Closing the Gap Between Brand Promises and Customer Trust



Here are four questions every company should ask before marketing for consumer bucks.

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Consider this scenario: You're on a journey and reach a crossroad. You ask directions from two strangers. One tells you to turn left and, in convincing, sincere language, describes the beautiful scenery you'll encounter. The other tells you to turn right, describes the scenic but tough terrain ahead and gives you a jug of water for the hour-long trip. Who do you trust?

I'll go with the guy who gives me water every time, and I think most other people will too. Trust comes from an honest

and proven experience, not just a promise made. As a brand guy, I often wonder why so many companies spend so much time on their brand promise and far less on building customer-centric brand-delivery processes that engender trust.

That disconnect usually occurs at the point of post-sale engagement. Earning trust happens happens during and after the transaction, not beforehand. We can all name companies that spend a fortune on advertising to build their brand promise using brilliant commercials, beautiful cinematography and compelling stories. They strategically work their data and then leverage social media, direct marketing and couponing to extend customized purchase incentives. Then, once they've made the sale – at that critical make-it-or-break-it point in the relationship when it's their turn to deliver the promised goods – that's when whole thing unravels.

That "friendly skies" airline, "welcome home" hotel or "powering your vision" smartphone all start to seem disingenuous when your airline gate agent is frustrated, room service is cold and phone's battery cuts out during a call with your family. Let me be clear: It's not the fault of the gate agent, room-service staff or your local phone-store employee. Usually, it's based on poor management decisions. In short, a flawed customer-experience process breaks your brand promise.

So, if it's all about the process and not just the promise, how do you know if yours is off-track? If you're a senior manager creating policies, directing customer-facing teams or cultivating long-term customer-engagement strategies, here are four questions to consider.

1. Are your rules of

engagement based on the exception-of-one or best-for-most?

Why do you need the receipt to return an item that clearly has a price tag on it? It's because the store policy is trying to prevent fraud by that one person who's returning a marked-down item to get a full-price refund. But that's a "punish many for the sins of one" strategy. Maybe you don't run a store where shrinkage is a profit killer, but how many of your customer-facing policies are designed to prevent the exception and not reward the norm? Conversely, I'm reminded of that probably apocryphal legend of a high-end retailer allowing a customer to return a set of car tires — even though they don't sell tires. Is it true? I don't know, but that story, and the store's name, has been repeated countless times. What's that worth in customer trust and loyalty?

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2. Are you chasing the fault or finding the fix?

There's an odd bit of psychology that says customer loyalty is more about the problem a company fixes than the product or service they offer. Don't believe me? I bet your favorite airline is the one which, after they created a delay or some schedule SNAFU, put you in first class to say sorry. Yup. People give their loyalty to companies that work hard to solve problems, especially the ones they've created. Ask yourself if your customer-engagement processes are more about identifying faults than fixing problems.

3. Do you collect marketing metrics

or assess the value of an engagement?

In our zeal to measure everything, calculating alphabet-soup metrics from TCO and ROI to CPC, are you ignoring harder-to-measure metrics of customer engagement? If your customer processes are in place to test and measure, and not to listen and respond, then that itself is a good measure of a poor process.

Yes, customer satisfaction can be measured in pre-sales contacts and clicks, purchase conversion, reviews on product web sites or the ongoing revenue of repeat customers. However, don't ignore the more meaningful, softer metrics such as word-of-mouth, customer history and longevity and the passion of someone's recommendation. I get more excited from a thoughtful handwritten thank-you card than a ream of big data. The former tells you about trust earned, not just commerce conducted.

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4. Are your processes about controlling or enabling?

As managers, we're supposed to be in control. (Heck, we even have financial professionals called "controllers.") Most top-down management processes help leaders make strategic decisions, marshal critical resources and assign responsibility to get things done, but rarely does that involve ceding control.

Creating meaningful, trusted relationships can only be done at the point of customer engagement, and that involves relinquishing control to your frontline people. They're the ones managing the point-of-sale experience, answering post-sales questions or solving less-than-stellar product or

service-delivery concerns. Unless those related processes empower frontliners to solve customer concerns, your brand promise is in peril.

The point is, a bad experience with a brand eradicates any goodwill created by marketing. Worse, it leaves us feeling betrayed. It can take years and hundreds of contacts to build trust and mere seconds to tear it all down. What good is marketing that moves a consumer through the sales funnel, right to the point of purchase, but then abandons them at delivery? Why are so many companies willing to spend a fortune to make sparkling brand promises but are then so reluctant to design a process that delivers? Maybe it’s because, for too long, they’ve gotten away with it.

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