



Enhancing the Customer Experience with Brand-Aligned Service

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by John Goodman

Vice-President

Customer Care Measurement & Consulting LLC

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Customer service can have a much greater impact on brand image than traditional communications, especially with the advent of social media. One study I led in the financial services industry revealed that superior service transactions yield 20 times the impact of advertising campaigns and corporate sponsorships. Quality service is a vital part of developing a positive brand image. **Service is now the best word of mouth management tool most Chief Marketing Officers have available to them.**

In researching how organizations align their service offerings with their brand image, we interviewed executives at 10 organizations with strong brands and incorporated input from the published and proprietary work of another 20 organizations with strong brands. The study results identified the building blocks necessary to align service offerings to reinforce brand loyalty.

Brand-Aligned Service's Impact on Customer Relations

Brand-aligned service is achieved when an organization strategically aligns business processes, operations, people practices, and internal and external communications with the brand promise to drive business results. When service is not aligned with the brand image, it dilutes the brand's message and leads to unmet customer expectations, customer dissatisfaction, and decreased loyalty.

Increasing the alignment of the customer relations function with the brand will increase the value of the customer relations function to the organization because more emphasis will be placed on reinforcing the brand attributes while also increasing customers' loyalty and willingness to recommend the brand. In addition, studies show that employees like working for an organization with a strong brand image and enjoy contributing to that brand awareness, so employee satisfaction and retention will increase. For those with fully developed customer relations functions, shifting the focus to brand-aligned service will take the function to the next level.

Building Blocks for Brand-Aligned Service

There are nine common building blocks that contribute to successful brand-aligned service:

1. Clear brand promise;
2. Clear accountability for the brand;
3. Focused values that are operationalized;
4. Measurement and feedback;
5. Formal process;
6. Ongoing communication to everyone;
7. Emotional connection with customer;
8. Employees who deliver the brand;
9. Customized brand for market segments.

1. Company Heritage that Illustrates Brand Promise

Organizations with a fully developed brand-aligned service have a clear brand promise and value their history's role in building that brand. For instance, HSBC is the "World's Local Bank" and "You're in good hands with Allstate". At FedEx, "when it positively has to get there", sets a simple expectation for both customers and employees.

Further, fully aligned companies incorporate the heritage story into company training, even daily management. Consider Disney, which has a particularly strong and proud heritage. During orientation, all new Disney employees must attend a "Traditions" class, which teaches the founding principles that are part of the company's current vision and mission. Stories are shared that illustrate how employees have acted to fulfill the brand promise and key values. The U.S. Postal Service also has a strong heritage and profiles on its Web site those employees who have exceeded their job requirements and embody the organization's values of trust and dependability.

2. Clear Accountability to the Brand

Organizations demonstrate accountability for brand-aligned service in four ways:

- **Formalized structure**

A department or cross-departmental team ensures that the organization delivers the brand's message in all communications and champions the brand in all operational service design meetings. UPS' Brand Management Team is tasked with defining the brand strategy, conducting brand training, and working with other groups to ensure consistency in the service experience. That, in turn, reinforces the brand's message.

- **Leadership**

Top management communicates that brand alignment is a priority; it references brand attributes continually and oversees how initiatives deliver on the brand promise. At one leading Internet company, the CEO often refers to key brand attributes in communications and during planning sessions. At UPS,

the CEO talks about the company brand in every meeting. Top management also leads by example. At Disney, all managers must spend at least one day a month working with the public.

- **Peer accountability**
Employees hold each other accountable for “living the brand.” Disney staff is encouraged to gently counsel coworkers who forget to wear their name badges or reflect Disney’s values. Starbucks strives to accomplish the same thing through peer recognition. The company’s Green Apron program encourages staff to recognize the acts of co-workers who exemplify Starbucks’ core principles. The program awards honorees a card that makes them eligible for other public recognition.
- **Employee empowerment**
Employees are authorized and encouraged to actively and creatively help deliver the brand message. The Disney staff is provided “Make the Experience Magical” cards that they can give to guests. The cards can be redeemed for specific items (e.g., a new box of popcorn or a balloon) or privileges (e.g., skip to the front of the line) at the employees’ discretion. The cards are tracked so managers can praise the employees for taking the initiative to give a guest a card.

3. Focused Values

Brand-aligned organizations have a few catchphrases that epitomize the company’s credo and provide a framework for putting the brand into practice. Employees latch onto the phrases and create service experiences around their meaning. Decision-making in the organization is driven by these values.

Disney’s values are “safety, show, courtesy, and efficiency.” All service planning and delivery is measured against those core values in an explicit manner. Starbucks focuses on five principles: be welcoming, genuine, knowledgeable, considerate, and involved. Levi’s emphasizes the following brand values in service planning: be real, confident, social, inclusive, and innovative. While each organization’s catchphrase varies, all embody the core values of the organization and form an effective foundation for delivering on the brand promise.

4. Measurement and Feedback

Brand-aligned organizations use measurements and feedback to ensure their service delivery tracks with their brand image. Customer satisfaction measurement, quality measurement, voice of the customer systems, and continual feedback on employees provide insight into performance. A major auto finance company surveyed major customer groups and held focus groups to discover what brand characteristics and customer experience tactics would have the most appeal to current and prospective customers.

Ultimately, the company found that it could differentiate its offering from the commodity-like offering of its competitors by focusing on making the car turn-in experience personal, easy, and worry free.

In addition, measurements are tied to incentives in a meaningful way. Bank of America uses daily phone surveys, as well as branch and channel mystery shopping that is tracked back to the individual associate. Incentives are determined at the market executive (city) level and roll up to upper management, with each executive having five service targets, with a clear line of sight to the chairman's level. At Marriott, customer satisfaction surveys are conducted on a continuous basis, and results are shared with employees. Every hotel manager is accountable for the hotel's results, and department heads within the hotel are accountable for their area's performance (i.e., food service, cleanliness, etc.). In the case of both Bank of America and Marriott, the employees' goals are to improve the customer experience and better align service with the brand.

Top companies, such as Chick-Fil-A and USAA are NOT satisfied with being the leader in their industry. Their leadership continues to look for ways to further increase satisfaction and loyalty by identifying and addressing customers' key points of pain. In the words of one senior executive, " Each point of dissatisfaction is tens of millions of dollars and we shouldn't be satisfied simply because we are in the 90s on satisfaction and loyalty".

5. Formal Process

Brand-aligned organizations have a formally defined process for developing new services and integrating new corporate acquisitions to ensure brand consistency as early as possible. Organizations also use these processes to ensure consistency across the organization without creating robotic responses. The following examples illustrate how process is used to achieve brand consistency across the organization:

- Starbucks strives to create the same warm, welcoming, neighborhood atmosphere in all of its stores. The staff is empowered with flexible solution spaces to deal with most contingencies. For instance, I was recently at O'hare between planes and asked for a cup of regular coffee. Without missing a beat, the barista said, "I'm sorry but I was just brewing a new batch so you'll have to wait about two minutes **but of course it will then be free**. Would you be willing to wait?" You can guess my answer and my reaction. Delight for 20 cents worth of coffee.
- Bank of America uses playbooks that describe in detail the ideal processes for every major transaction, with accompanying process measures for new product introductions, mergers, and transitions of branches and systems to the brand. The bank uses the playbook to define each aspect of each transaction during training. The aim is to align the answer for a particular situation, regardless of the channel used, across all products.

- Allstate defines key moments in the customer experience, along with the emotional and operational aspects of each. For instance, when a claims adjuster assesses a damaged car, he or she is trained first to empathize with the customer and then to explain what is going to be done. The idea is to “fix the customer” before starting to fix the car.

6. Ongoing Communication to Everyone

Brand-aligned organizations provide frequent brand-consistent internal communication from the CEO to the lowest levels in the organization and across all divisions. These communications are typically steeped in storytelling as a way to demonstrate and reinforce brand principles. They take three main forms:

- **Training, briefings, and meetings**

The organizations we interviewed emphasized both initial training and ongoing training/ meetings. For example, most of the organizations have monthly, weekly, or even daily briefings. While these meetings may take on a local flavor and provide site-specific information, there is also an emphasis on consistency across the organization in terms of the issues that are covered and the stories or features that are used to reinforce the brand.

At Marriott, this concept takes the form of Daily Basics sessions created by the corporate office and delivered as part of the daily briefing at every property location. Each session focuses on one of the Marriott service principles. The principles are covered in five modules, with each module providing a service snapshot that teaches empathy and is designed to put the associate in the guests’ shoes. Similarly, a leading Internet company circulates stories illustrating how its service makes a difference in customers’ lives. Southwest Airlines has established a Culture Committee at every location that is responsible for maintaining the Southwest culture. It plans Spirit Parties and other occasions that reinforce the Southwest brand image of fun.

- **Periodic newsletters**

Every organization with which we spoke publishes weekly or monthly employee newsletters, which ties employee actions to the organization’s core brand characteristics. A leading Internet company, which has a brand associated with fun and community, runs a column in its employee newsletter that provides specific examples of how people have fun and are connected to others through its service.

- **Universal access to consistent information**

The key to providing consistent service is ensuring that employees have access to consistent information. Disney provides cast members with access to Web sites with up-to-date information, phone hotlines with the latest on character appearances, and a fold-up guide with answers to the 100 most frequently asked questions. Levi's has developed a robust online training tool and reference for its customer relations area that provides fast access to valuable information to help agents respond to customer inquiries. The online reference is updated nightly.

7. Emotional Connection with the Customer

Brand-aligned organizations seek to create relationships with customers. Our research on customer commitment found that experiences that creating "community and social interaction" contribute significantly to customer commitment to the organization. Organizations create the emotional bond in numerous ways:

- Starbucks strives to create a personalized ("everyone knows your name") feeling so that the local Starbucks store becomes "My Starbucks." Employees are encouraged to get to know their customers by name, remember their favorite coffee drink, and interact with them on a personal level (e.g., learn about their families and daily lives).
- In many stores, Chick-fil-A creates an emotional connection with customers by displaying a collage of photos of frequent customers. They more recently have hired older, grandmotherly employees to cruise the dining room pouring tea, getting a few more fries or fawning over a toddler. These employees have a job description of "creating microbursts of emotional connection".
- Harley-Davidson dealers often use customer photos taken at the time of purchase to help service writers remember the customer by name when he or she comes in for a service appointment.

8. Employees Who Deliver the Brand

Brand-aligned organizations that employ people who fit the brand image understand that if they can hire individuals with the right psychological attributes, they can teach them the necessary skills. Levi's Customer Relations Department has a hiring profile that targets confident, outgoing, and "real" individuals who fit the company's core brand values. Southwest Airlines specifically looks for employees who are animated, warm, and fun. Whole Foods Markets recruits new employees from the customers that frequent the coffee bar and other departments, to ensure its staff has a passion for natural foods. The theory is that people who enjoy the atmosphere at the front of the store are more likely to enjoy working there.

9. Customized Brand for Market Segments

Brand-aligned organizations plan on a global basis, but maintain the flexibility to meet regional or market segment needs. Bank of America varies its service specifications based on customer expectations in different areas (e.g., urban vs. suburban markets), as well as geographic differences (e.g., New York City vs. Southern markets).

Brand-Aligning the Customer Relations Function

Follow four steps to increase the brand alignment of your customer relations function:

1. **Identify the brand characteristics that you want to reinforce.** Talk to your marketing department and assess how your department is positioned and structured. Are there corporate brand characteristics, or are you a company of individual brands? Are your customer relations representatives handling contacts from one brand or multiple brands?
2. **Assess your current level of brand alignment.** Develop a baseline measure of customer perceptions of brand alignment by conducting an internal review using the grading chart below and an external survey of customers who contact your department. Consider recruiting your internal clients in marketing for help with this exercise.

Building Blocks for Brand-Aligned Service	Grade (A-F)	Reason for Grade/ Opportunities for Improvement
Clear brand promise		
Clear accountability across all levels and functions		
Focused values that underpin the brand		
Measurement and feedback across all products and functions		
Formal process to ensure consistency without losing personal creativity		
Ongoing communication to everyone		
Emotional connection with customer		
Employees who deliver the brand		
Customized brand for market segments		

3. **Identify opportunities for improvement.** Identify where you can be most successful and have the most impact in increasing brand alignment. You may not be able to impact corporate accountability for the brand, but you can make an impact on department accountability and encourage peers to have pride in the brand and accountability. Look for ways to tap into established corporate communication that can translate to the department level. Involve both your internal clients in marketing and your staff in developing realistic action plans to increase brand alignment.

4. **Measure the impact.** After you have implemented your changes, measure the impact on external customers' loyalty and their willingness to recommend the brand, as well as the impact on internal clients' perception of brand alignment.

Summary

A strong brand image is an important element of customer loyalty, and customer relations can have a strong impact on brand image. By intentionally aligning customer relations service with the corporate brand characteristics, the customer relations function can increase its value to the organization; contribute to increased customer loyalty and willingness to recommend the brand and increase employee satisfaction and retention.

There are nine building blocks of brand-aligned service. To increase brand alignment, customer relations functions should (1) identify the key brand characteristics, (2) assess the current alignment of the function with the brand, (3) identify opportunities for improvement, and (4) measure the impact of actions taken.

John Goodman is Co-founder and Vice Chairman of Customer Care Measurement and Consulting. His

latest book is *Strategic Customer Service*, published by AMACOM and available on Amazon. His next

book, *Customer Experience 3.0*, will be published by AMACOM in March 2014..

John Goodman is Vice Chairman of CCMC and can be reached at <mailto:jgoodman@customercaremc.com> or 703-823-9540. His latest books is *Strategic Customer Service* and *Customer Experience 3.0* are published by AMACOM and are available on Amazon.com



Customer Care Measurement & Consulting LLC

2121 Eisenhower Avenue, Ste. 501,
Alexandria, VA 22314

Phone **703.823.9530**

Fax **703.823.9538**

info@customercaremc.com

www.customercaremc.com