

# Meaningful Loyalty

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**W**e have an opportunity as marketers to create brand experiences that result in meaningful loyalty. For the most part, this is not what we've been doing in recent decades. We've said, "Hey, for a dollar, would you try this?" Or, "For fifty cents, would you buy it again?" That's not about creating lasting loyalty; it's just renting someone's shopping behavior for a short period of time.

Marketers have spent trillions of dollars over the past 10-15 years on encouraging switching or trial behavior among shoppers, and yet our categories have grown very little, if at all. It's clear that consumers are not as interested in buying something because there is a coupon or an offer as they are when the brand actually means something to them.

**What a brand really means to a consumer is loyalty's ultimate touchpoint.**

Meaningful loyalty is rooted in a sense of humanity—it's about shared values and a sense of community. This seismic shift toward meaningful loyalty is especially potent among millennials because they aren't necessarily interested in clipping a newspaper coupon, even a digital one. They want to buy and connect with products that are relevant to them.

These may not be the cheapest products, or the easiest to find. Millennials are interested in creating

relationships with brands that are quite powerful, that are based on sentiment more than cents-off. We actually see shoppers shopping differently overall—it's not just millennials. Consumers of every generation are diving more deeply into the provenance of brands. Who makes it? What does the brand stand for? How does it behave in the marketplace?

This runs far deeper than what is in the can or box. It's not about simply wrapping the brand in a cause, like Tom's Shoes. It's at a higher level than that. People are looking for brands that share the values that they either currently hold or would like to see in themselves. They're looking for brands that solve their problems or make their life better on a daily basis, provide education, inspiration, or enlightenment. That's what galvanizes relationships. When you can tap into that, it's a tough thing for a competitor—large or small—to break.

Consider the success of Plum Organic, a baby-food brand that Campbell's acquired. Plum Organic has an incredibly loyal base, and its products are never on sale. It's not a brand that relies on heavy trade spending. It's a brand that has earned incredible affinity from a small group of consumers who will not switch because it represents more than just another product to them. It's not unlike, say, Pampers. You could look at Pampers and say they make diapers ... or that they are a mom's ally in early childhood development. Pampers is right there with you—the co-pilot that moves along with you from the time you bring an infant home until he or she is out of diapers. It's a relationship built around higher-order benefits.

#### IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES

The brand, the product, the company, and the experience must all be one thing. It means being very choiceful with every communication, and it always goes back to values. The marketing of consumer packaged-goods is often dismissed as somehow

different. Some claim that it's just not possible to create the kind of connections made famous by the likes of, say, Mini Cooper or The Body Shop. The truth is, we have plenty to learn — and apply — from such brands, and other categories.

Take the airline business, which itself is not necessarily known for providing great brand experiences. I fly Delta a lot. They are absolute stewards of loyalty. I get to board the plane early. I usually get whatever seat I select. At times, they've even gotten a little cart to take me from one gate to the next, simply because I fly so many miles on their airplanes. Airlines, hotels, hospitality and travel—they really understand the importance of making people who use them the most feel valued and important.

Conversely, in a grocery store, the express lane is for those who buy the least amount of stuff. In consumer packaged-goods, we reward the people who buy the least. Meanwhile, there's a shopper with \$400 worth of groceries waiting seven people deep in a lane to check out. Why don't we invest in making her feel as important as she truly is? It's a brand experience opportunity in the offing.

Personalization is critically important, too. When I walk up to the Baldwin lock display at Home Depot, it looks spectacular. There's this big wooden door, all lit up. I can turn all the doorknobs. It's a cool experience. But maybe none of these knobs seem to fit on my door, or my style of house. It's no different with consumer packaged-goods. For millennials—and certainly every generation behind them—the 'Net is norm. They want to shop and be treated in a store the same way they are when they are online.

So, for example, if I am interested in certain products, foods and flavors, then that's all I really want to see. Imagine you walk into a physical grocery store and there's a giant search bar over the front door. You can type in who you are and what you want, and basically all you see in that store are the things that are within your interest areas.

Things will get really interesting when we can start to tailor the experiences to specific shoppers and take that off line. It's easy to do online, but there's such a disconnect between what consumers are interested in while in their mobile and digital life, and what they're seeing in stores. Some are already trying to crack the code with ideas like home-delivery subscription models and vending-machine concepts. It's important to question what a 'store' really means in today's world, and deliver it on the shopper's terms. That's going to be a really powerful aspect of the experience, as well.

Brands also have some inherent assets that remain largely underleveraged. Our products are in people's kitchens and homes. We feed their children and we relieve their pain—whatever it might be. We have the ability to be in an ongoing, day-to-day, deeper relationship than an airline or hotel ever will be.

Retailers like Wegmans, Harris Teeter and Wawa provide great experiences. The opportunity for brands is to take such experiences and drill them down to the category level. Brands and retailers talk a lot about joint business planning. That planning should be more about how to create a category experience that makes people want to come back and buy, regardless of the brand. For all the high-mindedness of brand purpose, the unfettered creative potential to create meaningful brand experience, the realities are decidedly down-to-earth, especially at retail.

#### RECOGNIZE THE REALITIES

Ultimately, it's all in the execution. The truth is that you can have relevant insights, an incredible strategy and breakthrough creative, but if you fail to deliver on the consumer's expectations when they are on the retail floor making a purchase decision, then everything you've done in advance has been a failed investment. Their experience will fall short, and that will have a direct and measurable impact on their long-term view of the brand and their loyalty to it.

Let's say the brand challenge concerns awareness within the retail environment—centered on issues of availability, distribution, price, the competitive set, and so forth. So, you create a fantastic experiential program designed to raise consumer awareness and drive shoppers into stores. However, when the consumer arrives at the store, the product is out of stock, or in short supply. Or, it's not appropriately merchandised on the shelves, and difficult to find. It may not be priced appropriately, or have the necessary promotional support.

In other words, there is no relevant communication or trigger to motivate shoppers to connect and transact. That gap prevents them from engaging with your brand, or worse, causes them to try another brand because they're not feeling the emotional connection that is so essential to loyalty in the long-term.

A lot of things can go wrong. You can have all the right promotional elements, and ensure that there's digital and social amplification. You can create immersive live events and experiences, but all of that will fall flat and fail to deliver against plan unless you set your retail partners up for success with



core deliverables. If that doesn't happen, you'll lose your consumer's confidence and ultimately they'll reduce their frequency of purchase, or switch brands altogether. All of these things factor into the total experience and long-term loyalty.

In the coming years, we will see increasing retail and brand consolidation, and consumers are going to continue to be bombarded with noise. We are going to see brands focusing more and more at retail because it makes sense to invest money where the cash register rings and money is made. The ultimate measure of brand experience and meaningful loyalty is retail sell-through. You can create an incredibly immersive campaign, but the sell-through is the ultimate metric of success.

I've heard some chief marketing officers say that they can "feel it" when the brand experience is working and the brand promise is being delivered. I would challenge that by saying that they should also be able to "see it." Seeing how consumers are experiencing the brand first-hand is your validation. You can see it in POS stats and validate it through the sales metrics.

There are lots of ways to add measurement and analytics, but you need to measure against consumers who are actually experiencing the brand first-hand. You need to let them give you the input that both validate your assumptions and allow you to continue to sharpen your approach.

This means putting yourself into the consumer's shoes, and what their actual experience is, every step of the way. Making it a seamless and enjoyable experience is the only way to achieve brand loyalty, passion and commitment. That's the big gateway.

## TO WIN, GO ALL IN

Everybody today believes in creating a great brand experience. Nobody is against it. The challenge is making the trade-offs required to pursue initiatives that may take focus or dollars away from more traditional approaches. However, given changes in shopper behavior and available technology, the time is right to create brand experiences that result in meaningful loyalty, and re-define the brand as something more than just the product alone.

In the big picture, shopper marketing, to be successful, has to take on a provider mentality—not only providing good products at attractive prices but also providing content, education, value—and bringing those things together, as opposed to so much focus on short-term tactics. Achieving success requires a full-throttled commitment. You've got to be all in, across the entire organization. It takes a lot of

bravery to be all in, but if you're not all in, you're not in at all.

First, you've got to understand clearly who you are, what you mean to consumers today and what you want to mean to them tomorrow. You've got to think outside the 'product.' What do we provide to people in their lives? What's the value that we offer? What do we mean, what do we stand for? You've got to spend a lot of time getting at that. That's not cause-related. It's not about the corporate charter. What's your role in that person's life?

Second, articulate to your customers what's important to them and what you stand for. This relates to values and transparency. We're going to tell you everything we can about how we make our product, what goes into it, what we believe in, who we believe it's for. Then you enable consumers to make a choice as to whether it's for them.

Third, tap into the consumer's sense of community. People usually hang with cohorts. All of my friends have kids about the same age, who live in the same geography under similar economic circumstances. We've got to foster a greater sense of community and be able to connect these people, because that's a way of amplifying loyalty in a very personalized way.

Finally, consider the total desired experience—from opening the bottle, to drinking the juice, to the shelf, to the advertising, the website, the community, to the people who are ambassadors, to our employees in the field, to our employees in the warehouse and the farmers that make it. What is that total ecosystem of the experience we want to provide? How do we engage and delight them?

You need a balance of curiosity and confidence. You need the curiosity to look at the total organization in terms of the experience you want to deliver, and then go down that path, with confidence. Marketers have done a great job translating their vision, the idea of meaningful experiences, into emotional, 30-second television commercials. We have the opportunity to make that idea come to life in the rapidly evolving retail environment, and every other touchpoint. We can do better. ■



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