

Let's 'Operationalize' the Brand Promise

CALL ME Joe Marketing Guy. I like big marketing ideas. Bold promises. Sexy, content-rich Web sites, glossy collateral materials, flashy TV spots, you name it. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to get my brand top-of-mind, consumer by consumer.

Down the hall is my colleague, Steve Salesman. He likes the razzle-dazzle too; after all, it helps him land business. However, Steve is a bit more reticent about some of the bolder promises the company makes. When some of the marketing promise turns out to be . . . a bit of a stretch, life can get uncomfortable for Steve.

Luckily, Steve's an old pro. He knows the perfect way to disarm the customer—the right roll of the eyes, inside joke and conspiratorial tone of voice when he says, “Well, you know those marketing guys . . .” In fact, the customer *does* know marketing guys, and Mr. Salesman and the customer have a good chuckle.

Further down the hall sits Sue Operations. She's squarely on the front line. What I promise, she's supposed to deliver. So when my brand promise far exceeds our company's operational and service capabilities . . . let's just say Sue isn't quite as charitable as Steve Salesman. And when she tells the customer “You can't possibly expect *that*, that @#&% Marketing Guy,” no one is laughing.

This scenario may sound completely dysfunctional or unsettlingly familiar. Or both. While it's certainly exaggerated, it probably resembles the silo effect that



By Rob Rush

plagues many organizations. Sales and Marketing vs. Operations. Human Resources vs. Training. Corporate Headquarters vs. Branch Managers. IT vs. everyone. And while all of these departments are busy jousting or—worse yet—ignoring one another, who gets the short end of the proverbial stick? That's right, the customer. The customer

doesn't care that marketing promised this, and IT dropped the ball on that, and HR just hired some stiff. They just want what was promised to them, and have it delivered in a consistent fashion.

What our firm is lacking is the ability to “operationalize” our brand. Clearly, we have no problem creating a strong, attractive brand promise; as Joe Marketing Guy, I have more than taken care of that. Our ads are good and our consumer message is coming through loud and clear. What's missing is the internal agreement on the brand experience and how to deliver on it. That level of dissonance is invisible to the customer, but makes it virtually impossible to satisfy them.

Think about it: if the real-world delivery of the product or service in question cannot possibly match the promise of that product . . . well, it's safe to say that the entire customer experience is going to fall short of expectations. Chances are the products and brands that have earned your allegiance over time aren't necessarily the most expensive or innovative. Rather, they're the ones that deliver, time after time. Your favorites don't smack a home run on Tuesday and strike out on Wednesday. They line a solid double into the gap, every time.

And that's why Southwest Airlines has a customer base every bit as loyal, if not more so, than Singapore Airlines. Southwest customers aren't expecting flutes of champagne in the passenger cabin, nor are they getting them, but they are getting a

friendly, efficient travel experience, from Sarasota to San Jose. One that is in 100% agreement with every TV spot, Web site, brochure or reservations agent. That precise level of execution, whether it's applied to Dom Perignon or a smile and a wave, is the sort of brand promise delivery that inspires customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Another example is Commerce Bank, a regional player in the Northeast that recently went the extra mile for a colleague of mine by staying open after hours—just so she could get a roll of quarters. Nowhere in the bank's customer service manual does it decree “stay open past closing to help noncustomers with change needs.” But the leadership at Commerce found it was valuable to sit around a table with operations, IT, human resources, marketing and the branches, and map out the types of experiences they want their customers—or noncustomers—to have and the types of people they want to deliver them.

We all know that an effective advertising campaign will drive consumers to your door. Once there, all future purchase behavior is based solely on the efficacy of that experience. It's easy to make promises. It's much harder to deliver on them.

Think of an iceberg. If you're the lookout on a ship, what you see above the water is really only about 10% of the iceberg. That proverbial tip of the iceberg represents the brand promise. It's the 90% under the water—the part that the lookout never sees but assumes is there—that gives the iceberg its strength. That underwater portion, my

Favorite brands aren't the most expensive or innovative, they just deliver consistently.

friends, is the culture, leadership, alignment, discipline and process necessary to “operationalize” the brand, and turn a brand promise and customer strategy into operational reality.

When the brand execution is aligned with the brand promise, you have a powerful iceberg capable of sinking the Titanic. And when the brand execution is missing? Despite appearances on the surface, you really just have . . . ice cubes.

So the next time you think about a new ad campaign and wonder whether you are internally aligned to deliver on that brand promise to benefit the customer, ask yourself one question. Is your company an iceberg . . . or an ice cube?

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RANDOM THOUGHTS By E.L. Pletcher

“The group didn't meet again today because, like earlier meetings, they couldn't break away from their work!”