

PEOPLE

CREATING THE BRANDED SERVICE EXPERIENCE

From brand differentiation and service differentiation to customer service branding.



Customers today face an almost endless range of choice. A key challenge for business is to stand out, to be different, in a market that is so saturated. While this environment encourages companies to adopt brand differentiation and customer service differentiation, how are we going to merge the concepts of branding and customer service to create the branded service experience?

Two of my interviewees, Theologian, Jennifer Hallow and Paul Stewart, have recently written a book called "Branded Customer Service: The New Competitive Edge." They believe that a company's competitive edge comes from engaging its customers. Their greatest branding work forms the basis of this article.

The art of branding is to create an emotional connection between your company or product and the customer. Brands such as Harley Davidson, Apple, Disney and many others work billions of dollars. They create strong associations with customers so the words for some are firmly tied to their brand. Traditionally, branding has been associated with what customers see such as graphic design, packaging and new logos. Although

visual branding is important, the "branded customer service" is a critical order to develop service-based relations.

This can be explained with a simple story. Let's say that you visit a local coffee house such as a company that has a brand process of "the origin - just old plain bagged coffee that you get elsewhere." It's a shop everyone has people get confused by because everyone would imagine that when people enter the shop, they get prepared as you walk into the shop. The company may have spent a fortune to create an exciting atmosphere, with music playing through the shop. The company's logo is professionally positioned throughout the store.

As you move to what is being displayed on an impressive track for coffee, a barista using what some appreciate you are seen to make a pitch. He also about the coffee, the AT-Grounds Customer (brand) and the ICE machine. Within seconds, you are made to feel like a child because you have no idea of what he is talking about. You sense that this will make your coffee and of course, you do not buy from the shop. You were impressed with the visual branding, the shop atmosphere and overall setting, but your brand experience did not meet the brand promise. And this is a simple language to find a company just right for you. In the end, you go on to a shop that you did not visit.

Have you ever had a service experience with a company that was not consistent with the image that the company had projected to you? Without having the language for it, you did not have a "branded service experience". Have you ever had a "branded service experience" that was not consistent with the brand promise? Was he instead to deliver on the brand promise? Did he use language as a person who was not of the same world of enhancing the company's brand image as the way to making a sale? Or was he just interested in providing some sort of customer service and getting a commission?

The bridge to the traditional customer service model, in this case, is to create a branded service model. In this case, companies attempt to stand out through service differentiation - delivering service that was better than their competitors. They competed at standard service factors including friendliness, helpfulness, responsiveness, regularity and reliability. The only problem is that their competitors compete on the same customer service playing field. What was often special is now expected.

When it comes to branding, it is by aligning our customer service culture with our brand promise. The differentiation now lies in engaging and delivering the service experience that reinforces the brand image, thus delivering on your company's brand promise.

In other words, customer service is delivered through the brand and customer base. How do we do this? One of the ways that the Marketing Department, which has been mostly responsible for branding, and the Human Resources Department, which traditionally has been responsible for service, must work closely together.

One of the keys for companies to create a branded service culture is by having a set of brand values. Brand values will show what the core "business" behaviors by employees. These brand values must be clearly understood, believed and translated into actual behaviors by employees. The process must be supported by senior management and the entire organization by making and using of "brand language", a group of employees who engage in activities to reinforce the brand and customer service experience.

The second step is to create the "brand culture" which has developed brand values that include engaging, refreshing and "brand membership". A training and coaching process was developed to give employees the awareness and skills to be able to deliver on the brand experience. For example, rather than a person saying a guest, "how was your flight?" they would engage the guest with a question such as, "how did you like your flight with the weather in Atlanta?"

Business is indeed made from these service experience-driven branding. Developing an "on-brand" culture that delivers "branded service experience" represents an opportunity for your company to establish a competitive advantage that will be difficult to copy.

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Companies can do this by aligning our customer service culture with our brand promise. The differentiation now lies in engaging and delivering the service experience that reinforces the brand image, thus delivering on your company's brand promise.



Creating the Branded Service Experience

From brand differentiation and service differentiation to customer service branding

By George Aveling
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Customers today face an almost confusing range of choice. A key challenge for businesses is to stand out, to be different, as a means to win market share. Within this environment two strategies that companies adopt are brand differentiation and customer service differentiation.

Here we are going to merge the concepts of branding and customer service to create the 'branded service experience'.

Two of my international TMI colleagues, Janelle Barlow and Paul Stewart, have recently written a book called 'Branded Customer Service – The New Competitive Edge'. They believe that a company's competitive edge stems from engaging their staff to deliver on the brand promise. Their ground breaking work forms the basis of this article.

The aim of branding is to create an emotional connection between your company or product and the consumer. Brands such as Harley Davidson, Apple, Disney and Sony are worth billions of dollars. They create strong connections with consumers to the extent that some are

fiercely loyal to their brand.

Traditionally, branding has been associated with what customers see such as graphic identity, packaging and store layouts. Although visual branding is important, the 'brand experience' plays a critical role in today's service based economy.

This can be explained with a simple story. Let's say that you visit a hypothetical business such as a computer shop that makes a brand promise of "No jargon – just old plain language advice that you can understand". This shop recognises that people get confused by technical computer-speak language that sales people often use. You are impressed as you walk into the shop. The company must have spent a fortune to create an inviting atmosphere, with music wafting through the store. The company's logo is professionally emblazoned throughout the store.

As you marvel at what is being displayed on an impressive 17-inch flat screen, a friendly young sales person approaches you and scans to make a pitch. He talks about the

cache, the ATI Graphics Controller (Shared) and the IEEE Firewire Port. Within seconds, you are made to feel like a child because you have no idea of what he is talking about. You smile, thank him and walk away confused. And of course, you do not buy from this shop. You were impressed with the visual branding – the shop atmosphere and visual identity, but your brand experience did not meet the brand promise. Rather than using a simple language to find a computer just right for you, the sales person spoke a language that you did not understand.

Have you ever had a service experience with a company that was not consistent with the image that the company had portrayed to you? Without having the language for it, you did not have a 'branded service experience!'

Let's delve a little more deeply. Did the customer service person know what the brand promise was? Was he trained to deliver on the brand promise? Did he see himself as a person who was at the front end of enhancing the company's brand

image on the way to making a sale? Or was he just interested in providing some sort of customer service and getting a commission?

This brings me to the traditional customer service model. In days gone by, companies attempted to stand out through 'service differentiation' – delivering service that was better than their competitors. They competed on standard service factors including friendliness, helpfulness, responsiveness, empathy and reliability. The only problem is that many companies now play on the same customer service playing field. What was once special is now expected.

Where to from here? It is by aligning our customer service culture with our brand promise. True differentiation now lies in engaging staff to deliver the service experience that reinforces the brand image, thus delivers on your company's brand promise.

In other words, customer service is delivered through the brand reinforcement lens. How do we do this? First of all, it means that the Marketing Department,

which has traditionally been responsible for branding, and the Human Resources Department, which traditionally has been responsible for service, must work closely together.

One of the keys for companies to create a branded service culture is by having a set of brand values. Brand values will drive what TMI calls 'on-brand' behaviours by employees. These brand values must be known, understood, believed and translatable into on-brand behaviours by employees. The process must be sponsored by senior management and the energy maintained by training and team of 'Brand Champions', a group of employees who engage in initiatives to reinforce the internal and external brand experience.

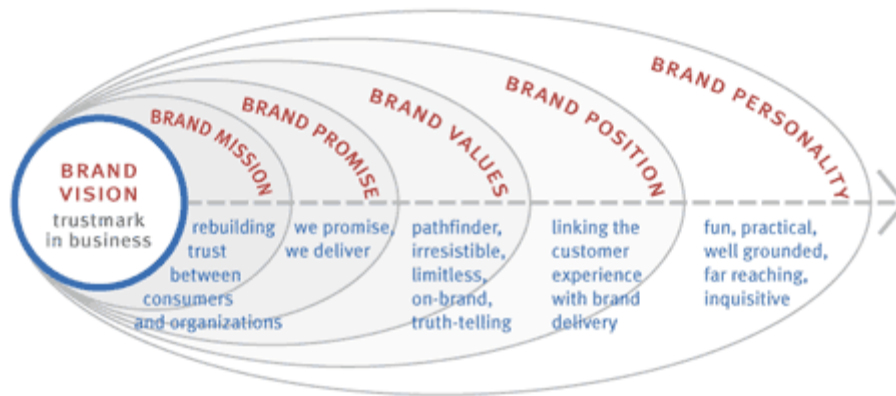
TMI worked with a resort in the Bahamas which had developed brand values that included 'engaging', 'refreshing', and 'worth remembering'. A training and consulting process was developed to give employees the awareness and skills to be able to deliver on the 'brand experience'. For example, rather than a porter asking a

guest, "How was your flight?" they would engage the guest with a question such as "How does the weather here compare with the weather in Malaysia?"

Business is indeed tough these days, success requires different thinking. Developing an "on-brand" culture that delivers 'branded service experience' represents an opportunity for your company to develop a competitive advantage that will be difficult to copy.

One of the keys for companies to create a branded service culture is by having a set of brand values.

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The Customer Service Branding Roadmap.

Reproduced from Branded Customer Service, The New Competitive Edge, by Janelle Barlow and Paul Stewart.