Uncovering the foundational habits of a customer experience brand

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Abstract

Corporations are very eager to create a brand through their customers' experiences. Much emphasis is currently placed on delighting the customer through experience mapping and journey optimisation. There exist, however, deeper foundational elements and habits that demand attention from employees at all levels of the business. Left to external brand exercises, and ignoring foundational habits, the brands will erode. This paper highlights two foundational habits: first, the ability of anyone in the organisation to uncover, solve and delight the customer by removing pain points; second, the ability for anyone in the organisation to be heard and understood through their own ideas to solve inherent challenges facing the market or the company.

Keywords

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INTRODUCTION

Operationally inclined corporations must be trained, coached and rewarded to enable the systematic identification and removal of customer pain points. Pain points are organ–isationally inflicted challenges placed upon the customer's journey. This habit of any employee seeing a pain point, escalating a solution and then solving the pain point through the enterprise is brand sustaining. The second foundational habit is found in the obvious, yet less operationalised, habit of being heard as an employee. Employees whose ideas are heard, acknowledged and acted upon within the organisational apparatus will represent customers' ideas equally well.

With the advent of the digital economy, social networking and media, brands are now under the fingers and thumbs of the customer's digital device. Corporations have energised their marketing teams to embrace the digital implications around their brand but have sometimes forgotten that what lives inside their corporation is just as important. Business attention

seems focused on engaging customers and encompassing them with an experience, while it is sometimes forgotten that the company's own employees must be enabled to bring the brand to life beyond just being trained and told about it. They, too, must have the experience of the brand. But seldom is this systematised.

SURFACE-LEVEL BRANDING

Companies train their employees to remove pain points. They are told to jump on customer problems and solutions. Companies encourage initiative and thinking 'outside the box', and yet corporations fall prey to slow responses and bad experiences. Examples of brands gone wild could fill a page: Equifax[1] and Yahoo[2] on data breaches and United Airlines[3] with passenger insensitivity. These brands listen and solve within rules and did not listen-design-create-solve for new market expectations. When markets transform, companies can never capture all the experiences they want to offer, and so they must be ready to understand, design and deliver solutions to customers rapidly on demand. Brand managers can propel the brand only so far, and the truth within the organisation can hinder or enable their progress.

FOUNDATIONS FOR THE BRAND ARE MISSING

Beyond and below classic brand measures and structure live habits of the organisation that leaders can avoid or create. Two important habits that hold up the brand apparatus are the following:

1. How corporate employees identify, design and respond with solutions to customer pain points.
2. How employees' ideas are encouraged, measured and responded to internally.

These habits have critical implications for and impact on the truth within a brand. Simply spoken, if someone does not care to seek and solve a customer pain point, then either something is keeping them busy or they do not care enough. If no one wants to hear employees' ideas, encourage them and act on them, then why should employees listen and act for customers?

Foundational to any brand is the operationalisation of listening, caring, solution making and acting. But if this not expressed internally, how can employees be expected to learn?

FOUNDATION HABIT #1: CUSTOMER PAIN POINTS ACROSS THE ENTERPRISE

The United Services Automobile Association (USAA) stands out as one of the leading customer-centric brands in the USA. Known for being a transformational organisation designed to serve those who serve the military, it has long been the benchmark in the USA for a brand that lives through its employees. Retired General Bill Cooney, a retired leader from USAA credited with bringing the can-do customer experience to USAA, says it simply: 'When you see a snake, kill the snake.'[4] This simple and obvious statement is one of the more profound and difficult cultural transformations needed within organisations. Pain points are many times self-inflicted within the corporation and impact the customer. We seldom solve these obvious problems. Instead, we ask the following questions that freeze the organisational apparatus when we encounter a pain point:

1. Where is the budget?
2. How do we prioritise this when the resources are already allocated?

3. What group decides this priority?
4. What will it impact? Let's get a meeting to analyse it.
5. Whose job is it anyway to solve this pain point?
6. Will this refocus our objectives?

Although these questions are legitimate, these concerns highlight a different operational philosophy than 'see snake, kill snake'. This reflects an enterprise-wide, top-down, hierarchical structure for decisions. Also, it reflects that employees faced with customer pain points look upwards to solve the issue and thus use the structure to solve a problem that the habits of the corporation could solve.

Two systems of governance and innovation

Jatin Desai[5] highlights two systems within corporations. He calls them the mechanical engine and the innovation engine. The mechanical engine is what we tend to call the business operational systems. This is focused on the efficiency of the organisation. Here, the organisation seeks optimisation, removal of redundancy and cost management. Seemingly opposite, the innovation engine enjoys redundant thinking and design, experimentation and rapid prototyping. Enlightened organisations understand that both these systems must coexist and in a way intertwine based on need. When we consider the innovation system, however, we tend to apply this system to grand leaps of disruptive innovations rather than pain points. This is an incorrect assumption. Innovative systems can very aptly be applied to operational pain points.

How to create a pain-point culture to enable the brand? Cambia Health Solutions embarked on creating a pain-point solution culture in four steps:

1. Start by identifying ten self-inflicted pain points that result in customer problems.
2. Identify ten leaders from various parts of the organisation to lead their solution.
3. Direct the innovation team, versed in designing and making solutions, not to solve them but to coach leaders to find and make solutions.
4. Highlight these solutions and reward the enterprise for measurable customer impact.

This approach took an entire year. Weekly reviews led by the Innovation Force, Cambia's internal innovation engine, alongside the operating teams measured progress. The theme was to design lasting solutions through these leaders and to measure progress by actual measurements of impact on consumers, not internal measures.

The chief operating officer partnered with the chief innovation officer to ensure consistency. This marriage between the operating strategy and the innovation strategy enabled the weekly transfer of innovation skills to operating teams. This linkage between the operating strategy mindset and the innovation strategy mindset formed the basis for a brand culture within the organisation to enable a customer-facing culture that is deeply engrained in the organisation. Cambia solved nine out of ten pain points set at the beginning of the year. They then moved to bring the habit into operation and grew from there.

Outcomes

The learning derived from the operating officer and the innovation officer, whereby the mechanical system and the innovation system worked to find out how to

operationalise pain points, brought about the understanding that the hierarchy can hold both systems as habits, not as separate organisational silos with competing habits, although, for more intricate long-term disruptive innovation design, separating innovation teams makes for focus. In this case, the blending of both enabled habits of operational efficiencies to balance with innovative thinking and design, leaving leaders able to know when to operationalise and when to move into 'kill snake' mode.

FOUNDATION HABIT #2: ARE IDEAS ENCOURAGED, MEASURED AND RESPONDED TO?

When an employee approaches his or her boss with an idea, does she put down her pen and engage or does she ignore these random interruptions to the operating process? The question may sound like an employee engagement question, but the response establishes a profound behaviour in business. The question determines whether leaders model idea focus or objective focus daily. When employees are unable to discuss their ideas with her, she is modelling what happens when customers try to engage ideas. Her employees will model her ability to stop and engage or otherwise; it also defines a brand foundation to whether she models the customers' ability to penetrate the operational systems, both human and digital, within the organisation. Inherently enlightened organisations have concluded that listening to employees and crowdsourcing ideas from them are good habits to operationalise. Organisations such as Citi, AT & T[6] and Siemens have publicly declared the value of idea management as a source of innovation. The field of technology-based idea management software has spurred idea listening posts to the next level in corporations. Although the outcome seems to be

focused on innovation, truth be told, the real recipient of value is the brand, when it transforms employees from workers to people being heard and responded to. When employees are encouraged to submit their ideas, beyond suggestion-box items, they believe they are respected fully. If they receive no response, however, then they may respond negatively. The best model for a strong brand foundation is to systematise idea collection and response, either electronically or at every department level where leaders are listening and challenging ideas.

If ideas from employees are respected, the diversity of ideas provided can be crowdsourced and either taken further or rejected. Clayton Christensen, father of disruptive innovation, in his book *The Innovator's DNA*,[7] declares: 'the more knowledge, experiences, or ideas you add from wide-ranging fields to your total stock of ideas, the greater the variety of ideas you can construct by combining these basic knowledge building blocks in unique ways'. Employees who participate in innovative action will do the same when they meet customers.

Once again, in the context of the brand, the innovation agenda aligns with the brand agenda; when employees respond to being heard, they deliver this to customers, driving the brand forward. Furthermore, linking the brand strategy with the innovation strategy will paint the hard walls of the hierarchy with the notion that ideas from anyone have merit and can disrupt the status quo. Of course, we can reject ideas all the time, but as the saying goes, 'love me or hate me, but don't ignore me'.

The theory is that the listening systems within the organisation are reflected in the listening systems outside the organisation. It takes brand leaders to drive internal habits that drive the brand. Ignoring this foundational habit internally in hopes

of gaining it outside through employees will not sustain the brand.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper proposes that the brand of a corporation cannot stand without a strong internal foundation of habits that ena‐ble employees who can reflect the brand. Employees will maintain the external brand only if they are employees ready to see, design and remove customer pain points and when their own ideas are heard and acknowledged.

Both pain points and ideas require sys‐tematic and operational enablement. This is powered by creating a sustained synergy between the operational strategy/systems and the innovation strategy/systems. The internal foundations of the brand are habits employees engage in to express themselves.

These habits, enabled through them to customers, can fulfil any brand promise.

References and Notes

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