

In Love for Life

If you look at some of the fastest growing businesses and brands in the world today like Google, Facebook and iPod, you will notice one thing in common - their customers are so in love with their products that they have become a free sales force.

These customers are totally smitten. Just as any teenager experiencing love for the first time, they cannot help but talk to anyone who will listen about their new-found love.

Fleeting interest

Take a look at most other businesses and what you will see millions of one-time customers who, after the initial seduction, one-night stand and promise of a long-term relationship, find themselves bitterly disappointed.

There are others who, after being a loyal customer for many years, decide to divorce the business because of a lack of care. Then there are many others who remain customers until an attractive, understanding and easy-to-deal alternative gets their attention.

At the heart of the most profitable and fast-growing businesses in the world is a positive emotional connection between three groups - the company or brand, its people and the customers. There is an emotional engagement between them. The customers are captivated by the product.

Making the connection

In the 1980s, several Harvard Business School professors started looking in depth at what explains superior profitability between companies operating in a specific service sector.

They looked at airlines, financial services, retailing and professional services. The professors asked themselves why one bank operating in the same geographic area with the same products was 40 per cent more profitable than its competitors.

Their discovery is summarised in a framework they call the Value-Profit-Chain. In simple terms, superior growth and profitability was the result of significantly higher levels of customer loyalty from profitable customers.

I call these customers who "stay, say and pay". "Stay" means they actively choose to do business with you rather than feel handcuffed by some financial "loyalty bribe".

"Say" means that they defend the company when others complain about it. "Pay" means that they believe that people do get what they pay for.

So if the business has a price increase and it is explained as being required to continue delivering a superior product and experience, they are more than happy to pay the premium.

The Harvard professors discovered that if customers perceive the value of your product and service to be superior, both in promise and in delivery, they would be emotionally engaged.

While products are easy to copy, the element of perceived value is not. The overall "customer experience" is how they feel when they start thinking about your product through to when they are using it.

The personal connection

When your customers deal with your company, the quality of the experience is largely a function of what it's like to deal with your front-line employees - the customer service people, the people in the outlets, on the telephones and making the deliveries. Now let's go into people's brains and nervous systems.

What is it specifically that gets customers emotionally engaged with your company and brands? At the heart is a particular brain cell or neuron called a "mirror neuron" and it is automatically activated every time one person deals with another. It is the basis of what the scientists call "emotional contagion" and it can be positive or negative.

Assuming that your products are well designed and represent competitive value for customers, the challenge is to get front-line employees to emotionally connect with the company and customers.

Highly engaged employees are those that "stay, say and strive". The company retains them (they "stay"), they "say" good things to everyone about the company and its brands, and they "strive" to improve the business.

As company leaders, your ultimate role is to emotionally engage your teams and people. When you can truly help employees feel valued and involved, they will make customers feel valued and involved - the mirror neurons will make it so.

A customer's lifelong love affair with your company requires a deliberate approach I call "engagineering" - applying the art and science of personal and group engagement.

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