



Mind the gap

Brand promises or customer experiences: what influences choice and loyalty? In reality, you need to measure your brand and customer experiences alongside each other to get the real consumer view

Understanding what people think and feel about brands, and what influences their choice and loyalty decisions is extremely important – it is what makes businesses succeed or fail.

But the current approach to understanding people's opinions of brands is over-simplistic and often plain wrong.

The widely held view is that loyalty is driven by experiences while choice (non-customer acquisition) is driven by advertising and communications. This ignores the fact that lots of advertising has the goal of reassurance – making existing customers feel good about decisions they have already made.

It also ignores the fact that people have experiences of brands before they choose to become a customer, such as renting a car they are not familiar with, or visiting a branch of a different bank.

In addition, we need to consider the growing impact of forms of uncontrolled communication such as word of mouth, blogs, YouTube and review websites. All of these factors play a role in both choice and loyalty decisions, and therefore in the success or failure of brands.

Organisations that silo their communications and operations departments are not acting in a customer-centric way. Two different departments may manage brand and service delivery, but to the customer it is all one company.

The impact of a poor experience depends very much on the brand promise. A bad experience on a low-cost, no-frills airline is more likely to be forgiven and forgotten than the same experience on BA or Virgin Atlantic.

Conversely, a big, differentiated brand promise that is not met can lead to disappointment and distrust, even if the experience was better than average.



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It is the combination of images and experiences that forms people's overall brand opinions and ultimately influences their behaviour. It is the alignment between brand promises and delivered experiences that companies need to get right.

A collision or missed alignment between these elements means a company has what we call a 'brand-delivery gap' – one they would be advised to close to avoid losing customers.

Furthermore, the impact of a brand-delivery gap between promise and experience, even when it occurs on an infrequent

basis, is now accentuated by the emergence of consumer-generated media. People used to tell perhaps 10 others about a bad brand experience; now they can share their views with tens of thousands, and sometimes even millions.

Organisations need to measure and understand their brand delivery gap so that they can prioritise investments between communications and operations, as well as within them.

A small gap is a good thing: it means you are delivering experiences that more or less live up to your brand promise. There is an argument, however, to

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prioritise the brand and its communications before investing more in improving the experience. There is an opportunity to further promote your brand promises and perhaps even extend them a little without disappointing on delivery.

By contrast, a big brand-delivery gap is a bad thing. If people do not believe that a brand is delivering on its promises then further advertising spend will be wasted until the experience is fixed.

Companies need to include both brand and experience when analysing profitable behaviour. They also need to pinpoint and understand the influencers of brand beliefs, and evaluate the gap between promise and delivery.

One of the best ways to do that is to break down the silos. Cross-functional teams need to include: marketing, to talk about what the brand wants to be; operations, to cover systems capabilities; HR, to cover staff training needs; and finance, to agree the funds. Having these four parties in the same room to discuss the issues is a great place to start.

Companies that see the world through their customers' eyes will deliver experiences that live up to their brand promises. Delivering the promised experience will help them attract, retain and grow profitable customers. ■

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