

# Branded customer service

BY LEE WEI LIAN

While many companies understand the need for good customer service and the importance of branding, seldom the twain doth meet. For many companies, the two concepts are executed in parallel with little convergence.

Brands are owned by the marketing department while customer service is often delivered by people outside the marketing department. That's why we are told by companies via brochures and other promotional materials that they value their customers, but when it comes time to deal with an actual employee, reality hits.



Aveling defines a brand as an emotional connection between the customer and the company

George Aveling, a branded customer service consultant with TMI, shares a story about how when flying on one particular airline, he found the in-flight service to be good, but the ground staff was cold and impersonal. "What the airline needs to understand is that my experience with them starts the moment I check in," says Aveling. "This is a problem where the performance

indicators are different for cabin crew and ground crew. For the check-in staff, their job is to quickly process as many people as possible. Unfortunately, the airline's brand is compromised by this over-emphasis on efficient check-in."

That's where branded customer service comes in — it helps companies combine customer service and branding. "We shift

companies away from good customer service to branded customer service," Aveling says. He defines a brand as an emotional connection between the customer and the company.

But while many companies spend a lot of money and time on advertising their brand, the employees who are supposed to deliver on the brand promise often do not even know what the brand means. "What is your brand? Does everyone in the company understand what the brand stands for? If they do, every time they meet a customer, they will be able to promote the brand experience."

Janelle Barlow, co-author of the book *Branded Customer Service — The New Competitive Advantage*, says that when the cus-

tomers is with the employee, the control of the brand is with the employee. Thus, all the millions that the company spends promoting the brand could be in vain if the employee in question does not deliver customer service that is aligned with the brand. To avoid this, "the brand needs to permeate HR policies, internal communications and the reward and recognition schemes", says Aveling.

But what about TMI's own brand values? And do these values permeate TMI's culture? "Our brand values are that we care, are responsive and fun and we communicate," he answers. "We hire people based on their ability to live these values. Our people give a lot of after-service care and re-

spond quickly. Our customers like dealing with us."

Companies that have undergone training in branding their customer service include Hong Kong Trade Development Council, SMART, a telecommunications provider in the Philippines, Kaiser Permanente Hospitals in California and ANZ bank in New Zealand. Janelle Barlow, who is also the president of TMI United States, and co-author of her book *Paul Stewart* will be conducting a seminar on Jan 23 at Hotel Maya, Kuala Lumpur. The seminar is being organised by Alpha Corporate Training Professionals Sdn Bhd. For more details, call (03) 2168 4498.

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The Edge, Malaysia – 16-22 January 2006

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