

Brand-Speak

How do customers define your brand? by Margie Johnson

As the economic climate continues to challenge businesses on many levels, I think it is the opportune time for independent merchants, restaurant owners, and owners of service businesses to ask themselves some difficult questions about the perception of their “brand.” Often, as Shop Talk analyzes customers’ feedback about businesses they continue to frequent, or have stopped frequenting, it seems to always come back to reflecting on issues regarding the business’ brand/promise. Therefore, many of the indicators that make a successful business will need to be carefully critiqued by all business owners/managers.

As we delve into this all important success ingredient, let’s examine the literal translation of the word “brand.”

According to Random House Dictionary:

brand n. A kind or variety of something, distinguished by some distinctive characteristic.

brand name n. A product...or service bearing a widely known brand name.

Now, let’s examine the word “brand” as defined by consumers:

“**The internalized sum of all impressions received by customers and consumers resulting in a distinctive position in their ‘mind’s eye’ based on perceived and emotional benefits.**”

When you reflect on all of the tangible and intangible qualities that are in the “mind’s eye” to evaluate the brand’s promise, it always encompasses the thoughts and feelings that customers/clients have with the brand. I affectionately call a term that I have coined for this phenomenon the “E-Gap.” The E-Gap defines the difference between what the customer expected from a brand/business versus the experience they had with that business. All of us have had E-Gaps! Many of our experiences have more than delighted us when our expectations were exceeded, and we left with a very positive memory. However, we have also had the converse of this – when the experience not only did not meet our expectations, but left us very unsatisfied! The E-Gap theory simply means that each brand will be either strengthened or weakened by every point of contact by the customer. Business owners must focus on the customer points of contact and do everything necessary to make sure that their expectations are not just being met, but that the experiences are consistently exceeding their expectations. This consistency needs to be in all forms of brand communication from the human contact to the physical aspects to the media, etc.

What questions must we ask ourselves regarding key principles that businesses must consider to be effectively positioned in their target consumers’ minds? Let’s start with these points:

1 Does your business have some “unique differentiators?” If so, what are they? Do you in fact have a USP (Unique Selling Position) that differentiates you? Is it one that the market perceives that you can deliver? This question needs to be pondered and given thoughtful consideration.

2 What is the “value equation” of your brand? Does your brand lead customers to choose you over your competitors?

Does your definition of value align with what your customers most value? Remember, today’s consumers’ definition of value is not just about price. Today’s time-crunched consumer is rewriting the “value equation” to be a combination that fits what they value. The new “value equation” is often a combination of price, quality, great service, convenience, delivery, unique gift wrap, follow-up, etc. The bottom line is that all business owners need to understand exactly what it is that their clients most value from them.

3 Have you established a brand that is perceived as creditable in your marketplace? Can you deliver your brand experience/product realistically time after time? If so, your business is in an enviable position of having a “top of mind” position in your consumers’ minds. Consistently delivering your promise will help secure customers’ loyalty. Remember, today’s consumers are very fragile and fickle and will quickly go where they are better served. It is incumbent on all business owners to enhance and reinforce the credibility aspect of their business.

4 Are you thinking long term about your brand, not just for today or this month? Think about the sustainability of your brand over the next three to five years. Ask yourself these questions: (1) What must you do to remain relevant in your customers’ minds? (2) Are you asking enough questions of your target audience regarding their changing needs? Try to integrate some simple market research into your organization! Use the “voice of the customer” to help you sustain your brand.

All independent business owners must ask these two hard questions: **Are you reaching your brand’s potential and would you be missed if you weren’t around?**

In an effort to grasp and better understand the brand concept, I urge business owners to read and study the landmark book “POSITIONING: The Battle for Your Mind” by Al Ries and Jack Trout. They define “positioning” this way: “According to the Positioning theory, the human mind contains slots or positions which a company attempts to fill. This is easy to do if the position is empty, but difficult to do if the position is owned by a competitor. In the later case, a company must re-position its competition if it wants to get into the mind.”

I challenge all business owners to reach out to their staff, their clients, and prospective clients to get a creative and fresh perspective about their brand. Get creative, ask the right questions, and solicit honest answers. Pose a few of these questions to gain rich insight into your brand:

- Does your business enjoy a great reputation?
- Are you considered experts in your trade area, or best in your category?
- Is price often a reason that customers do not choose you?
- Are you known for extraordinary service?
- Do you make shopping easy and fun?
- How do you measure in the EST qualities?
- Do you make it easy for your customers to do business in both your “brick and mortar” and your “click and order?”
- Would people say you are totally reliable?
- What one attribute most distinguishes you in the customer’s mind?

Brandspeaking continued...

Paramount to all of the above thoughts and questions when evaluating any “brand” is that all great brands must master the shopping or dining or service experience. Today’s consumers have “so many choices and so little time,” thus the squeeze is on as brands get continually confronted by increased competition, new types of media, new channels of delivery, and very requiring shoppers/customers. To hold a “top of mind” position in the consumers’ minds, you must continually strengthen your brand’s position. This process calls for fresh thinking, new perspectives, and new actions!

I recently attended a very inspiring lecture by Marc Gobé, author of the new book “**Brandjam**.” His research is very enlightening around the theory of emotional branding. In short, his research tells us that brands today must shift from “communications and commodities” to “emotion and inspiration,” that we must revive our exhausted, overly familiar offerings. He has coined the term “brandjamming” as a metaphor that suggests the ideas in his book that brands need to connect with culture and to reach people’s hearts! Marc Gobé’s perspectives and new book on emotional branding reinforces the underlying premise that *consumers rule*. This book is about exploring more intuitive ways to reach and connect with people. This is a must-read book for business owners to immerse themselves in and understand the new consumer mindset. Marc Gobé states that the “new goal of savvy retailers in a market that has become more and more niche-oriented is to reach people individually in order to fulfill their emotional needs.” This book outlines many ideas that deserve serious consideration so that your brand will not pale and become generic!

As a consultant with business owners around the country, I urge them to revisit their customer promise. I believe that a brand is a promise. It is a promise that is conveyed to its customers by everything they observe about the business. This includes but is not limited to the look of the business, the signage, the name of the business, the tagline, the customer service levels, impression of staff, print ads, catalogs, menus, merchandise products selection, visual merchandising, website, logo, packaging, the loyalty program and frequency cards, the general ambience of the business environment, etc., etc., etc. Branding is reinforced or undermined by multiple “moments of truth” in a business. Such moments are made up of both positive and negative impressions that the business projects. I urge businesses to carefully re-examine all the ways they “touch” their customers. Owners must look for ways to improve their “moments of truth.”

In summary, today’s consumers continue to vote with their feet. Happy customers continue to patronize the business. Unsatisfied customers vote with their feet as they stomp out of the business, all the while announcing their discontent to others!

Remember, at the end of the day, the consumer’s mind has been influenced by thousands of impressions. The less distinctive a “brand” is in the consumer’s mind, the more room for a competitor “to occupy a position in the mind’s eye.” -- *Margie Johnson*

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