



Promises do not define a brand. So there.

Brand ‘gurus’ love to define a brand as ‘a promise you make to the customer’. But how many companies do you deal with that keep any promises at all?

So there I was, number thirty-seven in that damned call waiting queue. I’d been stuck there for at least twenty minutes and I was beginning to get extremely pissed off.

Three times I’d been transferred to a different department and three times I had to go through all of the usual security checks. You know the drill – state my mother’s maiden name, colour of cat, my birthday or whatever. Most of it utterly pointless and exceptionally time-consuming.

But it wasn’t just the appalling lack of organisation on the company’s behalf that was driving me crazy. Or the distorted and totally unsuitable music they were pushing down the phone line assuming it would somehow calm my state of mind. Or indeed the huge phone bill I was running up.

No, folks, it was much more down-to-earth than that. It was the cool, calm voice that occasionally butted in to gently remind me that ‘your call is important to us.’

Important? I don’t think so. A nuisance, maybe. An unwanted intrusion most definitely. After all, I was on the line to complain, not help them meet their sales targets.

Promises, promises, promises

So when the so-called ‘brand experts’ tell me that the definition of a brand is ‘the promise you make to a customer’ I simply say, ‘dream on.’ I’ve never yet dealt with a company that has kept any promise it has made to me – whether it be the local plumber or a national utility provider.

Many years ago marketing people came up with what they deemed a

really smart idea: under-promise, they said, and over-deliver. In other words, promise the customer they can have their new three-piece-suite delivered in five working days, then turn up on the doorstep in three.

Hey, presto, a satisfied customer, yes? Well, no actually. Not unless we consumers are such a bunch of idiots that we can’t see through the ploy. And not unless we’d be over the moon that all the arrangements to have time off work or go on holiday had to be completely reorganised to fit in with the new delivery date.

So let’s get something straight here and now. A brand is not – never has been and never will be – a promise you make to a customer.

It isn’t a mission statement or a mantra or some other anally-retentive nonsense that goes as far as the boardroom door and disappears into the ether.

Perception is reality

Rather, a brand is the total perception a customer has about a company, its product or service. That, my friends, is how it is.

And if that perception doesn’t match what the company spinmeister is promulgating, then no amount of music or sickly messages about how important I am is going to change it.

When will companies grow up? We’ve had years to get this whole brand concept right. Total quality management, customer care, integrated marketing – you name it, the ‘gurus’ have created it.

So what happened to the practical implementation and the cheesy concept of ‘delighting the customer’? Duh.

If you want to know what people really think of your brand, here’s a novel suggestion that even the biggest blue-chips might find of benefit: ask them.

A word of warning, though. Don’t be surprised if their perception doesn’t quite match the corporate version.

And for those readers who don’t have deep pockets and huge resources, worry not. You can get valuable brand feedback from your customers by the use of a simple postal questionnaire, making some telephone calls, or even via your website.

It sounds such a simple thing to do. But in many companies for whom I’ve consulted, a brand audit was rarely the driver for the brand strategy.

On the contrary, most branding ideas were the result of brainstorming sessions behind closed doors that created the kind of unbelievable twaddle we witness today. Like phone statements that no-one believes, pre-recorded and badly edited apologies blasting through loudspeakers when trains, planes or buses don’t run on time, and nauseating music that I don’t like and don’t want to hear.

It’s time to take a proper, professional look at branding. Get it right, and it really can put your company miles ahead of the competition.

Start today. And maybe your first port of call should be a thorough review of what you say – and maybe even sing – down the phone. ■

Agree or disagree. Care to comment? You can email me at:

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