# Marrying brand promise and delivery

By Janice Spark                                                                27 Oct 2005

Brand strength is often quantified in terms of the customer's perceptions of, and attitudes towards, a company - the closer the customer experience is to the 'brand promise', the stronger the brand. And strong brands enjoy long term customer loyalty, top line growth and increased shareholder value.

Many companies, however, fail in their attempts to marry the brand promise with the delivery. In most cases, this is not the result of 'brand laziness', or a failure to comprehend the central importance of the brand promise and experience to the health of the company. Rather, organisations are repeatedly tripping over hidden barriers to an effective marriage of brand promise and delivery.

The results of an 'advertising first' approach to brand management can be catastrophic. Far too often companies skip right to what they see as the juicy stuff - disregarding the key fact that the brand identity must, by definition, define the outputs of creative media campaigns.

Consider Sentech. A new company, offering a product (wireless broadband internet access) only deliverable across certain geographic zones, Sentech launched a mainstream TV advertising campaign promising a whole new world of connectivity to South African subscribers. Unfortunately, the company hadn't geared internally towards its advertised promise, on any level - resulting in a barrage of negative exposure in the media (particularly the IT media).

For the brand promise to translate effectively into delivery (in the form of a consistent, predictable and satisfying customer experience) the brand has to be the central benchmark of action across the entire organisation; from shop floor staff and customer facing managers and business partners.

Too often, brand management remains isolated in the silo of the marketing department. While proactive advertising and marketing campaigns surely belong in this department, the big mistake is to view these aspects of business as the sum total of brand building. The brand should operationally relevant across all aspects of the business.

Efficiency and productivity targeting is central to most businesses. This is particularly true in the world of call centres. The traditional productivity goals for call centre agents are to minimise call time, and to defer interaction with a 'live agent' until absolutely unavoidable.

But what is the cost of this approach to the customer experience? Highly efficient and productive call centres, although meeting or exceeding productivity and efficiency targets, can impact negatively on the customer experience. If follow-through on the brand promise isn't the primary aim of the call centre, a lot of hard brand work quickly comes undone.

It's no accident that short term insurer, Outsurance, achieved number one spot in the Sunday Times 2004 Markinor Best Brands Survey (in the short term insurance category). Although the Outsurance business is structured around the call centre, the delivery of the Outsurance brand promise takes precedence over productivity and efficiency targets.

Which is not to say Outsurance staff aren't incentives to deal with calls as fast as possible - of course they are. However, these targets have to be met within the context of the brand promise. The result? A power brand that is riding the wave of a positive, consistent customer experience.

In order to gain control over the gap between the brand promise and its delivery, companies should be following a brand development process that focuses on synchronicity between the key elements of the brand.

A winning brand capitalises effectively on the crossover between what the company does well and effectively, and what the target market wants, or needs.

Achieving alignment between the brand promise and organisational life means that brand governance must become the responsibility of the organisation as a whole. One of the most effective ways of achieving this is the creation of a brand council, including representation from every business division. Such a council is able to identify brand issues, discuss options and take necessary actions on behalf of the brand as a whole.

Equally important is the creation and delivery of a long term process that keeps employees aware of, and acting according to, the brand promise. This is about far more than the occasional brand workshop - it's about identifying and communicating with a range of internal constituencies. It's also about treating staff as customers - segmenting audience groups and speaking to each group effectively.

Lastly, it is essential that brand concerns are threaded through business planning process. Planning forums should feature strategic brand issues as much as they do budgets, investment plans and so forth.

Only once the brand promise and the organisational structure have been aligned should organisations be looking at delivering the customer experience itself.

Eliminate actions that don't match the brand promise: Kulula, the low cost airline, has delivered on its brand promise of air travel for ordinary people - and every aspect of the customer experience matches the promise.

Reinforce actions that match the promise: Take things that work, and make them better; or make them more visible. Again, Kulula provides a good example. The active use of humour worked well for the airline, and has been carried through to all communication mediums.

Add new, high leverage actions that match the brand promise: Woolworth's position in the upper LSM food market has been significantly reinforced by the gradual addition of buffet style coffee shops at selected outlets.

Recover from off-promise actions: Whether the mistake is your own, or comes from an uncontrollable external source, recovery is key. Think of the Pick n Pay food poisoning crisis in 2003. Pick n Pay acted swiftly and concertedly, and always according to its promise.

Effective brand evaluation systems not only give a context to past events, they are also early warning systems that continuously gauge the customer environment and enable pro-active action at points of need. Successful brands are the ones that invest as much in listening to customers - on a daily basis - as on other aspects of brand management.

Any down-turn in tracking surveys or sales growth figures will indicate a brand issue that actually began months (as many as 12) ago. Companies that are relying solely only on these mechanisms as brand measurement tools will be unable to actively manage, and refine, the brand experience on a daily basis.

# ABOUT JANICE SPARK

Janice Spark has directed the marketing efforts of leading global organizations and co-founded Idea Engineers, which is in business to do one thing - to grow yours. Idea Engineers believes great brands are built by a differentiated strategy, a strong reputation and an experience that lives up to the brand promise.

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