



Focus: Customer

by Lior Arussy

A Question Of Execution

In my recent trips around the world I am coming across different slogans produced by ad agencies all claiming total commitment to the customers. "Taking you more personally" declares Qatar Airways. "Emotionally yours" is the promise of the Indian Airlines, Sahara. These slogans are no different than many others produced by brilliant (at least by their own description) advertising agencies who are trying to dress their clients with more customer centric messages. When encountering such slogans I have a little exercise I like to play. I approach employees of these companies either in their retail outlets or through the call centers and ask them what this slogan means to them.

When encountered with my question, the employees are usually confused and embarrassed. They go through a mental dance of trying to explain what they think it means. Their attempts only reinforce that this slogan was not internalized by them. They do not live it. They in fact hardly understand it. It is not that I developed some masochistic inclinations that make me enjoy embarrassing people. I just want to examine the heart of the issue. Are the people at the front lines committed to the message?

Like purchased advertising space, these employees were plastered with the latest slogan and commitment without much expectations. They are expected to smile and spit it out upon request. But if your employees do not understand the latest slogans, let alone believe and live them, then you failed the first credibility test.

The question at hand is not a selling question. It is an execution question. I have no doubt that all these companies who go out there and declare the ultimate commitment and long lasting love to customers actually hope to deliver it. The embarrassment and confusion demonstrated by their employees usually reflect lack of understanding and failure to Operationalize those great intentions.

Taking the customer more personally or being emotionally committed to customers requires more than just a slogan. It requires a way of making it happen. The organization must learn how to execute on such a promise before they present it publicly. If differentiating from the competition on the premise of greater customer intimacy is your competitive edge, then you ought to know how you are going to deliver it.

The easiest and most traveled road is that of companies rushing to their ad agencies and requesting a new makeover in the name of customer centricity or customer experience. In fact what they need to do is walk on the road less traveled and approach their operation people first. The question should be what can we do or change to become a more customer loving organization. What processes should be changed?

What impact should we have on the way we produce and deliver our products and services? What else can we do to delight customers? It is only after all these questions are answered satisfactorily, that we can approach the communication challenge.

Operation and execution are at the core of the challenge of becoming customer centric. There is no point in raising customer expectations through over-promising communication if there is no organization to back up those promises. For years the advertising and marketing industry pushed its clients to over-promising in the form of outrageous slogans and statements. Behind those promises was a house of cards that could be blown over by the slightest ill wind. Employees who failed to understand the new promises and become more confused by the promise de jour. The operation and execution of those clients remained unchanged as well. The only change in the core relationship with the customers was that customers heightened their expectations. Those heightened expectations were quickly transformed into bigger disappointments.

I am fully aware of the old cliché argument of advertising executives that they are not to be blamed for their clients' inability to deliver on the promises. "The client must hold his part of the bargain and be accountable", they will argue. There is some truth to it. This argument is very similar to the truth a drug dealer claims when he argues that his clients, the addicts, are fully aware and responsible for all their actions. In reality both clients are addicted to quick fixes and avoidance of the real world and the need to face the tough actions required to survive and thrive. This addiction to quick fixes is the reason why the number of companies who actually succeed in forming sustainable relationships with customers are far and few in between.

It is time to face the execution and operation challenge first. Making unfounded promises, even if they are in the form of wishful thinking, will not deliver the goods and is plain deception. Worse, false promises will only delay the real actions required to build the desperately required competitive advantage to combat price erosions and commoditization. Delivering amazing and profitable customer experiences starts with operation not marketing.

Margaret Thatcher, the famous British prime minister, said once that there are certain things in life that if you need to claim you are, you are probably not. Just like being a lady. If you need to claim you are, you probably are not. I would juxtapose this argument to our case, if you need to claim you are fully committed to customers, you probably are not. If you were fully committed, it would show naturally without the need for communication support. The word will travel by itself.

Lior Arussy is the President of Strativity Group and the author of several books. His latest book is *Passionate & Profitable: Why Customers Strategies Fail and 10 Steps to Do Them Right!* (John Wiley & Sons, 2005). To learn more about customer strategies, sign up for Lior's newsletter at www.StrativityGroup.com/knowledge.