

# The Power of Customer *Experience*

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While it's surprising to most, studies show that the effectiveness of our communication with others isn't primarily related to the words we say. In fact, though it would seem that our word choice plays the most pivotal role in communicating our intentions, incredibly it ranks last in overall importance. Our choice of words shouldn't be minimized to be sure, but the effectiveness of the words we use stands at only 7%, while our tone ranks at an impressive 38%. So what takes the remaining 55%? Body language. Such findings seem counter-intuitive, but they demand attention from any company dealing directly with customers. Imagine the significance of these findings for call centers, to take just one example. Body language clearly doesn't factor into those customer interactions as they would for an on-site customer visit, which means that tone becomes all that more important.

From a different angle, another important study demonstrated that people remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, and 50% of what they read and hear. In his book *Thou Shalt Prosper*, Daniel Lapin makes the interesting point that when reviewing goals, one should *read aloud* what he or she intends to accomplish, siding with ancient wisdom which says that what passes through the lips to the ears more effectively penetrates the soul. What these studies imply, and what the ancients knew well, is that human beings are much more complex and multi-dimensional than modern businesses typically acknowledge in their daily customer interactions. As we'll see below, there's even more to it than just this, as emotions play perhaps *the* most significant role in a consumer's satisfaction with companies and their products.

Like so many other institutions, businesses are failing to harness the insights from studies that carry enormous implications for how customers form judgments about products and services. Given that fact, our focus here will be to address precisely that: to examine the ways in which customers form judgments about products, and the companies that make them, by interacting with important recent research on the subject. Without a doubt, companies can more effectively shape their customers' experiences from the very beginning of their interactions and throughout the life cycle of the relationship. Our reflections here are intended to highlight the relevant issues that can further spur innovation and creativity to that end.

## Infusing Products with Emotion

It's been standard among companies to think that customers make buying decisions, and are satisfied, as a result of mostly rational processes. However, this has been shown to be false in an important way that has serious consequences for marketers. Let's begin by noting Professor Zaltman's observations in his book, *How Customers Think*:

In reality, people's emotions are closely interwoven with reasoning processes. Although our brains have separate structures for processing emotions and logical reasoning, the two systems communicate with each other and *jointly* affect our behavior. Even more important, the emotional system...typically exerts the *first* choice on our thinking and behavior. More important still, emotions contribute to, and are essential for, sound decision making.

Such observations can be multiplied. Daniel Coleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, points out that feelings are typically indispensable for rational decisions; they point us in the proper direction where dry logic can best be used. While the world confronts us with an unwieldy array of choices, emotional learning streamlines our decisions by eliminating some options and highlighting others at the outset. "The emotions, then, matter for rationality. In the dance of feeling and thought the emotional faculty guides our moment-to-moment

decisions, working hand-in-hand with the rational mind, enabling – or disabling thought itself.”

Joseph Turner (quoted by Zaltman) expands on this in an important way:

*To select among alternatives requires some way to assess the relative value of these alternatives, and this ability to assess alternatives is tied to emotions. Emotions give each alternative a value and, thereby, provide a yardstick to judge and to select among alternatives. This process need not be conscious; and indeed, for all animals including humans, it rarely is. Thus to be rational means also to be emotional; and any line that we draw separating cognition and emotion fails to understand the neurology of cognitions. One can't sustain cognitions beyond working memory without tagging them with emotion.”*

What does all of this mean? If an idea (or product) doesn't have emotional significance, customers are unlikely to store it (or be happy with it), with the result that it won't be available for later recall. Since emotions are integral to a customer's response, companies can shape their experience in a more positive way by paying special attention to how customers perceive their offerings. They can effectively *encourage emotions* of happiness and empowerment to capture them right out of the gates – setting the tone initially that they want to portray about the product and company.

### Shaping Customer Expectations

Products, along with their branding, provide a *context* that the mind uses to form judgements, both at the conscious and unconscious levels. As Zaltman shows, customers record as present an experience with a product they expect to be present, even if it's not. Absent information is counted as present. So if they know they're sipping their favorite beverage they add special qualities to the experience, such as smooth taste, a relaxing feeling, etc. What's interesting about this is that in blind taste tests, these special qualities don't materialize because the brand name doesn't play a part in the expectations:

Brand meaning is even more elusive than marketing researchers previously thought, because consumers' predispositions generate thoughts and feelings toward the brand that unconsciously influence their reaction to that brand. They fill in missing information, which becomes as real to them as if it were physically present in a product or in promotional materials. Consumers add qualities to a familiar brand... These qualities are experienced as real and duly recorded in the brain as such. They *are* real, because consumers' minds (more than the brand) have supplied them with that information. Remove any knowledge of the brand, and the special qualities tend to disappear.....

These alternating perceptions involving the interaction of unconscious and conscious processes suggest that firms must be particularly sensitive to that element of a duality that occurs most often in consumers' conscious minds and what may cause a shift to the unconscious. *Companies can then build in cues in the design of a service setting or a product and its packaging and advertising that will encourage activation of the more “silent” element in the duality* [Zaltman, *How Customers Think*, emphasis mine].

This fact about how customers think has important implications on how companies can better shape customer expectations. Research implies that at every second consumers, both at a conscious and unconscious level, are making judgments about what they think and how they feel about products. Unfortunately, many products have been designed for those who wield dry logic, but don't effectively penetrate the rest of the human make-up. In other words, at the risk of sounding abstract, there's very little emotional significance within many product lines and customer interactions.

But there's even an interesting physiological aspect to this, in that with customer dissonance, or frustration and anger, the human body begins down a spiral with the result that anger builds on anger *physiologically*. Coleman calls this emotional hijacking. It's a state where something triggers feelings of frustration or anger - but as the experience advances, those feelings build on one another at a faster rate than they can dissipate, creating a spiral emotional effect on the customer which can no longer be hampered by reason. Thus its name, emotional hijacking.

In this sequence every successive anger-provoking thought or perception becomes a minitriple for amygdala-driven surges or catecholamines, each building on the hormonal momentum of those that went before. A second comes before the first has subsided, and a third on top of those, and so on; each wave rides the tails of those before, quickly escalating the body's level of physiological arousal. A thought that comes later in this buildup triggers a far greater intensity of anger than one that comes at the beginning. Anger builds on anger... [Coleman, *Emotional Intelligence*]

At the opposite end, Coleman notes that *happiness* increases the activity in the brain that inhibits negative feelings and fosters an increase in available energy, as well as quieting worrisome thoughts. "This configuration offers the body a general rest, as well as readiness and enthusiasm for whatever task is at hand and for striving toward a great variety of goals."

The point here is that companies need to be mindful that their interface with customers through normal interactions and products has an impact not only at a conscious and unconscious level, but at the *physiological level as well*. Imagine if customer interfaces could create a sense of happiness and well-being, rather than dissonance and aggravation, giving them the feeling that the product allows them to show off their ability in a new and exciting way. Thus providing customers with a context that envelopes their emotions in positively reinforced experiences should be paramount for businesses as they develop future strategies.

### Point of Departure

Heath and Heath, in their *Ideas That Stick*, cite an enlightening case that illustrates the point from a different angle. A researcher studied a manufacturing firm that designed and built complicated machinery used to produce silicon chips. To build the machinery, the firm needed two sets of skills: engineers who could create the designs, and skilled manufacturing people who could transform those designs into complex physical machines.

To succeed, the two sets of people had to be able to communicate smoothly, and not surprisingly they spoke different languages. The engineers thought abstractly as they spent their day agonizing over drawings and blueprints. The manufacturing team tended to think on a physical level, as they spent their day building machines. What's interesting is that when something went wrong on the manufacturing floor, the engineers would immediately get to work by *fixing their drawings*. The manufacturing team might find a part that didn't fit on the machine. When shown the problem, the engineers wanted to pull out the blueprints and move things around on the drawing. In other words, they instinctively wanted to jump to higher level abstractions.

Over time, the engineers made their drawings more elaborate in hopes of clarifying the process. They were like the American tourists who travel to foreign countries, and try to make themselves more understood by speaking English more slowly and loudly. They suffer from what Heath and Heath call the Curse of Knowledge. *They'd lost the ability to imagine what it was like to look at a technical drawing from the perspective of a non expert.*

The manufacturing people were thinking, Why don't you just come down to the factory floor

and show me where the part should go? And the engineers were thinking, What do I need to do to make the drawings better?

Should both parties learn greater empathy for the other and, in essence, meet in the middle? Actually, no. The solution is for the engineers to change their behavior. Why? As Bechky notes, the physical machine was the most effective and relevant domain of communication. Everyone understands the machines fluently. Therefore problems should be solved at the level of the machine.

The moral of the story? Companies need to find a “universal language,” *one that everyone speaks fluently*. Too many companies take the road of the engineer in the interface with their customers, which would go a long way in explaining why customers *begin* with the feeling of dissonance, only to be reinforced (in Coleman's) sense through further interactions.

## Conclusion

So what can we conclude from all of this? For one, businesses need to pay more attention to how their customers feel with every interaction that one of their employees or products has with them. Some companies have wisely built their entire business model around such concerns. Nordstrom, for instance, has historically delivered some of the best customer service in the industry, effectively redefining what service can and should be for retail stores. They've rightly set the bar for others within their industry, and far beyond.

Zappos.com as another example built their online business around a similar model. Stories abound with their amazing service from their call center (of all places) that truly defy any other online business model. So much so, in fact, that the book by Zappos's CEO, *Delivering Happiness*, is a must read for anyone who touches customers in any way; but most especially by those in senior management roles who set the tone for company culture overall. The book rightly makes the argument that your culture *is* your brand, in this case (as in the case of Nordstrom) the culture being one of WOWing the customer in every interaction. Both Nordstrom and Zappos.com have mastered meeting their customers on not just a rational level, but even more importantly on an emotional level. Service that penetrates to that level creates a genuine commitment to the company that nothing else can.

For high tech and software companies, there's a lot to be learnt here as well. While the more traditional retail experience isn't a factor, they can and should do a better job of creating an emotional connection with users through interfaces that make people *feel* empowered. Any software company that wants to be truly innovative and forward looking must meet these new demands to keep pace. The days of consumers being satisfied with complex interfaces that only the technically oriented can grasp are numbered. It's not just person to person interaction that creates dissonance or resonance, it's equally the experience we all have when trying to grasp a new software program and not understanding how to use it. The same thing can be said for hardware manufacturers. Those companies changing the paradigm for how the *average person* interacts with their products are the companies to watch. Heath and Heath's point about the engineers should be heeded; it's precisely here that companies set their customers up for emotions of frustration, anxiety and dissonance, or ones of empowerment, energy and resonance.

Apple provides an instructive case study for both software and hardware. Remember that it was only a few short years ago that analysts had virtually written them off. How were they able to defy analysts and competitors alike (recall Michael Dell's critical remarks)? At least one reason is that they've been truly visionary about providing devices that draw average people in at an emotional level. Fans argue that the Mac, for instance, is incredibly intuitive in the sense that it allows someone of limited ability to do things without a single tutorial, such as pairing a mouse or connecting wirelessly to another computer. Emotionally speaking such things are significant, because it makes the technologically challenged feel smart and

empowers them to do something technical with little effort. In fact, Apple has been so successful at this that, seemingly out of the ashes, they've become the world's most recognizable brand.

While other stories like this exist, they're certainly the exception and not the rule, and that's precisely the point here. Those that want to connect with their customers, and create what Chip Conley (in his book *Peak*) calls peak experiences are the companies that unleash true evangelists for their products and services. No slick marketing technique can begin to approach the power of customers who speak, even evangelize, on a company's behalf. It's that emotional connection so thoroughly documented in recent literature that businesses need to embrace, absorb, and implement at every level of the organization. Aligning around this singular goal will have an enormous impact on not just the customer's experience, but will carry an intensely positive ripple effect throughout the company culture, resulting in increased profitability and a more fulfilled workplace.