

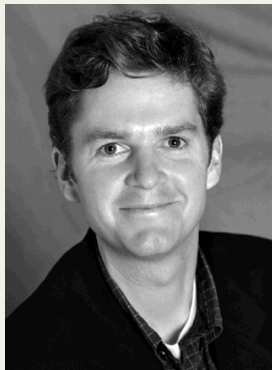
# National HOTEL EXECUTIVE

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## Sales & Marketing

### Achieving Consistency – Delivering On Your Brand Promise Across All Customer Touchpoints



*Mr. Ray George*

*By Ray George, Director, Prophet*

Whether you intend for it to happen or not, each time a customer, stakeholder, or even an employee interacts with your brand, an impression is made. Unfortunately, an inconsistent impression or experience is the death knell for many brands, whether they are newly launched or very well established.

Every interaction you have with your customers represents what we call a brand touchpoint. This article outlines how to create consistency across those touchpoints, by identifying and taking action to modify those touchpoints that aren't delivering on what your brand promises.

This is not rocket science – in fact this relies on the basic tenets of process analysis and reengineering, using the brand as a lens through which to view each interaction. The ultimate goal here is what all brands seek — consistency of experience.

I'll highlight how inconsistencies impact the brand experience using a recent hotel stay I had: Two weeks ago, I called a hotel directly to book a room for a business trip. Once passed along to the reservation representative, I asked for the contractor rate associated with my current client. After a few minutes of investigation, the representative could not find the rate, so I booked a room at the full price. When I arrived at the front desk the evening of my stay, the very friendly front desk person registered me. When I inquired about the contractor rate again, the person immediately found the information, gave me the cheaper rate, and told me about the perks of this association, which included club level access as well as free local calls. The next morning, the bill beneath my door included a list of local call charges. When I inquired at the front desk about these phone charges, the person took my bill, fiddled on the computer, and then printed a new bill. The tone of this exchange made me feel like I was asking for a special favor – the person behind the desk never said a word and acted a bit exasperated.

As for the rest of my brief stay, the quality of the room was great, the location was convenient and the relevant amenities (exercise gym, gift shop, club/concierge level) made my stay more enjoyable. But I was left with this lingering impression of not being a valued customer. And my loyalty to this brand was put in jeopardy. What went wrong? Simple – inconsistency across a few mission-critical touchpoints.

So how do you fix a broken touchpoint? Uncovering the root cause of this inconsistency lies in understanding the processes supporting these touchpoints. Typically, a detailed analysis will reveal a breakdown in procedures, technology or the people charged with demonstrating the brand.

By now I'm sure you're aware of the various stages in a customer relationship, from awareness through to intense loyalty. Customers' experience at touchpoints along each stage of the relationship can either propel them further into the relationship or turn them away. A review of those touchpoints allows a company to dissect an intangible thought process into actionable steps. By then prioritizing those

touchpoints, a company can identify the "moments or truth" that either make or break customer loyalty. Applying process reengineering techniques to these high impact touchpoints will help a company to identify obstacles/impediments to the optimal customer experience, diagnose the root cause of these issues and recommend the process, tools and people changes necessary to align the broken touchpoint.

Let's take another look at my recent hotel stay. As a customer, I viewed this stay as one event that involved a series of different interactions. But for the hotel, there were at least three (if not more) distinct processes in which either the people, procedures or technology interfered with the overall customer experience. The three processes were reservation, check-in and checkout. Here's a framework and examples for thinking about this type of analysis.

### **Step 1: Identify All of the Elements**

The first step is to review the entire situation and define all of the process elements such as inputs, outputs, participants, and tools. For example, the reservation process inputs might include cities, locations, dates, price points, and personal preferences. Outputs would include confirmed reservations, confirmation email/itinerary. Participants would include traveler, phone representative, intermediaries such as front desk/travel agents. Finally, tools could include computer reservation systems, databases and telephones.

### **Step 2: Map the Activities**

The second step involves mapping each activity in the reservation process, including not only what is being done, but which participants/tools are involved. Also critical is including key decisions in the process – for example, in reservations, at what point can a customer change his/her mind? When do they actually make the buying decision?

### **Step 3: Analyze the Process**

The third step is to diagnose these processes for potential problems or issues. Remember, these touchpoints are analyzed because they are high-impact and are inconsistent in the brand experience. Diagnosing problems might involve one or more of the following:

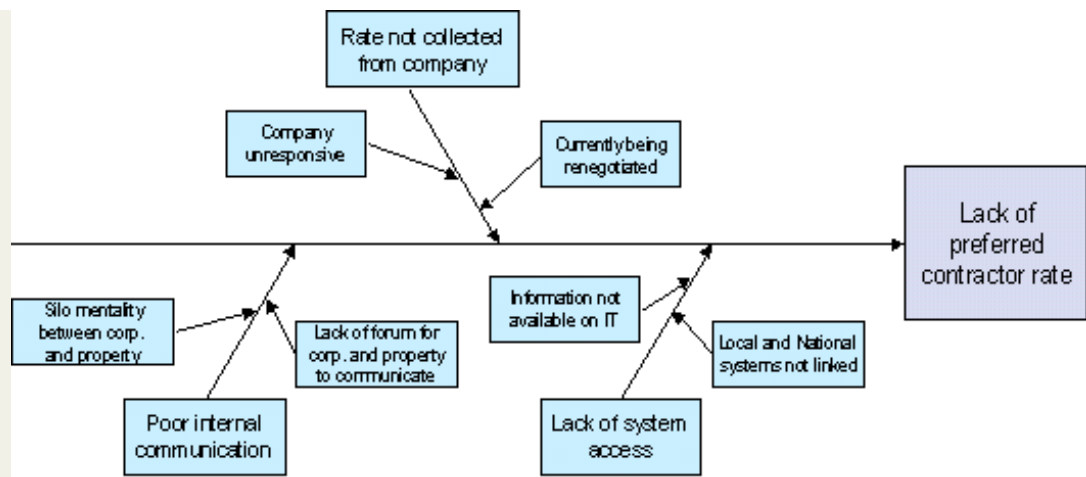
- Bottleneck analysis. If timing is causing a problem, identify where too many activities or too much information is passing through one participant. Processes that take too long, whether they be reservations, check-out, or room service, can have an impact on the quality of the brand experience

- Value-add/Non-value add analysis. Take a look at all of your activities. Is each activity moving the process toward the outcome, or is there duplication of activity along the way? These activities, characterized as "non-value add," can quickly demonstrate where too much time and effort is being dedicated to the wrong actions. In addition, these non-value add activities tend to deteriorate the dedication and morale of hotel staff – employees know busy-work.

- Brand alignment analysis. Review the major activities and outcomes in the process map and compare against your key brand elements. Are they consistent? For example, does your check-out process reflect customer focus, innovation, trusted advice or other potential brand attributes? Large gaps between your current brand attributes and your current processes are a sure sign of an inconsistent brand experience.

### **Step 4: Determine the Root Cause**

The fourth step is to determine the root cause of any problems highlighted in step 3. A root cause analysis seeks to peel away all the layers of "that's the way we always do it" to reach the real problem. This technique can uncover the breakdowns in people, procedures and technology that can hinder consistency of brand touchpoints. A quick example of a root cause diagram (also known as the "fishbone" diagram) is below:



Each problem often has a series of issues that contribute to the problem. Another way to look at this diagram is to continue to ask "why" as you uncover problems until you cannot answer the question anymore. The further you dig into the issues, the more likely you will uncover the root cause that needs to be fixed.

### Step 5: Plan Problem Resolution

The fifth step is to prioritize, plan and resource how to fix the problems uncovered through the process analysis. Often, there are single problems that impact a variety of touchpoints. For example, in my hotel experience, a breakdown in the communication of corporate-negotiated rates and the national reservation center may have occurred that could have solved all the inconsistencies in the process. But without the rigor of this process analysis, this breakdown is merely a hypothesis that lacks justification. Once the underlying problems within each touchpoint are identified, they can be prioritized, planned and resourced.

Problem resolution typically involves fixing people, procedures and/or technology. Procedural or technology fixes are made all the time – hotel executives are experts in this particular area. But influencing people's behavior, particularly in a distributed management environment, is a challenge. As with process analysis, let your brand be your guide. Getting your employees to understand your brand, and their role in helping to deliver on its promise is a crucial element in achieving consistency.

It seems like a lot of work to review processes you already know – but with brand execution and process analysis, the devil is in the details. Without a detailed analysis of the activities, participants and tools that support each touchpoint, it is difficult to identify the root of the problem. After investment has been made into diagnosing and fixing these issues, then measures should be selected in order to ensure that the changes are having the desired impact. That's where metrics come in and it's the topic for my next article – stay tuned.

*Ray George is a Director in the New York office of Prophet, a strategic consulting firm specializing in brand and business strategy. He leads brand strategy development and implementation projects for a variety of clients in different industries, using his expertise to help clients differentiate their brands in crowded competitive categories, develop compelling customer value propositions, and drive growth through brands in their portfolios. Ray can be reached at [rgeorge@prophet.com](mailto:rgeorge@prophet.com)*

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