connection ideas, and integrating them into actionable plans. This approach, the third dimension of marketing, is just as important as new product development or campaign development. It is the crucial, and often overlooked, component in achieving breakthrough in both B2B and B2C markets.

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