

# Unity, Fraternity, Loyalty

In the good old days, recognition was something customers were able to establish with their favoured stores over time. I'm sure you know the feeling. It's that special warm feeling you get when you're remembered by name, and by your usual purchase, when you enter a store. Well, being remembered is still common today -- on the Web, that is. The personal touch has been transferred to the Web and, sure, the old trick gets some of us. But does it really inspire customer loyalty?

Most likely not. By now, consumers can see the trick for what it is, and the Web's version of the personal touch is not perceived as being very personal at all. Customers no longer feel particularly special just because a site welcomes them back by using their first names.

So, what more can you do to really keep ahead of your competitors? Let me share an anecdote with you.

In outback Australia, I visited a small (and, when I

say small, I mean small) town. From a metropolitan person's point of view it looked as if there could be no possible benefit in living in this remote, isolated, and sparsely populated community. Far from the coast and innocent of the seaside scenery urban Australians take for granted, deprived of shopping and entertainment venues, ostensibly devoid of interesting outlooks (both the scenic and imaginative varieties), and far, far away from any other population centre, the place seemed to be a hotbed of social malaise.

But, very quickly, it became clear to me the people living in this town were incredibly happy. And they were incredibly happy not because of the town itself, but because of the community that composed it. The atmosphere of support, helpfulness, and neighbourly good cheer that prevailed was so positive the happy milieu approached fairytale proportions. In short, I came to the obvious conclusion that social commentators

must take as a given: that what makes a city great is its community, its people, and its social cohesion.

So, what has this to do with branding?

I'm sure the justification for my analogy is obvious: I believe the creation of a feeling of community around a brand can make all the difference. Why? Because, it's important to remember, a brand is not a factory creation. It's created in the minds of customers and in the collective mentality of the community of which those customers are part. In e-tailing and branding terms, we're way past automatically generated greetings, behavioural-prediction programs, and automatically generated emails. These techniques hold no persuasive power for the educated customer base. Let's face it. We all take that stuff for



granted. But what we don't take for granted are meaningful indications of the presence of real human beings -- true interaction. Gimmicks and tricks just don't cut it. Let me give you an example from my experience as a customer.

I once chose to fly with an airline that was reputedly unique in the facilities it could offer its patrons: fully reclining beds, interactive entertainment systems, and even on-board Internet access. I just had to try that! But, as is so often the case, my preconceptions didn't match the reality. Sure, the airline had all those great electronic features on board, but the personal interaction was nonexistent. Had I not spilled my drink in my seat, I'd have

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never gotten a smile from any of the flight attendants. On the way back, I chose to fly with another company, a company without all the fancy equipment, but one, which rightly boasted of impressive staff courtesy and care.

Which brand do you think I'd choose again? The latter, of course! It happens that since I had these two experiences, almost every European and Asian airline has started offering the fancy technical features provided by the former airline. And guess what. None of them seem to be offering the smiles I remember so happily from my return flight.

So, where does this get us? The importance of involving your customers in everything you do. And I don't just mean setting up chat rooms. Jones Soda, a well-known soda producer, surprised me with a sponsorship program in which it supports ordinary people doing special things. Visit the company's site and you'll see that more than 10,000 people have created

a "Jones Soda Label." The result is you can find labels created by the product's own customers. The Jones Soda brand is no longer owned by Jones Soda but by its customers, a fact that inevitably has had a substantial influence on the company's decisions, image, and attitude.

That last word is crucial. Brands that really want to survive need to sell more than nice products. They need to sell attitude! They need to sell opinions and feelings. When I drink a Jones Soda, I don't drink what's inside the bottle; I drink the label. And I drink what I see on the company's site and in stores. Sure, a brand's spirit might be reflected on bulletin boards, chat rooms, chain email letters, peer-to-peer programs, and general creative thinking. But what's common among truly successful brands is a strong idea. Jones Soda's marketing execs haven't established a chat room just because the marketing manual prescribes it. They haven't done anything just because of any formula.

They've created and fostered a strong idea that's gained potency from a community of understanding among the brand's customers. Only then have they used chat rooms, bulletin boards, and peer-to-peer programs to fortify and promulgate the solidly founded brand idea.

I still remember Jones Soda, not because of its taste (because, if I have to be honest, I barely remember what it was like), but because of its attitude. There's the crux. That's exactly what's behind long-term customer loyalty to brands: sharing feelings with users by revealing the real people and ideas that compose the brand's community.



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