



Does Your Brand Deserve Loyalty?

By Ron Morrison

Brand this, brand that. Brand is the modern executive's mantra! My question to you, your executive team, and your CEO is this: Does your brand deserve loyalty?

Are you expecting your people to sell and deliver on brands that are broken, dysfunctional, or non-existent? Does your executive and management team have their head buried in the sand as to what is really happening at the grass roots level where your brand is created?

True, no executive team, middle manager, or CEO worth their salt would ever dream, much less admit, that their heads are in the sand; however, that doesn't mean it is not so! Here is one more question to ponder: What destroys brand loyalty?

*Before I go farther into this topic, I want to offer my very simple belief regarding brand. **Your people create your brand, and your brand succeeds or fails based entirely on how they behave.** If you do not share that belief, you probably need to read no farther. That being said, I contend that the number one cause of brand loyalty destruction is poor employee behavior.*

Consider the Penguins

So where does it start? In the animated motion picture Madagascar, the penguins were quite ingenious little creatures. In fact, they planned, and executed a grandiose escape from the zoo. During the development and execution of their plan they did not want any of the humans to become aware of their intellect or abilities to execute their escape strategy. So what was their policy? In the words of their ring leader upon spotting approaching humans, "Smile and wave boys... smile and wave."

In many companies today the "smile and wave" mindset is alive and well. Why? *It is my estimation that middle management and front line supervision typically want executives to think that everything is fine and under control.* However, in many cases, if executive management really knew what was happening, they would be shocked. So, supervision and the frontline employees are self-taught to "smile and wave" as the executives stroll by. Within this mindset true problems are not presented, not solved, and stay present. This then results in an eroding culture that leads to poor behavior that impacts the customer. The very last factor and typically the final red flag indicating problems is financial loss or instability. All the while, company executives look as if they have their heads in the sand. In reality, they may have no idea what is truly happening.

In essence, the "smile and wave" philosophy is a mask as to what is really happening. It is the old fashioned dog and pony show for the "big guys in the ivory tower." And yes, you may be seeing that show more than you realize! Customer service, workplace relationships, vendor relationships and so forth may all look great while you are standing there, but what is happening when you are not present?

So it is with customer service. In the executives' presence frontline supervision and middle management personnel may be holding to the premise that they are doing all they can. So often these people who live in the "smile and wave" mindset actually believe they are creating a state of honesty and integrity. In fact, they may believe that they can "turn it on" when the customers show up; after all they do for the executives. They might tell you they treat people well, respect the customer, love the company, etc... all the while they are "smiling and waving."

If the "smile and wave" mindset is present in your culture, **your brand is in trouble.** Chances are, if you are an executive or in middle management, you may not be able to identify it as quickly as your customers can. But I assure you, your customers see it in how they are greeted and treated. *So where do you start looking for a quick insight into the natural behavior of your people?* My answer might surprise you, in fact, I know it will!

If you believe as I do, your people and their behaviors create the natural state of your organization, and this becomes your brand, then the first place to look may not be in the customer service area at all. Consider these questions from Zach Conen's latest article:

"How does your company treat [outside] salespeople when they call? Are they treated like vermin...or like potential customers? Are they ignored, given the run around and routed into voicemail purgatory...or do they receive a prompt, courteous call back?"

Why look to how outside sales people are treated? Simple, they are often viewed and treated in the ways Zach's questions imply. How sales people, calling on your company, are treated may in fact best represent the natural state of how your brand interacts with people. ***They may in fact be representative of how customers are treated when complex issues or complaints arise.*** Why, because this may be your natural state.

Both the company Zach represents, LRA Worldwide, and my company, SASI Consulting, specialize in improving customer service and the overall customer experience. I believe, as he does, that if your employees' behavior is to treat outside sales people calling on your company poorly, then it would only make sense that they would treat both each other and customers poorly as well! Consider Zach's next point:

"Either treatment provides a pretty clear window into the soul of your organization's customer experience. Though you may think organizationally you can "turn-on" a customer-centric approach when faced with an actual customer, chances are your treatment of the salesman is more reflective of your natural state of being. Responsive and caring...or dismissive and callous."

Your Brand is How You Behave!

It does not matter what is written on your walls, practiced as a cheer, chanted in the parking lot on opening day, or developed in a leadership seminar, it matters how you behave! **If your behavior is in question at any time, during any transaction, with any person interacting with your company, your brand is both in question and in jeopardy!** And, if you support questionable behavior based on a circumstance you are handed by a customer, outside sales person, or client, you are in the same boat.

Zach's article stirred me personally because of a recent experience I had when dealing with a company that claimed to subscribe to a set of ethics. In fact, those ethics appear to be at the core of what they do. However, when I pointed out behaviors that appeared to be contrary to those ethics, it fell on deaf ears.

My point is this; during my interactions it seemed to me that their ethics are easily applicable when times are good. It seems that when unusual situations arise, times get tough and hard decisions have to be made, those ethics seemed to disappear. ***This, by the way, is the time when ethics***

regarding behavior should be most closely adhered to, respected, and followed. I would be foolish to believe that the company in question would treat anyone else differently than I was treated, although they “smile and wave” really well!

Many companies face this same issue. When times are great, ethics are great! But when times are tough and difficult situations arise, the time when core ethical principles and values supporting their brand should rise to the top, they often seem to disappear into a sea of forgetfulness. *Be warned, if you find yourself or your company in that sea, there are people standing on the shore watching, and remembering their experiences with you and your company!*

So, what creates a brand deserving loyalty?

It is my estimation that what builds a brand deserving loyalty can be summed up in three basic principles:

1) Do what you say you are going to do! If you have values, uphold them and empower your people to uphold them, even if it hurts! Don't play games. Have a vision and create missions to that vision that are measurable, actionable, and can be observed by any person that interacts with your brand. *This means stakeholders, outside sales people, employees, customers, and everyone your brand touches!*

If you say you are about the experience, deliver the experience. If you say you are about service, deliver the service. If you say you have values, behave by them. Whatever your claim, make it happen and stand behind it!

Ask yourself this question, could a person interacting with your company write your values after completion of their interactions?

2) Admit when you are not hitting the mark or when you have made a mistake and offer to make it up! One of the best and most recent examples that I am aware of occurred this past week at the Houston Live Stock Show and Rodeo. During a concert performance by Hannah Montana and the Cheetah Girls, an electrical failure caused the speaker system to fail in certain areas of Houston's Reliant Stadium. Within a day of the problem, Leroy Shafer, Chief Operating Officer of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo issued an apology and refunds for those patrons affected by the sound loss! *Yes, an apology and refunds.*

3) Deliver on the understanding that quality is not a buzzword. Many companies understand that quality is not a buzzword. In fact, they employ all types of measurements to insure quality. Understanding and intellectualizing quality is rarely the issue. *The issue is, almost always, delivering on that understanding and intellectual ability.* Quality is in the eye of the people interacting with your brand!

You may have the best, highest quality products on the market, but if the operators at your call center cannot deliver a quality centered and customer effective transaction, then your product will lose market share and your brand will erode.

Remember the Pepsi challenge?

Growing up as a kid I loved the Pepsi challenge! I watched each commercial as the blindfolded participants tasted both Coke and Pepsi and rendered their results. Now, I want to offer you my Executive Brand Challenge. We will blindfold the participants a little differently. Here it is...

1) From outside of your company's phone system, call your company's main number listed on the primary website and attempt to anonymously reach *yourself*. The goal is to see if you can reach yourself with ease. (You may want a friend to do this for you.) See how long it takes for you get to you! *It is critical not to reveal your true identity and that you greet and speak to each person you encounter candor for candor. If you have an issue, ask for a supervisor and see what happens. Remember, the goal is to get to you! Along the way, see how your people greet, treat, and speak to you.*

2) Buy two products, one with cash and one with credit card. Next, attempt to return both without the receipts. When you hit roadblocks in this process, ask for a supervisor or manager. If you continue to meet roadblocks ask for the corporate headquarters phone number; *you may not be able to get it!* The goal is to get your money back and it may involve you calling the corporate office. If you face "return" policy issues, attempt to reach the person who deals with "return" policy. *Remember, the goal is to get your money back. Along the way, see how your people greet, treat, and speak to you.*

3) Attempt to reach a subordinate. Follow the same premises as the first challenge. Do not reveal your identity. Create an issue that should merit a return call and see if your subordinate calls you back! The overriding goal of these challenges is to assess how you are treated and responded to during the processes. You may be surprised!

I will close with Zach's final thought from his article:

*"As a consultancy that works with companies and brands on the design and delivery of an optimal customer experience, there is no greater death knell in [our] sales process than when a company [we are calling on] promptly calls us back. **Chances are...they don't need our help.**" (Emphasis Mine)*