

Mirror, Mirror...Who Has the Strongest Brand of All? **by Kristine Kirby Webster**

"We don't have a Marketing Department; we have a Customer Department. We don't have a Personnel Department, we have a People Department." -- Herb Kelleher, Southwest Airlines CEO

It may be a bit trite to start an article with a quote. But with a quote as powerful as this one, I'll take a chance.

In this fast moving, multi-channel age of marketing, companies expect their brands to do more--to differentiate, to build relationships, and to increase market awareness and share. But if your brand isn't built with a 360-degree view of the whole brand--including the "people" part of the brand and all of its related communications and customer experiences--you risk getting left behind.

Twenty-first century branding requires a total brand experience, one that encompasses all messages, all channels, all touch points--essentially, one that creates a whole brand experience that is both holistic and realistic, with the customer as the guiding principle.

Humans are social: we both need and seek out relationships. With this in mind, it only follows that a brand is a perfect relationship builder. The human element that builds on the brand awareness is what creates and cements the relationship, and results in loyalty.

Being a cool, cutting edge, "now" brand is no longer enough. In the final analysis, this approach is shallow and shortsighted. If brands want customers for life, their stewards need to realize the importance of the relationship to the brand, and the importance of brand champions in this relationship equation.

So where do you find these brand champions? Many can be found on the inside of an organization--the employees. Employees are the most important part of the brand loyalty equation.

Brand loyalty is not instantaneous. It requires cumulative positive experiences for people to identify with, or even bond with, a brand. Do not confuse brand awareness with brand loyalty--they are starkly different. Brand awareness can be built rather quickly through a catchy jingle, a funny ad, free promotional giveaways, and so on.

Loyalty, on the other hand, takes time. A larger part of the brand-building experience when striving for loyalty over awareness is the customer experience. Can your company deliver a great brand experience time over time, from start to end?

One of the purposes of a brand is to differentiate your product or service to create and promote a competitive edge. If done well this edge makes your brand virtually unassailable in the marketplace (wherever that is these days!). Products and their resultant benefits are an important part of the brand experience, and they do dictate to a large extent repeat purchase or use behaviors.

But the true brand differentiator is customer relations, or service. If all these promised elements are delivered in a way that meets or exceeds the customers' perception of the

brand, you are on your way to being a “trusted agent,” in the words of Peppers & Rogers. Or in other words, a trusted brand. And so the relationship begins....

What do people value most in a relationship? They value honesty, trust, consistency, even familiarity. How do you convey these valued feelings to a consumer in order to get them to search you out rather than just waffle among many brands until a price, or package, or a promise makes them put a particular soap in their cart?

How do you create a relationship between consumer and brand? By offering a customer-centric brand experience, created, nurtured, and fulfilled by your “Customer Department.”

In many ways it is harder to keep an existing customer than gain a new one. In our consumerist society, where we are all constantly searching out the latest and greatest, we are encouraged to try new things, searching for the “holy grail” of anti-aging creams, the “hip” new drink, the “suggestion of success” tie. We are bombarded with messages and offers to make us try new things, and ditch the familiar. The only way to fight this is in the trenches--not in the lofty world of advertising, but in the human realm of customer service, the customer experience, via the internal branding effort.

Internal branding: now there is a misunderstood phrase if ever there was one. Ask 10 different people what it means, and you will get about as many different answers. In the book *Uncommon Practice*, the editors ask, “...how many companies set out to create a culture that is designed to complement the customer experience?”

They give the example of the UK bank First Direct, which strives to “ensure that our internal brand values are the same as our external ones. It seems ... there must be a mirror between the two. You can’t pretend to be one style of brand to your consumers if you’re a different style of brand to your people.”

That is the key: internal branding must mirror and support the external brand message. Only through this mirroring and support can you offer a branded customer experience that builds loyalty and trust that can be parlayed into relationships and profits.

Life is confusing and hectic enough: people want to embrace the familiar. Take advantage of the strength of a brand to really plant a seed and grow it in your customer's mind.

Listen to your employees, and your customers. Offer good value and service, and do so consistently--and then take a good hard look in the mirror. Do you like what you see?