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LOYALTY MARKETING

Intimacy in the Aisles: How to Distinguish the Customer Experience



It is a fact taken for granted that, in most cases, today's great customer experience actually began months ago, with a few key insights.

For many of us, the customer experience is distilled in a single moment — when the consumer is in your store, interacting with your sales associates, surfing your Web site, or whenever else you come into direct contact. But this final act is, as we all know, the culmination of hours of hours of work — understanding our customers and what they value, delivering products and services that appeal to them, training our staff to deliver in a way that resonates, and so on.

But none of this can come to pass — not in way that is effective — without a keen focus on customer information. Data is the raw material of today's marketing industry, and there is no shortage. But there are shortcomings, particularly in how some merchants use the insights they have.

Data has the power to differentiate the customer experience — when in the right hands. It is not merely a matter of collecting purchase information and then relying on that to guess what the shopper will buy next. Data collection is a responsibility. The way in which a company collects and handles it, how it shares it with other departments within the organization and how it uses it to inspire employees all determine how effective that data will be in building relevant customer experiences and, eventually, customer intimacy.

I suggest four steps, which I will define later: Embrace enterprise loyalty, empower your employees, make your message relevant, and respect the data.

But first we must recognize the challenge, which is in execution. The growth of digital channels, social media, mobile marketing, automated check-in, and countless other human and mechanized customer touch points results in organizations with many disparate moving parts. And the data has got to flow seamlessly throughout.

Yet what we think we deliver is often not what the customer gets. Take the result of a 2011 survey by Forrester Research in which 90% of executives said customer experience was very important for their companies, and 80% said they were trying to use it as a source of differentiation. Yet only half of the 118 professionals surveyed said they had a company-wide program to improve the customer experience across marketing channels, and only 30% had dedicated a budget to fund these efforts.

The point is that winning customer intimacy through enriching experiences is not a push-button-and-go exercise. It often takes every member of your organization to speak in one voice to deliver the same dedicated, elevated experience. And if you are a company with many channels, brands and divisions, that challenge is compounded.

Four Rungs to the Brass Ring of Experience

So how do we get there? As I said, it's not a simple, add-water formula. Achieving relevant customer experiences through data is a process, and the following four steps will ensure you are on the right path.

- **Embrace Enterprise Loyalty** It's sort of a given that marketers own customer data — we collect it, after all. But there is no reason to hoard it. Share the data with your store planning, product development and merchandising departments. By overlaying purchasing patterns, you can learn not merely what brands your customer prefers, but also what significant lifestyle changes she has made, how she navigates the store and what kinds of communications and price points she responds to. This information can inspire decisions regarding store layout, range and assortment and, yes, promotions.
- **Empower Your Employees** Your data provides basic guidelines to why consumers love your brand and why they do business with you. Give that information to your workers, encourage them to learn more by asking pertinent questions, and watch them go. Make heroes of those who apply sound judgment and think with their hearts on behalf of your brand.
- **Make Your Message Relevant** Again, the data will reveal your customers' needs, aspirations and preferences. Speak to these characteristics and your message will resonate. The moment of truth occurs when the customer, who is time starved, media inundated, overwhelmed with choice and generally distracted, sees relevance in your messages and gives you her complete attention.
- **Respect the Data** The point of data gathering is to improve the customer experience, and achieving that requires earning the customer's loyalty and trust. If you really want to build a sustained

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relationship, you must be transparent about what information you are collecting, why you are collecting it, what your intentions are for its use and the benefit to the consumer. Then you must deliver on your word and create something of value to the consumer.

Yes, these principles can take time to master, but the dividends will pay off in the long term, and at increasing rates. The kinds of customer experiences that lead to customer intimacy are hard won, and the information we gather today will define the experiences of tomorrow.

This essay was written by Bryan Pearson, President and CEO of LoyaltyOne and author of the forthcoming book "The Loyalty Leap: Turning Customer Information Into Customer Intimacy." You can follow Bryan's blog at www.pearson4loyalty.com. And you'll be able to see Bryan in action at the 2012 LEAD Marketing Conference, October 1-3, 2012 in Chicago (www.LEADMarketingConference.com).