

Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends

Sweet Emotion – Brands Look to Send the Consumer on an Emotional Roller Coaster

By Rob Rush, President & CEO, LRA Worldwide



When Steven Tyler and Joe Perry of Aerosmith penned the lyrics to "Sweet Emotion" back in 1975, they probably thought they were composing a paean to forbidden backstage...relationships. Thirty years later, however, the middle-aged (but still rockin') duo would probably be shocked to learn that their song has gained a newfound relevance in the world of...branding?

In case you haven't heard, sweet emotion is everything. Emotion makes grizzled old men weep, coupon-clipping housewives shell out \$4.75 for a cup of coffee and pencil-pushing CPAs drop \$500 for a hotel room because it makes them feel like they were cool in high school. (They weren't.) Welcome to the dawn of the "emotion economy," where every marketer worth their weight in cappuccino is desperately trying to create the bond between customer and company that causes customers to act...well, emotionally. And spend irrationally.

This phenomenon is not simply a product of Madison Avenue, where ad campaigns have long held the capacity to elicit emotion. (Admit it, you watched the serial Folger's ads hoping those two crazy kids would get together, didn't you?) While emotion may originate in an ad campaign, the true connection with the customer is developed in the delivery of the product or service. The promise of an emotional experience without execution likely will elicit an emotion – anger.

The best brands deliver the emotion without trying, as it has long been an intrinsic part of their product offering. At this point, Harley Davidson's emotional connection to its customer base is almost a cliché, but the company is very conscious of the fact that they aren't selling motorcycles. For each and every customer – from the tattooed Hell's Angel to the yuppie weekend warrior - Harley is selling the ability to channel their inner badass.

Others have recognized the trend and have put their money where their mouth is in an effort to tug at customers' heartstrings while they tug at their wallets. The hospitality industry trades have been buzzing about a new \$20 million Sheraton ad campaign focused on the "warm welcome" associated with a Sheraton stay, where you, as a guest "...don't just stay here – you belong."

And how does that warm welcome play out operationally? Aside from the free pre-paid phone cards and postage-paid postcards – all the better to stay connected to those you really care about – each Sheraton will feature "ambassadors" in the lobby designed to make the arrival process less of a transaction, more of a greeting. How do you think you would feel about a hotel check in experience conducted from a leather arm chair, sipping on a Manhattan. It certainly makes me feel warm and fuzzy...and I'm not just thinking of the cocktail.

As Ken Blanchard - one of my favorite speakers on the "customers are important" speaking circuit - explains, companies need to once and for all internally identify what business they are in to create the type of emotional connection that creates customers for life. So the hotel determines that "heads in beds" is secondary to being in the "home away from home" business. The baseball team sheds balls and strikes for the business of creating memories. And the homebuilder realizes that bricks and mortar are just a means to an end of entering the "lifestyle" business. Again, this may sound like Donnie Deutsch and his "Big Idea" toying with your affections, but each and every one of these concepts needs to be grounded in some sort of real-world delivery and superior execution in order to turn "emotion" into "engagement"...and dollars.

Hmmm. Is "emotional engagement" just a sexier replacement for "brand loyalty." Not quite – there is a subtle difference. It's one that can probably best be illustrated via every emotionally-stunted male's favorite emotional outlet – sports. I have a colleague who hails from Boston and is a huge sports fan; needless to say, the recent run of good fortune for that region's professional sports teams has given him much cause to celebrate. Are all celebrations created equal, you ask?

When the Patriots won the Super Bowl, he took a victory lap around his neighborhood, bought the championship DVD and contemplated naming his cat "Brady."

When the Red Sox won the World Series, he flew to Boston for a victory lap, cried like a baby for three months, bought (and watched) an 8-DVD box set commemorating the occasion and contemplated naming his child "Big Papi."

Now he is loyal to the Patriots, and would sooner lop off his pinkie than root for another football team. Like many other New Englanders lacking in perspective, however, the Red Sox inspire more than loyalty. They make him think of his father, his father's father and a connection to untold generations of Red Sox fans. They make his eyes well up and his mouth quiver...when they win or lose. And his proudest day as a father wasn't when his son said "Daddy" for the first time, but when he recognized Johnny Damon batting leadoff. (Damn Yankees!)

Cat named "Brady." Son named "Big Papi." That's the difference between loyalty and emotion.

In his book *Married to the Brand*, William McEwen likens the relationship between a company and a customer to a marriage, taking the metaphor about as far as you can go without violating decency laws in some states. He explains that trust and loyalty are the foundation of the customer relationship (and marriage), and that the customer relationship (or marriage) won't last without either. But to truly sustain the customer relationship (or marriage) for the long-haul, there must be an ongoing emotional connection that drives passion.

Exactly.

So what do you do to deliver an emotional connection if you don't have \$20 million burning a hole in your pocket? It's not rocket science (unless you're working on the NASA customer experience) and it's probably nothing you haven't heard before. Focusing on a combination of these customer experience fundamentals can help you build the emotional connection with your customers on a shoestring budget.

1. Deliver what you Promise: Nothing breaks up a potentially beautiful emotional engagement like unfulfilled expectations. And the promises needn't be all champagne and caviar – Target inspires the same fervent emotional attachment in its devotees as Nordstrom's does. Why? Because they've "operationalized the brand," consistently delivering on a primary emotional need of its customer base – "I can discount shop...and feel stylish at the same time!"
2. Seize the Opportunity to "WOW": Delivering a WOW experience has almost become a cottage industry in its own right, to the point where it's hard to define where a regular experience ends and a WOW begins. The only thing that you need to remember is that a WOW experience can be large or small – it just needs to be "sticky," or memorable, to the customer. So you don't need to provide a fanfare every time someone makes a deposit or orders room service. You do need to train your staff to identify opportunities to provide an unexpected (and unscripted) added value to your customer interactions and empower them to act on that opportunity independently. So your WOW experience may be as simple as slipping an extra lollipop "on the sly" to a shy kid at a bank teller's window....or arranging for the USC Marching Band to march in formation to respond "I Do" to a marriage proposal at a football game.
3. Know your Emotional Touch Points: Regardless of the industry, most operators will claim at least a strong working knowledge of the many and varied touch points at which their company interacts with the customer. What is typically lacking is any real sense of the relative importance of those touch points in how they forge and reinforce the emotional engagement between the company and customer. Not all touch points are created equal, and focusing on the ones that have the greatest potential to impact the customer's emotional engagement with the company or brand is not just wise – it's required.

Before "emotion" becomes as nebulous a concept as "satisfaction," it might be helpful to determine the exact response we are trying to elicit. In an effort to get all of the cards on the table, let's relate one of the dictionary

definitions of "emotion," which describes "a psychic and physical reaction...physiologically involving changes that prepare the body for immediate vigorous action."

Physiological changes. Immediate vigorous action. Maybe Aerosmith knew a bit more than they let on when they were singing about backstage liaisons 30 years ago. Everyone knows that sex sells; Aerosmith figured out that emotion does too.

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