Is Your Brand Engaging or Intrusive?

A brief guide to developing constructive consumer relationships.

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Managing a brand is a little like that relationship you have with your old roommate. You wistfully remember your good old days and the fun, crazy and life-changing experiences you shared, and you're fiercely loyal to them and those memories. Then, 10 or 20 years later, maybe that relationship feels a little intrusive. Sure, you're always happy to lend a compassionate ear when things are tough. Yet those now all-too-frequent calls to rehash the same old bag-of-woes can get a bit weary. Eventually, you wince when the, "Hey, can I ask a favor?" text message flashes across your phone — again.

Branding and advertising can feel that way too. You respond to a friend's social-network plea to support their charity, only to endure a year of unrelenting online-fundraising solicitations. You click on "Hotels in Nashville" and get weeks of Facebook ads, promotional emails and intrusive, "You've won a free vacation" phone calls.

As marketers, we spend big bucks on big data to understand customers's individual needs. Yet we often squander that insight and the opportunity to create meaningful one-on-one relationships with excessive, pervasive and ultimately intrusive pitches. In short, we know more about our customers as prospects, but seem to care less about them as people. But

there are ways to remedy this.

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Knowing “You” Versus Knowing “About You”

Today, harnessing big data is a $116 billion industry. Marketers know what we watch, the tweets we post and which Facebook friends, groups or companies we “like.” Mobile-purchasing platforms know where we are, what fast food we order and when real-time digital coupons drive our mobile or in-store purchases. Our own company has invested in data technology and analytics that help our customers understand the impact of interactions with people attending their programs and events. Used well — and with customer value in mind — these tools can build meaingful relationships.

While macro data feeds marketing-campaign algorithms, personal one-to-one engagements give us insight and empathy you just can’t get from clicks and likes. While it’s easy to think it’s the marketing department’s job to generate leads, building meaningful relationships really needs to be baked in at every level of a company. That’s why good marketing includes working with every member of your customer-facing team and training them to listen, learn and engage.

Sure, as a marketer, I want to track trends and identify issues from online insights or call-center inquiries, but real customer loyalty starts with that well-trained customer support person who patiently spends an hour on the phone to solve your computer glitch. Yet, think about that national restaurant chain opening a new venue in your neighborhood. They already know your dining-out habits, track when you’ve scanned their online menu or downloaded a coupon and see your reservation on OpenTable. However, when you arrive, the

hostess barely says hello before shuffling you off to a table where an overworked, harried server ignores you while ping-ponging between tables. #EpicFail.

As marketers, we frequently take digital shortcuts to connect with prospects, but fail to deliver on our brand promise by forgetting how to engage and interact with customers.

Speed, Frequency and Per-Click ROI Don't Build Relationships

Data and social media-driven marketing is great at reading a potential customer and responding with offers and ads three seconds after you type a search inquiry. But do digital marketers really think, to my earlier example, that when I type "Nashville Hotels," I want, or need, 30 promotional offers in three minutes? Instead, try connecting later that day with information I might find helpful. Maybe I'm thinking about visiting my aunt next spring, planning a driving tour to look at colleges or just looking for a great restaurant. Tell me what AAA says about best hotels, great hiking trails at a local state park or, if you really want to harness big data, how to connect my interest in country music with the best honky-tonks in the area.

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Stop Shouting and Start Listening

I appreciate that big data helps me spot trends, directs me to new audiences and fuels digital tools that help me connect quickly and, as a marketer watching a budget, efficiently. Much like that adage about direct response, today's digital marketing lets people raise their hands. The question is, once I've identified someone as a prospect, do I shout or do I listen? Meaningful engagements – the ones that build and sustain brand loyalty – start with listening. Whether face-to-

face, digital or virtual, it’s still a person-to-person exchange.

Let’s go back to that former roommate. There was a time when, if you had a problem, the two of you might share a beer while your friend sat patiently and listened empathetically to your concerns. But today, maybe he’s too busy or impatiently interrupts with a, “Yeah. OK. So, what you need to do is….” quick solution. That old friend now isn’t ready to listen and, as marketers, we’re sometimes not ready either. Although we’re armed with massive data, algorithm-driven marketing models and real-time, virtual response tools, do we miss the opportunity to listen before we respond?

As marketers, let’s stop measuring ROI by how fast our service members churn through customer calls, and instead reward our folks who spend time listening to our customers. Let’s train our sales teams at conferences and other live events to listen, engage and then maybe respond days later with meaningful information and ideas. Host more roundtables and webinars that seek input, share ideas and offer resources instead of just dishing out thinly disguised sales pitches.

Engagement-based marketing opens channels to speak, interact and share information and ideas that create and build relationships. As an industry, if our brand-marketing is centered on engaging with our customers by listening and providing value – rather than pushing out quick-hit responses measured in click-throughs – our prospects and customers will reward us with their trust and loyalty.

Love to chat more about this, but my roommate just called … and I need to listen.

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