

Demystifying Ways Employees Deliver on Brand Promises

By Maril MacDonald

While companies can easily measure marketing dollars spent on brand-building initiatives, understanding how the brand drives customers' purchasing decisions has often proven to be more elusive. How do companies use "brand magic" to form long-lasting relationships with customers? Demystifying branding begins with a few simple tenets:

- You're selling a relationship with your brand, not just a product or service. The brand is your promise for performance and your customers' expectations for delivery.
- Brand differentiation comes through the total customer experience. Delivery happens at every point of customer contact.
- The business strategy must set the course and make the brand a part of your company's cultural and operational DNA. Your employees must have the systems, processes, information and incentives to deliver the promise at every point of contact.

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Working under these principles, the brand can change organization-wide behavior in a way that improves performance and drives strategy.

Start with the Customer

At the heart of a successful brand strategy is a clear understanding of the customers you serve and what's important to them. Employees need direction on what the customer expects and the actions they must take to deliver on those expectations. To gain this understanding, employees must identify the interactions from the customer's point of view to determine whether or not the company is living up to its customer "promise."

These interactions, these "defining moments," are the critical activities, the things a company must get right. They are not limited to product performance and quality. Rather, they span the entire customer experience from order to delivery to application.

By understanding exactly what factors determine a satisfied customer and then delivering them, a company can provide employees not only with a common focus, but also with definite direction as to how they can positively impact the customer experience in their everyday jobs. In this context, every employee shares the same job description—to serve customers and deliver what's important to them.

Making Magic Happen: Brand Delivery

How many times have you talked with a customer service representative, looking for a solution to a problem only to find that the employee does not have the necessary information or the decision-making authority to resolve the issue? Wanting to help, the employee often becomes frustrated and starts explaining the situation in terms of the company as an outsider, that elusive "they" who makes both the employee and customer helpless. In these instances, the employee, in effect, divorces himself from the company and the brand.

What causes this? Often, companies pour millions of dollars into external campaigns that create a customer expectation, while focusing few resources on the internal components necessary to deliver on it. However, it is

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precisely the delivery via employees that has the most profound effect on the customer relationship. People, as simple as it is, deliver brands—not advertising.

In order for the brand to “come to life” at every point of customer contact, the brand promise must be the adhesive that holds together the overall company mosaic—its vision, mission, values, growth strategy and guiding behaviors—not just another, separate thing you ask the marketing department to do. Effective internal branding starts at the top with the company’s business strategy and leadership’s direction. In essence, brand strategy must reflect business strategy, and vice versa. It’s critical that they are both mutually supportive and two integrated parts of the same directive.

Organizations that want to create the right brand experience should make the brand promise the primary driver for decisions, utilizing six key levers of effective brand delivery: people, processes, structure, information, decision-making and incentives.

The competencies, experience and attitudes of an organization’s people affect the customer’s “defining moments” with the company. Leadership must select and train employees appropriately, always mindful of the customer when making recruiting and hiring decisions.

Organizational processes can make or break a customer’s experience. The infrastructure must enable optimal efficiency, productivity and customer service. Equally important is the prioritization and escalation of work or customer issues. Processes should promote collaboration across the company to break down barriers to communication and effective brand delivery.

How an organization assigns roles and responsibilities can create a structure that encourages involvement from employees in making customer-driven decisions. Leadership must clearly define reporting relationships and performance expectations, as well as make the necessary resources available.

The information available to employees must be accurate, relative, timely and actionable. Sharing knowledge across the organization will help employees be more effective in their roles. Leaders should consider educating employees on the company’s complete package of products and services, market trends and intelligence, the competitive landscape and customer satisfaction criteria.

Those employees closest to the customer must have the decision-making authority to consistently demonstrate the brand in action. To enable front-line decision-making, leadership must articulate a clear corporate vision and strategy, and the specific role of employees in realizing the full potential of that vision.

Company incentives—whether they are pay-for-performance, bonus, verbal recognition, or longer-term goals such as career progression and enhancement—must drive the specific behaviors necessary to deliver the brand experience.

Focusing on the six levers of effective brand delivery will help ensure that employees 1) understand what must be done to realize the brand promise and 2) can take action to deliver it.

While these levers create the infrastructure necessary to deliver the brand, they must be pulled in a way that inspires the brand to “come to life” in everyday experience.

The Magic of an Emotional Connection: Engaging the Organization

It is critical to understand that brands are emotional. While essentially inanimate products or services, the best brands are embodied in the hearts and minds of both customers and employees. Therefore, leadership’s direction must appeal to the emotional needs of employees—what makes people want to change their behavior and take action. With that in mind, the brand can be an ideal platform for such motivation, as brands often define the emotional connection between customer, product, company and employee.

Through effective messaging and delivery channels, communication plays a key role in inspiring employees’ hearts and minds to engage in and take action on delivering the total brand experience.

Messaging

Messaging, the first facet of this role, must provide direction, clarity, simplicity, consistency, integration and emotion. All messages should be integrated into a single story that can be told by everyone, from leadership in the executive suite to front-line management. A common story will provide clear, consistent direction to employees so they understand in no uncertain terms what they need to do and when they need to do it. Simply put, on one day you cannot pursue the vision, and the next the brand, and on the third day the strategy. Success in branding requires everyone to charge down one path.

Moreover, messages should be constructed and delivered to motivate employees to take the right actions with a sense of commitment and urgency. That motivation usually revolves around the “why” behind the strategic direction and how it ties into the things that inspire employees’ commitment to the company and the customer.

Messaging can and should do more than tell a powerful story—it should drive alignment and action that will actually create the story, rather than just telling it. Employees need to see management acting and talking about the brand (and overarching strategies) from a common platform. If words and actions don’t match, employees become confused and disheartened, and it becomes difficult for leadership to drive the desired behaviors. To work toward a common understanding, it is important to present concrete, clear messages to which managers must respond.

Through that interaction, one can identify differing points of view in the management team and therefore can work to achieve language and content that represents those viewpoints (while simultaneously moving the perspectives of the various leaders closer together). If views are diametrically opposed, or if personality issues preclude alignment, it is important to raise those issues and recommend and help implement a path to achieve a common brand vision.

Effective Channels

Messaging is only as effective as its delivery through effective channels. A company’s branding effort cannot reside in the executive suite alone. You must enlist support at the local level to implement the brand and to change employee behaviors to deliver its promise. Finding the early adopters in your organization, the employees who will enthusiastically champion the brand, is another way to tap into employees’ emotions on a peer-to-peer level. The effort requires effective navigation of your organization, which is often a complex, full-time job, spanning multiple levels and many silos simultaneously. It is important to find leaders who will support the brand at every level and put them to work driving new behaviors among fence sitters and blockers.

Sometimes this involves very informal interaction—around the water cooler, in the plant and R&D center, behind the scenes. Other times it involves the creation of special internal teams designed to harness and apply the skills and persuasive powers of leaders up and down the organization. Consider beginning your search with such groups as marketing, sales and customer service, as they will have a keen interest in brand evolution, as well as a vested interest in aligning (or blocking) support for the brand.

To win their support, it is necessary to have mechanisms in place to conduct a healthy dialogue around the brand, its rationale and opportunities. Communication departments are uniquely positioned to be leaders, brand champions. They can be effective in distributing information throughout the organization, targeting both formal and informal leadership.

With the right message and effective channels to drive it, a company will be positioned to execute a powerful internal branding campaign that will win the hearts and minds of its employees. If you give them a reason to care along with the right resources, structure and systems, employees will not only meet customer expectations but also exceed them. That’s when the real magic happens.

Maril MacDonald is an internationally recognized leader in workplace performance and a founding partner of the strategy execution and employee engagement firm Matha MacDonald LLC. Previously, she was vice president, corporate communications for International Truck and Engine Corporation, formerly Navistar. MacDonald has more than 20 years of experience at global companies, in positions ranging from human resources and communications to operations.