

Realising the Potential of Unlocking Emotions; Branding Your Organisation's Customer Service

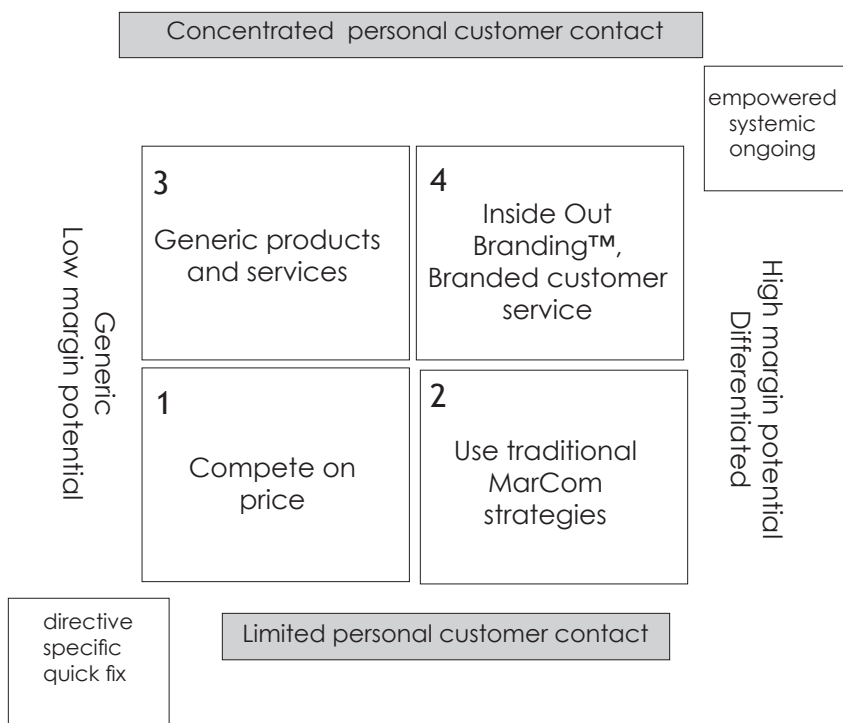
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Everywhere you look these days, you see mention of "brands" and "branding." People today even talk about branding themselves! It is a concept that has been around for a long time in the field of marketing and is rapidly evolving into an organisational development concept.

Branding traditionally has referred to product name recognition, perceived value, and reputation. The concept used to exclusively refer to well-known product names, such as Colgate or company names, such as General Motors, brands widely recognized by their logos, colors, styling, and shapes.

When branding applies primarily to products or names, marketing departments typically have exclusive control over the brand image. They may work with public relations and ad agencies, but the brand champions reside in the marketing department.

The Branded Customer Service Branding Model



The Competitive Branding Model explains why so many service branding projects fail. Quadrants 1 and 2 are organisations whose products require limited customer contact, such as Coca Cola. To differentiate its brand, Coca Cola has effectively used traditional marketing and communication strategies.

Quadrants 3 and 4 describe organisations whose products and services have highly concentrated personal customer contact.

Organisations with a lot of customer-staff contact wishing to create a differentiated brand with the high margin potentials afforded in Quadrant 4 must pay attention to how their brand is delivered by staff — Branded Customer Service.

Branding today's customer service organisations is different from traditional product branding by means of logo or name recognition. When a service organisation becomes successful at branding, its name stands for a uniquely identified type of service reflected through its culture. Nordstrom has come to mean avid sales staff doing just about anything to satisfy customers. Ritz Carlton has come to mean liberally empowered, rigorously trained staff who know how to deliver fast, pleasant, reliable, and refined service.

When service is branded, it encompasses not only the experience the customer has when interacting with the organisation, but also all the processes and actions, both internal and external, in which any person, staff or customer interacts with the organisation. When successful, everyone experiences the identified branded service style whenever dealing with the organisation.

In these organisations, there is a heavy emphasis placed on both customer service approaches and managerial style and talent. Such an organisation starts from the premise that the brand is displayed and delivered by staff who are influenced and inspired by their managers and supervisors. And they all work within a structured system that hopefully helps both managers and staff deliver a specific style of service.

Branding in a service organisation needs to take place throughout the entire organisation, because branding occurs with every contact consumers have with an organisation. At TMI, we call this Inside Out Branding™.

Brands are considered an asset of organisations, though one can argue that brands are actually owned by the consuming public. A brand is the emotional connection (influenced by images, word-of-mouth, and past experiences) the public has with your brand. In other words, your organisation's brand ultimately resides in consumers' minds.

Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Computers, was recently asked about the design aesthetic that has come to distinguish Apple computers from most other computers. In his response, Jobs stated,

The iMac is not just the colour or translucence or the shape of the shell. The essence of the iMac is to be the finest possible consumer computer in which each element plays together.



We don't have good language to talk about this kind of thing. In most people's vocabularies, design means veneer. It's interior decorating. It's the fabric of the curtains and the sofa. But to me, nothing could be further from the meaning of design.

Design is the fundamental soul of a man-made creation that ends up expressing itself in successive outer layers of the product or service. (*Fortune*, January 24, 2000)

Jobs' eloquent description of design has application to the process of branding in service organisations. As Bill Oden, with TMI US, is fond of saying, "Service branding in organisations is not about a way of doing certain things — it's about a certain way of doing everything."

Service organisations do many things to "design" themselves — "a certain way of doing everything." From organisational charts to policies and procedures to training programs, service organisations intentionally or unintentionally work at making their staff act, look, sound, and even feel a certain way. Unfortunately, these efforts if not carefully and constantly nurtured, can wind up as Steve Jobs described, merely veneers or coatings that gradually wear off staff and the decisions they make.

If a service organisation were cloth, we would talk about needing to dip it into a vat of dye so every fiber of the cloth is impregnated with the brand colour. By encouraging consideration of every way service is delivered, a service organisation can see and appreciate the links between the "successive outer layers." This would lead not only to staff better understanding when service does not match the brand standard, but it would also provide a context for managers through which to filter their own behaviours towards staff.

A service organisation's bottom line is reflected in customer, distributor, and staff loyalty. Many management experts today refer to customer and staff loyalty as brand equity. Brand equity can erode as a result of at least two things: failing to continue to communicate and promote the branded physical product, and failing to consistently deliver the professed brand service experience.

This is why many branding efforts fail. Wishing to achieve the potentially higher profit margins, many organisations with concentrated customer contact have exclusively used traditional marketing strategies, as if they were an organisation that offers its products with limited personal customer contact.