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.