

Drive a Brand Like a Rental? It Won't Last

I turned in a rental car the other day after having driven it in some pretty inclement weather. As I walked toward the airline terminal, I had what I refer to as a Seinfeld moment. "Did you ever notice how no one ever washes a rental car," I mused to myself.

It was a rhetorical question, as Jerry's usually are, but still worth the asking. The answer I came up with was something I'll call "rental mentality." That is, the difference between how people think about and treat the things they own versus the things they rent or lease.

Rental assumes no long-term investment perspective and therefore little or no consideration for the on-going maintenance that pride of ownership involves. It seemed to me this could be applied to any number of situations and, given my work in branding, especially relevant to the way many brands treat some of their most critical and potentially differentiating customer experiences. The very things, in fact, that have the greatest potential to make or break a customer relationship.

I'm not talking about the advertising or promotions, the movie tie-ins or licensing deals which, I suppose, could be looked at like the rented media opportunities they are. Roll out your newest model of creative thinking for the Super Bowl and then dazzle me with something different next year. It's what I expect. What I am talking about are those critical points of touch

along a customer's journey with a brand that distinguishes it on a functional level from its competitors. Interactions that actually define the experience of the brand and through which associations with the brand are created.

Packaging "Pain" Points

For example, the brand packaging that requires a hacksaw, not to mention a sailor's vocabulary, to open. Where's the pride of ownership here? Or the product accessories that merely six-months old become obsolete once the newest technology arrives making repairs or replacement impossible. No one seems to be claiming ownership for this venture. Consider the voice-activated phone system which routes you back to the main menu after your eighth prompt to press for more options. You get the picture.

My point is that in today's hyper-competitive market where better had better be genuinely better, it's sharp interactions like these that have the power to shape a brand's reputation. Yet, all too often it's these very things that are the recipients of that rental mentality mode of management. When put into place with little or no thought they may be responsible for a consumer's displeasure with a brand.

The fact of the matter is that consumers are fickle and brands are proliferating faster than blogs. Show evidence of rental mentality when it comes to things that make

a real difference in a consumer's experience with your brand and watch how quickly they jump into the next thing that comes down the road without a backward glance.

Inside the Engine Room

The non-rhetorical question that needs to be asked is why the most critical brand activities are being treated with this rental outlook. Actually, there are two reasons.

First, all the glory is in the fun stuff. Who wouldn't want to take ownership of an award-winning ad campaign or a phenomenal product placement coup? Hey, high-fives all around when you sign Mick Jagger to do your latest promo.

The second reason is that there's a lot of sweat in the not-so-fun stuff and companies are looking for quick fixes and fast turnarounds. They gravitate toward the low-hanging fruit. Change the packaging? That could mean re-engineering production facilities. Retrain the sales teams and customer service reps? That sounds like work. Besides, who wants to be inside the engine room when you could be outside polishing the brass?

It's evident the most successful brands know the engine room is often where the glory is when it comes to building brand loyalty. They know what drives consumers, and what's worth spending good time and money on. A brand like OXO Good Grip kitchen tools,

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for example, which supports its brand promise by assuring its packaging is as easy to open as its gadgets are easy to use. Or Heinz, whose investment in its packaging made it a lot simpler for us to get the ketchup on the burger with its nifty upside-down bottle. Or Craigslist, which keeps its low-stress Web site as high tech as possible so we can get the apartments and jobs we need coast to coast.

These brands have taken the time to understand not only where and how their brands touch people, but which points of interaction provide the greatest measure of value to their customers—and therefore to their brands. Knowing this, they're more than willing to put in an owner's requisite sweat and equity. Believe me, they see the glory.

While it may be the more transitory aspects of a brand that have folks talking at the water cooler, it's the interactions with a brand that reflect pride of ownership that get them to reach for their wallets. And, while creating a new ad is far easier than addressing a complex operational issue, the most award-winning spot isn't going to make you feel warm and fuzzy about a brand if the service rep can't find your tracking number in the system.

We all know it's not the market it used to be. A brand isn't a passive experience being fed to consumers at half-time along with chips and salsa, but a very active one with consumers deciding how, when and where they'll interact. Demonstrate you know which interactions matter most, and then prove you own them. While I'm sure you may have noticed no one ever washes a rental car, I'm sure you've also noticed exactly which brands are driven like rentals. Hopefully, not yours. ■

