



Perception is reality. Look at your business through the lens of the customer in order to understand how they view it.

What Does Your Brand Stand For? How to Drive Consumer Opinion

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Let's be honest - a few of you read the headline of this article and thought I was referring to one of the many tire brands that you sell. This is certainly not unexpected, considering our industry and the various tire brands that are out there.

However, there is one brand that means more to your business than any other. It is built and tested everyday, but not inside a manufacturing plant.

The consumer makes decisions on whether to use this brand, based on what they know about it and what it stands for.

Just like any other brand, it can be strong - yet fragile - at the same time. The brand I am referring to is not made of rubber. It is *your* brand.

A brand is not simply a name, a logo on a sign or a catchphrase. It is what the customer experiences when interacting with your business. And it is the emotional connection that people make when thinking about your business.

To the consumer, that is who you are. Whether these feelings are good, bad or indifferent, this is what your brand stands for.

A great brand can be a very powerful thing. Some brands have actually defined their product categories. How many of us use the term “Kleenex” when referring to a disposable tissue?

Granted, most brands do not rise to this level of identity, but they are still powerful. They still stand for something in the consumer’s mind.

One of the keys to creating and maintaining a successful brand is consistency. Without consistency, there is no brand. Consider Starbucks, which is a brand I am sure you know. What do you think of when you think of Starbucks? You think of the customer experience. And you think of consistency. You can order the same drink at any Starbucks and get the same quality.

If I go into any Starbucks location, I will find a casual atmosphere where I can read a book or work on my laptop while enjoying my coffee. The experience is consistent from location to location. Therefore, that is what the brand stands for.

When I’m traveling and I see a Starbucks, I know what to expect. Starbucks’ brand has become so powerful that in many locations and on its cups, the company no longer features the name “Starbucks” - only the company’s green mermaid logo. When a consumer sees this logo, they know what to expect.

Granted, I know that for some, the Starbucks brand stands for overpriced, strong coffee. Let’s face it - that is consistent, too.

What is the consistency that represents your brand? What will consumers think about when thinking of your business? Start with the way your business looks. What does the consumer consistently see? If your building is unkept, the parking lot is cluttered and in disrepair and your showroom is a mess, this becomes your brand. The customer will think of this disorder and lack of cleanliness when thinking of your business.

They can easily make the connection that since the business appears this way that the quality of your service will likely be similar - in other words, poor and disorganized. Take the time to ensure that your business’ appearance is sending the right message for customers to interpret.

Granted, we are in the automotive business. We are not talking about your dealership resembling a five-star restaurant or a hospital operating room when it comes to cleanliness and order. But you must do everything you can to look better than your competition, wherever you can. Make policing your store’s appearance part of your regular processes every day.

What about the customer's interaction with your business on the phone or at your sales counter? What will they experience? How many of you have had the following happen when interacting with a business? You call and the phone rings and rings. You are just about to give up when someone answers, only to put you on hold. If this person gets back to you, he or she sounds rushed and is short with you.

Perhaps you have entered an establishment, only to look around for help that does not seem to exist? When someone finally arrives, that person seems too hurried or too involved with something else to want to deal with you. We have all been there.

The conclusion we draw is that this business either does not care about us or will not be thorough enough to provide the service that we want and deserve.

Don't let customers draw this conclusion about you. Make sure that all of your people understand that the customer on the phone and the one entering your building are your special guests and need to be treated as such every time you interact with them.

Always remember the old saying, "Treat customers special and they will become special customers."

Now think about the customer's vehicle. How is it treated? Is your business consistently using seat covers, floor mats, steering wheel covers and other protective equipment when operating or servicing a customer's car? If you do so every time, you are sending a message to your customer that you value their property as much as they do.

If you don't - or just as bad, only do it some of the time - you are sending a message to the customer that you do not respect their property.

This becomes particularly troublesome if you return the vehicle with dirty handprints all over it. Ensure that your employees know that they must use these protective items every time. And then enforce this rule.

How about the service you deliver? Are you ensuring quality and keeping your promises? If a customer comes in with an issue and still has that same issue when they pick up their car, they will not be happy.

If you tell them that you will be done with the vehicle by 4 p.m., only to have them arrive at 3:55 p.m. to find that work has not even started, they are not going to be happy. In both of these cases, you have demonstrated to your customer that your brand is poor customer service.

Every time a customer trusts you to solve an issue, make sure you verify that the problem has been correctly addressed before returning the vehicle.

Now, we all know that things come up in this business that may cause additional delays or the need for extra service. The key is that as soon as you are aware of these things, you contact the customer to inform them of the situation.

Keeping your commitments - and keeping the customer informed during those occasional times when you cannot meet deadlines - is a sign of good customer service.

You will have noticed by now that I mention the term “every time” quite often. You cannot do these things we’ve discussed only some of the time. You can not do these things only when you “have time.” These should be things that are simply what you do, all of the time.

If you are not consistent in what you do, as I mentioned previously, you have no brand. I’ll give you an example that most of you can relate to.

There is a restaurant near me that I have visited with my wife on a couple of occasions. The first time we went, the food and service were excellent.

The next time we went, the service was good, but the food was disappointing. Thinking this was an anomaly, we tried again. This time, the food was OK, but the service was poor.

We had not been back in a while when some friends asked us to join them for dinner one night at this place. We agreed to join them. This time, everything was great again. We decided to go back to the same restaurant yet again and this time around, both the food and service were poor. We have totally given up on this restaurant and will not be back. I got tired of “rolling the dice” with my money. Inconsistency has become their brand with me.

When people ask us about going to this restaurant, we now discourage them, explaining that you just do not know what to expect from visit to visit. And apparently, we are not alone. Looking at this restaurant’s social media reviews, many customers - now former customers - are saying the same thing.

What are your social media reviews saying about your business? While you are likely to have that outlier from time to time, if you start seeing the same thing over and over, that is what your brand is becoming.

Even if the vast majority of your reviews are good and you have a good overall rating, if you start to see certain negative comments repeat themselves, you need to address these issues internally and quickly. Do not look for excuses as to why this is happening. Look for solutions to ensure that it does not happen again.

Remember - these are customers’ perceptions. Their perceptions are their reality. Even if you do not think that these things are happening in the way they are being depicted, ask yourself how people could perceive it as being that way. Once you look at it through the customer’s lens, you are likely to figure out a way to keep that perception from happening again. The key here is to be honest with yourself. Do not dismiss these things because you simply refuse to believe them.

What will your brand stand for? That is up to you. Take control of your brand and protect it like you would any other asset in your business. Do not allow inconsistency to destroy what you are trying to become or have spent years developing.

Build a consistent brand that makes customers want to do business with you and also will encourage their friends and family to do the same.

Additionally, your team needs to be just as committed as you are to living the brand every day. Do not leave your brand's perception to chance. If you do, I am confident you will not like what your brand will stand for.

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