

Build a Brand Consumers Will Actually Want to Control



Follow the lead of Adidas and others, and get customers to reach out to you on their own terms.

By Scott Davis

The “Customer Rules” bandwagon is getting mighty crowded these days, with everyone singing the same tune as they jump aboard: The customer is king. The customer as agency of the year. You (the customer) as person of the year.

As a longtime brand and marketing strategist who’s been humming a similar refrain for years, it’s been fascinating to see how the concept has mushroomed, particularly with the almost infinite possibilities today’s adventurous new-media environment presents. It’s opened the door to customer control over when, how, and where consumers interact with brands, media, and information, and it’s doing so in ways we never dreamed of even five years ago. Or three.

But put aside the hype to ponder this: Does the customer really want to be your co-pilot? Does the customer want to do the marketer’s work in building the brand? Make your ads? Design your products? Distribute your message?

Maybe not so much.

Here’s one perspective: The most successful marketers listen to what customers want and create personalized and customized brand experiences that pass the authenticity test. They also should ensure the brand will serve as a trusted guide through the increasing

amount of undifferentiated clutter that litters the media environment. Think of it along the lines of Brand as a Network.

It’s all about leveraging the connectivity factor that a brand-powered network implies. It entails identifying and understanding the various touchpoints your brand has with customers and how each affects the business. It requires identifying where and how customers reach in directly to you and finding ways to strengthen that connection. Most important is being cognizant of ways customers directly connect with each other in a way that sidesteps you in order to find ways, in today’s opt-in/opt-out world, of getting invited in.

Marketers will miss out if they continue to heavily rely on traditional mass media. They no longer can count on blanketing the market with a single message if they want to truly connect with customers. For the brand to serve as the guide—or the conduit—in a “Customer Rules” world, marketers need to achieve better balance between the traditional “speaking-at” tactics and the more collaborative new-media ventures.

One brand that has the network concept nailed and has leveraged it effectively is Adidas. Its relationship with customers has not been forged as a result of top-down, outgoing communication, but by being a brand chosen by customers because it lets them be who they

want to be. Customers make Adidas cool by the way they wear the brand. Because those connections were made by the customers themselves, they're stronger than any link that could be forged by traditional advertising. But that hasn't kept Adidas from exploring avenues to strengthen and expand its brand network in ways that are both relevant and authentic.

For example, tapping into the "friending" trend facilitated by such social-networking sites as MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn, Adidas established a MySpace community that turned its brand into a persona, had a viral component, and created the opportunity for consumers to realize their dreams. For each MySpace user who said they intended to buy Adidas products as a result of this initiative, the company spent \$1.87. A report by Marketing Evolution said the campaign directly influenced 1.2 million people—and that those consumers went on to influence another 4.2 million. Way to expand the brand network!

Unfortunately, for each success, there is a better-known disconnect that undermines the integrity of and trust in a brand and weakens the power of the brand's network. Take Microsoft's perceived bid to buy good blog buzz by sending unsolicited, Vista-equipped, high-end laptops to prominent bloggers. Or Sony's fake blog last Christmas to hype its PlayStation Portable—AllIWantForXmasIsAPSP.

For all the hype over customer control, marketers are reluctant to give it up. Small wonder that marketing spend, according to a recent Prophet study, remains heavily weighted toward traditional media. And that new media is underused by marketers because a substantial number of marketers don't get how to use it best to meet business goals.

To harness the power of the brand in a Web 2.0 world, marketers don't need to completely give up control. They do, however, need to learn to better collaborate with their customers, in ways that are best facilitated by techniques and tactics that are outside of their traditional comfort zones.

They need to explore new media in its various forms before their customers leave them totally behind. The way to do so is by taking calculated risks, to experiment through test-and-learn trials that will allow them to connect with targeted audiences. Test-and-learn experimentation will either support expanded or aligned initiatives or they'll show the weaknesses of those initiatives before widespread implementation.

We're well into a new era where the customer is calling the shots. It's up to marketers to jump on that bandwagon without losing sight of the brand's role as the guide for the journey ahead.

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