

What brands do for their customers  
is the brand-experience bottom line.

# Will Do

## What is the hardest brand promise to keep today?

**Jeff Charney:** Living those eleven letters — *Progressive* — is very, very challenging. We live them every day, 24/7, in everything we do. It's just very hard to live that day in and day out, when you are on the line from an insurance-claim perspective.

Sometimes being 'progressive' just means listening to people. It's progressive in its simplicity. Just let people talk after they've had an accident; don't interrupt them.

## A brand promise can't be measured in a black-and-white, slide rule or calculator way.

JEFF CHARNEY

That's a simple thing to do, but also sometimes a tough thing.

Empathy is a very progressive idea. Peace-of-mind is very progressive, and also very simple. It doesn't have to be this gee-whiz experience. It doesn't have to be a counter-intuitive, smoke-clearing, lightbulb-flashing idea.

**Kevin Krone:** One of the things we hold very sacred at Southwest Airlines is delivering a consistent,

pleasurable experience for our customers. That can be a challenge, in that there are so many moving parts to an airline. There's the airplane itself. There's the weather that impacts operations. Then, of course, you've got a workforce who delivers the product. The machine part of flying from point A to B is pretty routine, but the people side of it is extremely important, and a very key part of our brand experience.

Marketing is the messenger of our promise, but our people deliver the promise. We've got a workforce that's located throughout the country. Having that piece of the puzzle

working consistently every day adds up to a lot of complexity. Day to day, our job is to extract all of that away from the customer, so that all they see is a great, pleasurable, hospitable experience. We're very blessed and very much value our employees and how they impact and deliver on our brand promise.

**Kathy Benning:** Brand promise isn't a singular promise; it's a collection of promises. It's how we are perceived. It's this emotional

connection to who we are. It's living the brand promise internally as well as externally.

Staying true to the brand promise is critical in every aspect of our business — whether that is marketing communications, franchise development, employee communications, a new logo design or our brand voice.

It's making sure that collectively all of our brand elements deliver a brand promise that creates an emotional connection with our current and future guests, whose needs and expectations are going to be different than our guests today.

**Russell Wager:** Our brand promise is focused on being an alternative to a premium product, and offering value to match with SkyActive technology, Mazda Connect, and i-Activsense safety features. We have a pretty clear vision, but every 30 days we get a sales 'report card,' and with it comes some pressure to deviate from our path. So, the biggest difficulty is sticking to our promise no matter what the sales report card says.

**David Aaker:** I've done a lot of thinking and writing about higher purpose, which might mean making people healthier, or protecting the environment. Higher purpose is really important because it provides an increasingly relevant basis for

## A ROUNDTABLE FEATURING

Jeff Charney  
Progressive  
Insurance

Kevin Krone  
Southwest Airlines

Kathy Benning  
Buffalo Wild Wings

Russell Wager  
Mazda NA

David Aaker  
Prophet

relationships with customers. It also inspires employees to deliver the brand's promises. You need activated employees, and without a higher purpose it's really hard to generate that.

If a brand has a higher purpose—and a high percentage do within their brand vision—that's the hardest promise to keep, or at least be perceived as being kept. It's hard because for some CMOs it's hard to justify. Why would customers, given that they're all so rational, buy a brand or be loyal to a higher purpose since it's not a functional benefit?

It's also hard to justify higher purpose to top management. That often means that the investment behind it is fragile or not even there to begin with. The other reason it's hard to keep a higher-purpose promise is that it's hard to get credit for it. There's a lot of noise and it's hard to be perceived as doing anything substantively different than competitors.

### Do millennials care more about brand promises than other generations?

**Charney:** Absolutely, they do. Study after study says that millennials want to do business with brands they identify and associate with. It's not just about price anymore. It all comes down to a return to authenticity, but that is easier said than done.

But it's not just about your age. We have what we call the APT effect at Progressive, which stands for the Age People Think. There is a lot of science that goes into this, but the golden rule is that once you hit the age of 40, you market to people like they are 10 years younger.

The Age People Think is radically different than the idea that 50 is the new 40 or 60 is the new 50. It's that 60 is the new 45 and 50 is the new 35. It's not about the age people act; it's about the age people think.

**Krone:** We all care about brand promises, but I think perhaps

millennials have a different lens on it. I'm always reluctant to speak on behalf of a generation, because there are always nuances. I will say that they listen very closely to what you're saying and hold you accountable for that.

They also value and are passionate about things that are important to them. If it's congruent with their life views, or what they value and want, then they will be a supporter of the brand. That's a perspective or filter they bring to brands that I don't sense as strongly with other generations.

They also like to co-create and form the brand into something that's really personal. We're blessed in that we're a brand that is really purpose-led and has a lot of transparency about our approach to our purpose, which is to connect people to what is important to them and their lives with friendly, reliable, low-cost transportation. That is a noble purpose that resonates with all sorts of groups, but certainly with millennials.

**Benning:** Millennials care a lot about community, honesty and connection. They also consume

media in so many different ways within their daily lives. I think they expect more out of brands, so if we are not delivering a consistent message, or are letting them down during any brand interaction, we risk losing our connection with them.

If millennials went online and

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KEVIN KRONE

opened up our app and it wasn't black and gold, and didn't come across as edgy, quirky and different, that would be a negative touchpoint. It would be a brand disconnect. We have to live the brand promise in everything—including an app, including the moment they walk into a restaurant, and including our on-tablet menu.

All of these things create ease-of-use for our guests and allow millennial guests, especially, to become more comfortable with our brand. We are always working on doing things differently and better to create greater relevance. I'm also interested in the next generation. What about the kids who are now 10? What are going to be their brand drivers? I think that's fascinating.

**Wager:** Millennials are savvier and hold brands up to a higher standard because they are the first to know—because of all their technology and access to social media—if a brand is not fulfilling its promise. They will be the first to leave the brand as a result.

Their brand loyalties also may not be as strong. In the past, the way

you found out about vehicles was to go to showrooms or read about them in automotive magazines. Now, you don't have to leave your home and you can see hundreds of different options. It's easier for them than it was for previous generations.

**Aaker:** Everything I've read about millennials says that they are not motivated by power and money as much as prior generations. I think millennials are more sensitive about a brand's purpose when they decide where they're going to work, which companies to associate with, and which brands to buy.

### Is advertising the best way to communicate the brand promise?

**Charney:** The answer is no. I've always been a marketer, never an 'ad guy.' Ads merely get people to walk in the door so they can learn about who you are. It's a means to the end. My dad would always say, in his very Brooklyn accent, "Jeffrey you've got to walk and talk." The talk is the ads and the walk is the actions of the company.

## *Brand promise isn't a singular promise; it's a collection of promises.*

KATHY BENNING

The insurance business is tough because the only time customers get to see who we really are is when they have an accident or file a claim. We have to stay true to ourselves in those situations—in the 'walk.' But as far as the 'talk' goes, it's all about the content and the context dance.

This is the most difficult dance for marketers. You have to have just

the right rhythm to make sure the content and context are dancing correctly. When you do, you make a connection, and conversion will follow.

**Krone:** It's a tricky question. In general, yes, advertising is the best way to communicate what your message is, or what you think your brand promise is. However, your experience is what formulates the customer's opinion of your brand.

I have a model I use that says the messaging is the tip of the spear, if you will, and then there are two other base components that play into that.

One is your company's purpose, and the other is the experience. Experience and purpose are connected and related. If those two components are right, and your messaging is true to that, it all works together. But if those pieces are out of sync, it doesn't work.

**Benning:** Advertising is one way to communicate the brand promise, and for many brands it's an important aspect. But I think there are even more relevant ways in which to create a brand

promise. Brand content is really important. I also love the idea of live activations. You can use pop-up opportunities to surprise and delight, if you are nimble.

Many people resonate with a television commercial or radio ad, and they think that's the brand. For us, it's about constantly defining what it means to be a brand of the people. We are our

fans' best fan. They're fans of our brand, and we're fans of our fans. So, it's in everything we do. It's about how we are engaging with our fans and delivering on our promises to them.

It's about every social-media touchpoint. It's about the in-restaurant engagement. It's not only about interactions between a team-member and guest; it's also about the guest-to-guest interaction. We've been very diligent about identifying those who are truly passionate about our brand, and creating opportunities for them to interact with each other.

**Wager:** I don't know if advertising is the best way to communicate the brand promise, but it's definitely a necessity. People want to know the benefits of becoming part of our brand family. From a product standpoint, we have to talk to them about our various features and benefits, like everyone else. That's table stakes.

It isn't just about buying a Mazda, however; it's about showing that we are part of each local community. For example, for every test drive, we give back to the community by donating an hour of time from Mazda employees, dealers or partners. We're going to give back more than 65,000 hours of community service around the country this year; that's up from 55,000 the year before. We're going to donate more than \$4.9 million to four national and 44 local charities.

**Aaker:** I don't think advertising is the best way to communicate the brand promise. I think the best way is through a branded program. For example, the Avon Walk for Breast Cancer and Patagonia's 4 Rs: Reduce, Repair, Recycle and Re-Sell. Unilever's Lifebuoy Soap

has a wonderful wash-your-hands program. They've gotten millions of people in developing countries to wash their hands and prevented untold numbers of deaths as a result.

It's these types of programs that provide substance to the higher purpose part of the brand vision. Branded programs not only provide substance behind the higher purpose, they also build credibility among customers and employees, and give brands a chance to get some credit. Otherwise, it's a battle to get credit. It's really amazing. You look at the wonderful things so many companies are doing, and it's just a blip on the radar screen. Customers just don't perceive it.

### Can a brand's fidelity to its promise be quantified?

**Charney:** Technologies cannot quantify feelings. So, simply stated: A brand promise can't be measured in a black-and-white, slide rule or calculator way. It's an experience world now. It's every little touchpoint. It's all about that 'x' factor of the experience. Brands look at certain data, but for us it's not about unaided awareness anymore.

The brand they want is the BEST. B is the Brand they want. E is the Experience they want. The S is the company they want to Stay with. T is the Time is now, today, tomorrow, Tuesday, Thursday, ten minutes from now.

**Krone:** Fidelity to the brand promise can be quantified, but perhaps not quite so directly as scientists would want it to be. Southwest Airlines has had 43 years of great customer experience and service, and 43 years of

profitability, which is unmatched in this industry. We let bags fly free—no other airline offers that product benefit to customers. We're winning more customers and gaining more market share.

You can look at anecdotal things like that, which really point to that formula I was talking about earlier: purpose, experience and messaging.

You can step back and look at things like brand regard, or statistics on brand consideration, commitment, repeat usage, or

**Wager:** Every day, customers are judging you, whether they are posting, blogging, or tweeting. Every minute of the day they are telling a story of our brand as they see it. We have quite a few reputation management tools that we're using that can help with quantifying and scoring that.

We saw this with our Mazda Drive for Good campaign. We went live with it on Thanksgiving weekend, and immediately saw comments about checking out our products because we were doing good things in local communities. They

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RUSSELL WAGER

loyalty to the brand. The ultimate measure is that we're winning more customers and gaining more market share.

**Benning:** We keep track through guest insights and a brand-health survey. We do brand research consistently and analyze data. You build loyalty through brand activations, trial, usage, awareness, and so forth. We regularly look at how we are activating in each of these areas. It is the responsibility of the entire organization—from our marketing partners to our in-restaurant team to our operations partners.

We're very open to constructive criticism. If we see that the brand is breaking down in one area or another, we are quick to analyze what's wrong. We listen to our guests. If we fall a point or two in one of our brand metrics, we don't wait two or three years to address it. We are on it. It's real-time for us.

weren't talking about our different car models necessarily. They were talking about Mazda at a higher level.

**Aaker:** You can measure exposure to branded programs. You can measure—or at least try to relate—branded programs to brand equity measures such as perception, loyalty and purchase. However, the bottom line is that if you have to measure it to justify it, it's not going to happen.

Unless you have a commitment among top executives that this is the right thing to do, and it's not based on justifying it quantitatively, it's just not going to happen. Quantification of the brand promise is a signal that the brand is not really committed to a higher purpose. It becomes something that sounds good, but you're not willing to make a commitment to it with real programs and a real investment that will be pursued over the long term.

## Which brands do the best job of keeping their promises to you?

**Charney:** There's a brand of eyeglasses called Activist. It's totally different. There are two prongs that go over your ears, not just one. It is a totally different way of wearing glasses. They don't fall off. You don't even realize you have them on. They feel better. They hold better.

There is also a brand called Headblade. I'm bald. It's a very insecure feeling to be losing your hair. I came across Headblade and I've never felt more confident because it's just like a razor that goes over your head. It's just something personal to a bald guy like me. Embrace being bald. I know I'm getting way too personal here.

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DAVID AAKER

**Krone:** An interesting company that's been in the news lately is Chipotle, which has always had that principle of standing for a higher calling. The report recently that they were walking away from a pork supplier because of what Chipotle thought was a violation of their standards is really powerful.

Chipotle has a clear idea of what it stands for and is delivering against it, even if it sometimes ends up creating business pain for them. They've got that laser focus. When you have that, your business life becomes much easier because it just gives you that clarity, and you don't spend a lot of time debating it. You just spend your time being good at what you want to be good at.

**Benning:** I am 100 percent a Southwest Airlines brand advocate. They're a humble brand that delivers on their brand promise without being completely overt about it. I like brands that consistently keep their promise to a customer both emotionally and rationally. I think Disney does a great job. I think Gatorade does an outstanding job. Gatorade started out as a true sports drink but has morphed into a lower-calorie, electrolyte drink for any type of athlete. I love the Nike brand. They have also evolved over the years and have done a great job of keeping their brand promise, as well.

**Wager:** I like the GoPro camera. There are lots of digital cameras out there, but GoPro promises to capture your life and your world in a whole other way. And

it does — whether it's strapped to the front of my car when I'm driving around a track, or on my helmet when I ride my mountain bike. When I first got it, I wasn't sure how it would work, but it absolutely is delivering on its promises. It captures your adventurous life in a way you never could before.

**Aaker:** I'm impressed with Walmart. It's hard to hate Walmart anymore because of the good things they are doing for the environment. It's really re-framed Walmart and changed the discussion. It gives them an alternative to people talking about how they trash employees, suppliers and communities. Now they have something else to talk about. ■



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