

Get caught up in satisfying your customer's needs if you're serious about improving sales.

Successful marketing depends on one basic concept: Focus total attention on the customer—not on the product or the company—just the customer. Marketing fails when companies act as if telling their story is the main objective. Such thinking actually undermines marketing by pushing the customer out of the picture. Although this is the perfect strategy for marketing failure, it doesn't need to be this way.

1. Don't think about anything other than the customer.

To put it bluntly, most companies get in the way of good marketing. No matter what they say, they act as if their marketing should be about them. It should showcase what they sell or what they do. Absolutely nothing could be further from the truth. Here's an example:

A company serving high-end consumers developed a new web site with excellent eye appeal. While it looked good, it failed to take the consumer into consideration. The web site was all about the company. There was no effort to engage the customer, other than to sign up for a service and even then, there was no provision for using a credit card, let alone getting more information or expressing an opinion.

This wasn't done deliberately. Chances are it happened because the web designers spent their time meeting with company management. No one thought about who would be using it, and of course management thought it was a great web site. If anyone had asked, "What does the customer want?" the result could have been quite different.

2. Stop trying to manipulate customers.

Attempts to get recipients to open e-mail messages with the lure of receiving "helpful information" often turn out to be nothing more than thinly veiled attempts to sell something. Scam artists aren't the only offenders. Well-known companies use this

ploy, as well. As soon as the customer is faced with a form with fifteen spaces of "required" information, the veil is lifted and the brand is damaged.

But that's not the worst of it. The objective should be finding ways to connect with the customer in a mutual value alignment that establishes a relationship. It's out of this experience that sales are made.

3. Demonstrate your company's values.

Avon, which describes itself as "a company for women," does an effective job of aligning itself with the values of its constituency. Its mission is "improving the lives of women" in economic empowerment, the environment, governance, people and diversity, philanthropy, product responsibility, stakeholder engagement, supply chain and workplace safety and health.

As John King, a talented, young, branding mind at Minneapolis-based Fallon Advertising said recently in "AdvertisingAge," "We believe that the future belongs to generous brands." He describes these brands as "additives to people's lives and to culture." Then he adds, "They help build ideas in the world; they leave something behind."

This is what Avon's marketing is all about.

4. Recognize that just getting people through the door doesn't make them customers.

Macy's is known for its "Star Rewards," credit card-size coupons touting "Extra 20% off" or "Take \$25 off." It sounds very rewarding until you discover that two-thirds of the back of each card is filled with tiny type listing everything you want to buy—as exclusions. The message is clear: "Hey, you suckers. Come on in." If the "rewards" aren't rewarding, why would anyone want to be known as a Macy's customer? Unless there is a value proposition that connects with the recipient, there is no customer.

5. Don't fall for every gimmick that comes along.

It's easy for some to become all atwitter about Twitter and other social media, but ask yourself, "Whatever happened to MySpace?" It fell flat on its face in less than a year.

There's another reason to be cautious about what you're doing in this area. You may be linked to more than you expected or wanted. One person joined a "placement community," indicating that he was looking for new employment. As it happened, someone who knew his current employer read the message and blew the whistle on him.

If you want to explore the possibility of social networking, I recommend that you start by blogging. Build a reputation for your

ideas, using Twitter and other social media to drive traffic to your blog.

6. Whatever else you do, be consistent.

Even the best marketing can go astray by lack of consistency. At a time when overall auto sales plummeted and other brands were slashing their marketing budgets, Mercedes-Benz, Volkswagen and Kia all increased their advertising by an average of 42.8 percent, according to "USA Today." While others lost market share, Kia's rose from 1.9 to 3.1 percent, Mercedes went from 1.6 to 1.8 percent and VW's rose from 1.4 to 1.9 percent. Modest gains? Not to these car companies.

"When we invest in marketing, this happens," said VW's marketing chief, Tim Ellis. "We think it's important to stick to our roots and our value message. We're getting a higher percentage of the dwindling marketplace. And when this crazy situation comes straight side up again, we'll be positioned to increase our share even further." It's no accident that VW is introducing three new models in 2009. Consistency wins customers.

7. Focus on pleasing the customer.

Even the most compelling marketing messages are worthless if the customer isn't satisfied. Take for example what happened at a well-known auto parts store, where several people had been patiently standing in line waiting to make a purchase. After waiting for about 10 minutes, no one was available to help them. Finally, a worker came by with a Coke in his hand and a fellow employee asked him if he would like to take care of the customers. His reply left everyone aghast. "I'm on my break" he said, and disappeared around the corner.

Contrast that with a visit to an Apple store where you are greeted and assigned a knowledgeable personal shopper who is charged with the task of taking care of you for however long you are there.

In the first example, the customer leaves annoyed, if not disgusted. In the other, the customer is totally pleased. Yet, both share their experiences with others. When the focus is on the customer rather than on making the sale, the difference is transforming. It's what it means to make marketing work.

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