

All the marketing in the world won't save your brand from bad customer service

Marketing helps people to *know* brands, but it doesn't make people *like* brands. People like brands that provide quality, value, and a good experience. That good experience comes down to customer service. If the brand's customer service is bad, the experience is bad, and the brand is tainted. It is really that simple.

Why I will never shop at Ulta again

A couple of years ago, I bought some nail polish at Ulta, and I asked before I paid if it was returnable. I was told yes. It turns out I had a similar color at home, so I returned to the store, original receipt in hand, and was asked for my phone number. I said I wasn't in their system, I had the receipt and I wasn't giving them my number. The clerk was unable to do the return. I went home and called Ulta customer service and was told I should be able to do a return with just the receipt, no problem. I ended up going to an Ulta in another county and doing the return there. I vowed never to shop at my local Ulta again. And then last week, I was in the shopping center where the Ulta is, so I decided to go in. I bought some makeup. When I got home, I realized the makeup was not what I wanted. I went back to Ulta, again with original receipt in hand, and makeup in its box, untouched, and got the exact same answer that I had gotten two years prior. They needed a phone number. Again, why? I am not in their system and a phone number will not bring up my account. I got a manager, who somehow managed to get around this "phone requirement."



What a difference

Contrast that with my experience at Sephora, another cosmetics store, a few months ago. I had a faulty mechanical eyeliner pencil but no receipt (I was hoping they would fix the issue not take back the item). The clerk was able to look up the transaction using my credit card, and gave me a credit, no further questions asked.

Making it difficult to make a return is a huge customer service problem

Most stores will do returns quite easily if you have a receipt. Some stores will give you a store credit if you don't have a receipt. The only stores that seem to make it hard to do returns are small, local boutiques, and Ulta. Customers want to be able to like what they buy and return it if they don't. Most businesses see the benefit in customer satisfaction.

When you have to market to overcome your failings

Ulta advertises discounts all the time. Sephora never does. Perhaps Ulta needs to get people in the door with incentives because it knows that the experience is less than ideal. This is not to say Sephora is perfect (far from) but it seems geared toward a better customer experience than Ulta.

You will choose to do business where you feel less friction

Many people shop at stores like Nordstrom because its policy is to accept almost all returns without exceptions. This makes for a more relaxed shopping experience. If you know you can buy whatever it is and then return it if it doesn't suit for whatever reason, you will buy. If, however, you think there will be a problem, you will not buy because you don't want to deal with the friction.

Here's the bottom line: If your customer service is bad it doesn't matter how good your marketing is.

How do your customers feel?

It seems that many businesses, especially the big ones, spend much more money on memorable advertising campaigns and very little on customer service. No matter how great a business is, there will always be customer service to be done (changing addresses, paying bills, correcting billing errors, etc.). Yet, many businesses ignore the basics.

A couple of examples:

Netflix. Netflix does not seem to care much about how its customers feel. The company does not respond to Twitter mentions. It doesn't seem to be concerned about negative postings. How do I know? Well, I have had Salmon Fishing in the Yemen at the top of my Netflix queue for about six weeks or more. At first, there was a "long wait." Now, it's a "short wait." Bottom line is that I have watched several other movies while still waiting for Salmon Fishing. And I have tweeted Netflix. And I have wanted to email them—there is no easy way to do that.

ATT. I have been with ATT for years now. I recently upgraded to a smartphone and was told that I was eligible for the upgrade (which apparently means in ATT language they will CHARGE you for this upgrade). I called to see if they would take this charge off—and my argument was 1) I was not advised of such a charge and 2) I was told I was eligible for an upgrade. The customer service agent said he would give me a "courtesy one-time waiver" of this fee, but proceeded to lecture me that this fee was something all carriers do and that ATT would charge me it with every subsequent upgrade. He was combative and rude, and when I pointed this out to him, he hung up on me. I called back and spoke to supervisor and she told me the same thing about the charge (a bit less rudely). I repeatedly told her that I have been an ATT customer for years, I pay my bills on time, and ATT had given me no special offers. Bottom line in my experience: ATT does not care.

Netflix and ATT appear to be utterly unconcerned with how their customers feel about them. I am just one more customer.

In contrast, I flew **Delta** last month and was amazed by the airline's interest in my customer experience. After the first flight I was sent a survey to measure what I thought of the boarding process, etc. The return flight was badly delayed due to weather in Washington. Delta sent an apology for the delay (even though it was truly not at fault) and asked how the gate agent and flight attendants acted during the delay.

Customer service and experience should be an integral part of an organization's overall marketing strategy. If your organization does not know anything about how your customers feel, and does not respond to customer issues, you are well on your way to losing those customers.

Marketing should be both about ATTRACTING customers and RETAINING them.

Thoughts?

Customer service IS marketing

There should be no doubt that a company's customer service plays a huge role in marketing. Put bluntly, if a company has poor customer service, there will be fewer customers at the end of the day. The only exception to this rule is with monopolies like power and telephone companies, which often provide bad service but customers are forced to remain with them as they cannot take their business elsewhere.

Let me give you a personal example. My website is currently hosted at Mediatemple. I have had hosting there since 2004. Off and on during the past seven years, I have had email retrieval issues among other problems. This past Friday, I noticed my Outlook was not able to access my email. It happened again on Monday, at which point I opened a support request with Mediatemple online. I have learned, through negative interactions in the past, that calling the 1-800 number results in long waits and unhelpful personnel.

After a few hours, I had received no response, so I tweeted it

out. Mediatemple responds immediately to tweets. I did not get a response from the support request until 24 hours later. It told me I should check my email settings. I did what they suggested, and the problem persisted. Mind you, I had no problem accessing my other email on the same Outlook, using the same ISP. In my mind, the problem was clearly on Mediatemple's side. At Mediatemple, they refused to believe my claims as a customer, or accept that there could be an issue on their end. The couple of emails/tweets that followed told me to call customer service to troubleshoot my settings. Again, my settings had never been changed and the Outlook was working just fine with my other account.

Clearly, to Mediatemple, it is easier to shift the blame to the customer than to check their service. This has happened many times before (once, I was actually told when my website was down, that I had "broken" it...I wouldn't know how to do that). Well, enough is enough. Since I am going to relaunch my website in the next few days, I am taking my hosting elsewhere. Customer service is the reason.

Customer service can play a tremendous role in keeping customers happy and COMING back for more. Nordstrom's is well known for excellent customer service, and in fact, it is its key differentiating factor. An article in Bloomberg Businessweek claims that:

For the most part, the Nordstroms have succeeded by making customer service the good they're really selling, say industry observers. Though many retailers embrace "customer centricity," a fancy term for putting the customer first, few equal Nordstrom, which routinely ranks in the top three on Luxury Institute surveys that measure customer satisfaction.

Read that again: **customer service is the good that Nordstrom's is selling.** Not the clothes or the jewelry. The SERVICE. And it has made the company GROW.

If companies spends lots of money on marketing materials, advertising and public relations but neglect their customer service, the marketing efforts will be for naught.

Want to improve your marketing? Start with your customer service.

The best, most award-winning ad in the world won't sway an unhappy customer's mind. Keep that in mind as you tinker with your marketing and you don't check in with your customer service.

If you live in Washington, DC or Maryland, you probably have PEPCO as your electric company. And if you were around this past summer or during the massive blizzards of February, you probably lost your power. You tried calling PEPCO only to get bad information or no information at all. Then you found out that PEPCO is rated very poorly among all electric utility companies in the United States. You probably weren't surprised.

Fast forward to the Fall of 2010. PEPCO is busy running a TV commercial featuring the company president assuring the viewers that PEPCO is responding to customer concerns. But, is it true?

Yesterday, I had to call PEPCO. I was on hold for 21 minutes. And there was no emergency. Can you imagine what hold times will be when there are outages?

This is a case where PEPCO is investing money in its marketing without investing money in customer service. This is a major mistake. Customers don't care if you are running a great ad campaign, have well written brochures and a redesigned website, if they cannot get through to an agent to resolve their problems.

Customers will judge a company on its service, not on its marketing. Marketing may get customers through the door, but it will not retain them or make them think positively about your company or organization (this applies to nonprofits as well).

Before you spend any money on a marketing campaign, make sure that you have budgeted for customer service.

Where marketing ends

Obviously, as a marketing communications person, I believe that marketing is helpful and mostly necessary if you want to promote an event, sell a product or service or obtain support. If people don't know you are there, they can't buy from you or support your cause. However, at some point marketing ends and customer service starts.

Let me share a story with you. I have been going to a hair salon in DC for a bit over a year. It doesn't advertise much and really depends on word of mouth. They have my business solely based on my experience. My last visit was last week. I had to wait and then the hairdresser, who has been cutting my hair for a year, did not remember me. It was as if I had never been there. She was unfriendly and she made me late for my next appointment. My hair did not look good. I felt upset and in general, the experience was bad. Would I go back?

Absolutely not. Would I recommend the place to anyone? Not a chance. So Fiddleheads on 17th Street, NW in Washington, DC, not only have you lost a customer but you have lost my word-of-mouth marketing on your behalf.

Could this situation be averted? Yes. Communication would have helped, as would a system where the salon keeps track of its customers, their preferences, when they've visited, etc. Can it be fixed retroactively? No. There is nothing that can fix a bad experience once it has happened. I would never trust my hair to this nasty woman who clearly does not care who she is working with.

My point is that marketing, including word-of-mouth marketing can only go so far. **The service/product/cause has to live up to the expectation or else you won't buy it or use it or support it.** I want to point you also to this article on Adweek, by Joseph Jaffe, "Customer Service is Key Strategy." Give it a read. Jaffe's point is that customers are lifeblood to a business and serving them should be one of your marketing strategies (interestingly, the article changed names from when I read it earlier today, when it said Customer Service is a Key Differentiator).

What are your experiences? Have you ever been turned off by a service experience to such an extent that you never bought from the vendor? Heck, let me do a poll:

[poll daddy poll=2827189]

