

EXPERIENCE BRANDING

What is it Like to Experience Your Brand?

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Key Points:

Three fundamental elements important to building any brand:

1. Product. What you do, sell, and how well you meet your customers' needs. It's how you name and define your products/services and price them.

2. Communication. How you consistently promote your brand through marketing and sales - presenting your promise. It is the marketing, advertising, materials, word of mouth, graphic standards, etc. that communicate your brand attributes, create awareness, and develop a brand image.

3. Service. How well you deliver your brand promise. Customer interaction with your company before, during and after they purchase.

And, an important addition to the brand-building fundamentals:

4. Experience. Synchronizing the entire business in order to generate a unique and consistent experience with the brand. Creating emotional involvement between the brand and the customer

Imagine your company has just spent hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars developing a new product, or has invested this much over the years into the reputation of its service offerings. On top of this you've spent even more money branding and marketing your product or service to your customers to communicate how it will answer their needs and how purchasing and using it will be an easy, positive and exciting experience. At this point you have a good product or service and a good brand message. However, you can still be unsuccessful. Why? Because your customers can still have negative experiences with your brand. The following are typical examples of such potentially negative experiences:

Your Internet site doesn't have enough information or tools to assist your customers with researching or making a purchase decision.

Your eCommerce ability is difficult to follow and doesn't offer service features to properly assist customers.

Your product is not easy to assemble, install or use as promised.

Your service is delivered in a manner that is unfriendly or frustrating to the customer.

Your service representatives or sales people are not knowledgeable enough about the product/service or the promotion(s) or are unfriendly to customers when they call in.

Your communications are not personal or relevant to the customer even after they have requested information and told you what their needs are via your Internet site or a sales or customer service rep.

Your message does not connect the customer emotionally and intrinsically to your brand.

And, I could go on...

After any or all of these experiences, does the customer feel your product or service is all it was branded to be? Does your customer care about all the money you've invested in your new product/service after having such negative experiences with your brand? Is your investment worth it if customers don't feel a positive connection with the brand?

Scenarios like those above are what can happen when a company only goes through the first steps of building a brand and communicating their brand promise through use of the brand name and trademarks, which is traditional branding. To prevent these scenarios from happening, companies need to incorporate customers' future experiences into the way they build their brands.

As well as products and services that meet their needs, customers want positive experiences around buying and using those products and services and to feel connected to the brand(s). This is where experience branding comes in.

'Traditional Branding' vs. Experience Branding

Traditional branding usually only has a few goals: to build awareness, to create an image, and/or to communicate brand attributes. Following only these goals, the branding budget centers on creating brand names and trademarks and then managing them. Customers are exposed to the brand and its promises and can sometimes remember the logo and/or message. However, this approach often falls short because it is only product-centric and customers and their experiences are often just an afterthought. Moving away from this approach to one that makes your branding effort more customer-centric will require you to add one more element to the brand-building process - the experience.

Experience branding goes beyond traditional branding by developing ways to create positive experiences for and to gain emotional involvement from your customers. Experience branding takes into account all of the touch-points a customer will have with your brand. It goes beyond just marketing, where touch-points are simply components in the marketing campaign, into sales, customer service, operations, fulfillment, web sites, and so on.

The Internet lends itself well to experience branding but is not the only way to create and sustain emotional involvement between your brand and the customer. Every interaction your customer has with your company or product needs to be evaluated to optimize and customize the experience your customer has or will have with your brand. Experience branding starts in the product and service development stages by asking and answering questions such as: How will the product or service be purchased and used? What will the service issues be? What will the customer feel and think? How will each of the touch-points interact with the customer to build a brand connection? Efforts to ensure positive customer experiences and involvement are then developed and synchronized across the entire business.

Experience Branding Strategies

So, how do we go about creating the experience? Each touch-point needs to create a memorable event that engages a customer in an inherently personal way. At each step your brand needs to be intuitive, relevant, personal, positive, immediate and consistent. Some examples of experience branding strategies to meet these goals are:

- Practice synchronized marketing. Not only brand the experience but create an experience with the brand. Ensure that all touch-points are in synch (advertising, print, retail, Internet, wireless, PR events, direct mail, tradeshow, customer service, operations, etc.).

Allow your customers to customize the product. The easiest place for this to be done is on your Internet site. For instance, let your customers pick and choose the options they most desire and then provide them with the appropriate suggestion that most fits their needs. Also, let them pick and choose the methods of customer service and communication that best fits their lifestyle.

Personalize the shopping and buying experience based on customers' preferences and behavior. On your Internet site you could create interactive modules that will customize the site for them as they select topics and links. If you have frequent purchase programs and gift cards at your establishment, you could send promotions based on past purchases to you customers.

Develop a two-way, conversational dialogue that creates a marketing relationship. Create ways on your Internet site that your customer can interact with others or with your customer service department in real-time. Create a community of interest on your Web site or through customized mailings. Train your customer service staff, not only on the basics of the product, but on positive communication skills and on all promotions and how they impact the marketing of the brand.

Create a connection with your customers. Practice permission marketing by getting memberships and registrations so that you can better service them and track their buying behaviors at the same time. Come up with ways to get them to make repeat purchases or recommend your product or service to others. One way to accomplish this is through loyalty and incentive programs. Once they become frequent customers, they are more likely to stick with your product or service as long as they have a consistent brand experience.

An effective experience branding strategy can be realized by developing touch-point strategies, communicating and implementing across the business enterprise and analyzing results to ensure the promised experience is delivered. In other words, you need to create new ways to go about product development and building a brand that incorporates the customer experience from the beginning and that ultimately will connect the customer emotionally and intrinsically to your brand. Your customers will reward you with purchases, loyalty and word of mouth advertising.

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