

SMART MARKETING:*The Big Picture**The lowest-paid employees have the most customer contact. Scared?**by Scott Hornstein***sales&marketing
management**

It may be the big shots in marketing that create your brand character, but it's the worker bees who make it come to life. Inherent to the concept of brand is the promise of a customer's satisfaction. That promise comes down to the interaction with the individual customer.

Said differently, the dedication to each customer's satisfaction must come from the top, and it must be understood by every employee as a strategic product. Else, events will turn around and bite you in the butt, because it's usually the lowest-paid employees who have the most contact with your customers—and thus have the greatest ability to affect customer satisfaction.

Happy customers tend to stay longer and buy more. Unhappy customers don't. Here are two illustrations from everyday life (and your customers live in everyday life).

Illustration 1: My younger daughter (whom I love) came up to my home office and said: "Dad, I can't get onto AOL."

With my best patient, fatherly demeanor I replied to my daughter: "I'm working right now, go figure it out."

"No," she said. "They kicked me off. They said I'm a spammer."

What an industrious child, I thought and went downstairs to look at the screen. Sure enough, AOL had black-listed her. Why? Because she sent a joke (which I sent to her) to several friends.

So I called AOL to explain the situation and was confronted by a rep who gave my story zero credence. May I speak to your supervisor, please?

The supervisor was willing to allow that my daughter (not AOL) had made an innocent mistake, but informed me that I was in violation of my contract with AOL. May I please speak with your supervisor?

This went on until I finally said: "OK, I give up. Let's just cancel everything. Life is too short—there are lots of ISPs out there." Which brought me immediately to a very compassionate voice offering me three months free if only I would reconsider. Nope. As they say, Elvis has left the building.

Illustration 2: I recently bought a car for my family. Everything went great until delivery. After the deal was closed, the salesman took a sheet of paper out of his pocket and put it in front of me. It was a customer service questionnaire and in yellow highlighter he had run a fat line through all the top scores. He then told me that I would be receiving this form and it was very important that I gave him all superlatives—not only because it affects his commission, but, and he now bends down behind his desk and brings up what we used to call a hernia book, because he also earns points based on his scores, and he can redeem the points for stuff. His son is in college and just got his first apartment. He needs a sofa (I was shown a picture of the sofa), and my salesman was just a few points away. My response would put him over the top.

While brand might be created in a boardroom, it is road-tested every day in every way on these mean streets. How are you communicating your brand's inherent promise of satisfaction to the rank and file?

How are you empowering them to make your promise come true? How are you measuring and rewarding their behavior, or noncompliance—because things in a corporation that are not measured or rewarded do not happen.

But I do know one thing—good news travels fast, but bad news travels faster. ■

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