

Sometimes You Want To Go Where Everybody Knows Your Name: Scaling Intimacy To Build Advocacy

Samantha Skey, Apr 01, 2010 07:00 AM

The marketing and advertising industry has grown tenfold since *Mad Men* days for a host of reasons, including a key underlying factor: we have learned the importance of the emotional connection that well executed marketing campaigns can elicit from consumers. Now that nearly every medium is fair game for an ad, product placement or sales opportunity, consumers have grown jaded by what they view as constant "marketing spin" and yearn for a more human connection with the products and services they are buying. They want to feel like they are dealing with other humans, not cold, faceless entities. They need a pulse, blood in the veins, eye contact, a sense of humanity. It is no surprise that brands who let their humanity show through rank higher in consumer appeal.

Moreover, the pervasiveness of the Internet has made the marketplace truly global, driving companies to launch gigantic, and often impersonal, media campaigns. After hundreds of years of technological advancement and industry, some consumers yearn for the intimacy of the neighborhood "soda shop." Like Norm and Cliffy, consumers want to know who they are buying from, to be greeted personally by name, and not just by algorithm.

Brands who build intimacy with their consumers have something to fall back on when all else is equal in cost and product experience. The emotional connection enables differentiation amid crowded markets in which product differentiators are lacking and brand recognition is often a primary deciding factor for buyers.

This human connection also encourages authentic brand propagation.

Social media has enabled a new consumer dynamic: while there is a great opportunity to bridge the gap between brands and their customers and empower an army of advocates with social media technologies, there is also the chance that attempts at personal connection can go horribly wrong. Consumers can amplify both their appreciation and disdain via Twitter, Facebook and personal blogs. These tools allow people to instantly let others know what they think of the brands they use, see and experience. And there is no 'cooling off' period--consumers can publish their thrills (or woes!) within moments of a brand interaction. Brands themselves are incorporating social media into their marketing and advertising campaigns, and using various tools to connect with consumers, but some struggle to create this intimacy without losing the scale and reach necessary to compete in the mass market.

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Making your brand "human"

There is no doubt that social media can give brands instant access to consumers, and vice versa. It is important to realize, however, that when employing social media technologies to make your brand more accessible, you risk further distancing yourself from your customers if it is not done right. Here are some best practices for making sure you are connecting authentically:

- Talk to consumers on a peer level; aim to develop a social media personality for your brand that is authentic, relatable and human.
- Establish a two-way dialogue with your consumers through private conversations, discussion boards, etc.
- Be vocal about your brand causes. Define what it means to be an advocate of your brand.
- Making the effort to connect with consumers as individuals (showing that you are paying attention to their unique needs and personalities), you gain authenticity "points" with the consumer.
- Be genuine with your message. Consumers are savvy; they have an internal definition of what your brand "is" and "means", and they expect the brand to remain true to its core identity.

Scaling Intimacy: Bigger is NOT always better

With marketing or advertising campaigns, the natural inclination is to cast the widest net to reach as many consumers as possible- using Facebook fan pages or Twitter accounts to accumulate hundreds of thousands of "fans." Although quantitatively impressive, these initiatives can fall short in meeting the consumer desire for the soda shop feel, and often miss the mark on creating loyalty and advocacy. How can global brands make consumers still feel that they are chatting with Woody and Sam when they interact with their favorite brands?

One way is to find your most loyal and vocal customers and initiate direct conversations with them. By starting small and building real, tangible relationships with your inner circle of fans, they will begin to spread the messages that you want broadcasted beyond this inner circle. Here are some tips that can be applied regardless of brand size:

- Provide a place for your customers to talk about the brand, and let them know you are listening.
- Target your biggest brand advocates and most vocal consumers for smaller-scale initiatives such as private communities, advocacy campaigns and word of mouth initiatives.
- Reward their loyalty and enthusiasm with access to insider information, special brand experiences, and 'credit' toward something they care about. By giving your principal fans exclusive access to the brand, their connection will grow even stronger, and they will feel more inclined to help spread the word about your most important initiatives.
- When possible, segment these loyal consumers into groups according to brand objectives. Engage these smaller groups in an intimate conversation to gain insights and strengthen the brand-consumer bond. Enable them have a real impact on the decisions being made within your company, and show them the fruits of their labor.

This last point is the kicker -- it is one thing to listen to your customers, but there is no better tool for creating intimacy than showing someone you are listening. Bring them into the product development process; solicit input on a new ad campaign; ask your "inner circle" what types of perks they might like as part of a rewards program; then show them how their input is being put to work.

If you get consumers involved in key decision-making processes throughout the company, and then show them that their input impacted that decision, you will be sending a battalion of googly-eyed advocates out into the world, spreading the gospel about your brand awesomeness.