

Is delighting your customers enough?

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In this series of Supermarket & Retailer's articles, we share stories of what some organisations and managers have done to motivate and inspire their teams. We give you practical ideas of what you can do to create the most amazing, customer-driven company in the world.

Around 2005 Oprah gave every single audience member a free car. Pandemonium broke out as she shouted out the words...

“You get a car!
Everybody gets a car!”

That episode is still remembered and spoken about today – more than fifteen years later.

For decades now I have been talking about 'Delighting Your Customers', and encouraging our clients to come up with special ways to appreciate, thrill, and excite their customers. (Indeed, I even trademarked the term, although it has become so widely spread now that it's impossible to manage.)



But a recent meeting with a marketing director at one of our most supportive partners really challenged me.

The gist of her comment went something like this: "Social media has changed everything, and for a ton of money you can even get a powerful 'influencer' like Kim Kardashian to promote your products with a hashtag. People don't trust these anymore, just like they don't trust our own advertising and brand promises. But genuine influencers – people who give you a positive review and recommend your products don't need to

be paid – and they can't be bought. Where have we failed?"

Now positive word of mouth and recommendations are the most powerful form of advertising and promotion, so I launched into my script about how critical it is for businesses to delight and surprise their customers so that those same people go out and rave about them. You simply cannot ignore word of mouth, online or offline, because more and more customers across just about all industries use recommendations to make their buying decisions.

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When I tell someone about an experience, it is relevant to their needs, it’s personalised, it saves time doing a search for themselves, and they know I’m independent.

But she interrupted me, and said, “Yes, but there are a couple of problems. First, we’d go out of business if every customer was delighted every time they came to shop from us because we gave them a choc-chip cookie or a free T-shirt. It’s not financially sustainable. And second, if we do something creative and innovative to delight them, they will maybe tell others for a while, but then it loses its power to surprise, and our competitors will probably copy it the next day.”

I was at a loss for words, because she was right. But it got me thinking deeply about whether everyone needs to be a Disney or an Apple. So

when I got back to her a couple of days later, I had some thoughts that you may find useful.

First, operational excellence is essential to your success, and you have to get the basics incredibly right and make it as easy as possible to do business with you. If you try the ‘fancy stuff’ on a weak foundation, it’s like putting lipstick on a pig. Being very good, or even being the best is not naturally remarkable – worthy to be noticed as being extraordinary and therefore remarked upon by your customers.

So you can never relax: you have to keep finding innovative ways to add value for customers. As Jay Baer put it in his book *Talk Triggers, Same Is Lame*. After all, when did you last rave about the fact that your local shopping centre has free and safe parking for customers?

Second, my marketing director friend was absolutely right about how the power of surprise is quickly lost. If you take a business like Virgin Atlantic, they were the first to offer a chauffeur-driven service to and from the airport for their ‘Upper Class’ passengers, and a neck massage for anyone who asked nicely. People started sharing this exciting service with many others, but soon it was taken for granted, and, even worse, all airlines started offering something similar to First Class passengers. (Nobody else offered neck massages though.)

Being who they are, customers kept looking for more, so in the next few years Virgin Atlantic started offering other remarkable services, such as free screens on the back of every seat, 600 entertainment channels, a small bag with some gifts for every passenger, more comfortable

seats, and an app to share a taxi from Heathrow to London with other passengers and split the costs. It seemed like other airlines just played catch-up all of the time.

Third – and this is the most important point – to get customers to come back for more, and to get them to tell many others, it's not enough to do remarkable, different, unusual and/or unique things for your customers. This is hard to repeat thousands and thousands of times a day, so we tend to focus only at special times – such as when a customer is having a crisis, or when we have a special event like 'Black Friday Deals' or an annual sale. But the key issue is that it has to be repeatable! If the special thing that you do for your customers creates an

instant spike in 'likes', or is even repeated by the person to as many people as they can get to, that is only momentary, and it doesn't spread too far unless it is absolutely legendary. It's the equivalent of a publicity stunt. It may create some goodwill, but it eventually fades away.

So the real challenge needs to be that if you want something to go viral, if you want to build a long-term enviable reputation that your competitors find impossible to imitate, it has to be repeatable – occurring for every customer every time they transact with your business. Surprises are nice, but they quickly lose their value, so you have to do the things that you can consistently implement every day, and repeat for every customer.

The impact of that may not be as dramatic or newsworthy, but it lasts far longer and customers continue to love you and your brand.

That is what the past few months of my columns have been about: using human interactions to bring a smile to the faces of our customers, or to sprinkle them with some magic that makes them feel good, that makes their day. Then you won't have to give away cars like Oprah did. **SR**



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