Does Your Brand Have Empathy?

Empathy is that amazing bridge that bonds relationships. It means you understand the other person. You "know where they're coming from" or "I get that." That's all we want to hear. Message sent – and message received, with caring and reassurance.

This is so incredibly important in branding, too. Brands exist in that mystical, magnetic force between consumer and product. That bond can only be established and maintained through understanding of the consumer's desires and needs. In that way, brands empathize with their consumer and seek to validate those feelings through the delivery of the brand in messaging, marketing decisions, affiliations and co-branding partnerships, special offers, added enhancements, line extensions and so on.

The more empathy, the more validation and the more validation, the deeper the relationship becomes. The result of that is the deeper the relationship, the more commercial success of the brand through the repeated purchase, loyalty, advocacy, and ultimately, sales and share growth.

Brands often fall short of establishing this chain reaction because, from the outset, brands fail to do any one of the following:

- They fail to understand who the customer is and what the customer's needs are, beyond demographic snapshots or superficial anecdotes.
- They fail to listen and address customer feedback in meaningful ways.
- They fail to communicate in a manner and in places the customer understands and is willing and ready to receive those messages.
- They fail to set realistic expectations and over-promise, setting up ultimate disappointment and disenchantment with the brand.

However, brands that avoid these failures cultivate enormous loyalty, and even admiration by their consumers. Pharmaceutical brand advertising does a superb job of empathy with their intended customer through validating their doubts, concerns, anxieties, and the like, brought about by the condition their brand is designed to remedy. Insurance advertisers likewise empathize with their intended customer.

In all these cases, the message is reassuring, as in "It's ok to feel this way. We hear you. We can make it better."

Perhaps the most demonstrable textbook use of brand empathy is the Dove "Real Beauty" campaign launched in 2004 by Unilever. The Dove brand took the unprecedented step of acknowledging what their customers already knew: All women don't look like fashion models. This was a breathtaking display of empathy and validation for the very customers the brand loves: women. To quote the campaign's mission strategy: "To make women feel comfortable in the skin they are in, to create a world where beauty is a source of confidence and not anxiety." This was pure brand empathy.

Does Your Brand Have Empathy? cont.

And it should also be noted; this strategy was determined after three years of research.

The "Real Beauty" allowed Unilever and their agency partners to open up a frank discussion about the definition of "beauty" and championed the notion of self-esteem – so vitally important to women (and men) of any age. And of course, women who use Dove products. All of this may seem obvious now. That's what big ideas do … they make the conclusions appear easy and obvious, when in fact, they take time and work to arrive at. In Dove's campaign, they excelled in each of points we listed above. And Ad Age considers the campaign one of the best of all time.

Empathy … It can be quite powerful in the hands of a smart brand marketer.

- How should you consider your own brand in light of this discussion?
- Does your brand have true empathy for your customer?
- For that matter, do you truly know your customer?
- And if asked, would your customer say that your brand understands them? Even anticipates their needs?
- Do you reach your customer on their terms, and in their language?
- Are you fully engaged with your customer on social media and through on line reviews?

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