

► Personalise your customers' experience to differentiate your company from bigger brands



Recently, we have seen more and more of these global monoliths stripping down their costly brand assets to a bare minimum in order to try and compete on a more personal level, and to be seen as more approachable. What these brands need to realise is that customers engage with their brand for a number of different reasons. It could be quality, desirability, reliability, service, kudos or value that drives a customer to a brand. Whatever the reason, can large organisations gain loyalty today by adding personality to what might have been a faceless conglomerate yesterday?

To fight off competition and remain at the top of the tree, large organisations often spend vast amounts of money building their brands into national and global household names. In order to succeed, lesser known organisations who can't compete with these goliaths have to differentiate themselves by ensuring their brand engages with the customer in a more personal, relevant and creative way.

Put the customer at the centre of your business

I find myself spending long hours on the road travelling from meeting to meeting. As a result of this, I also find myself frequenting a number of motorway service stations and utilising their soulless franchised coffee outlets to ensure I remain awake for the duration of my journey.

Like most marketing professionals, I tend to automatically place a subjective eye over promotions, advertisements and propositions in these establishments. 'Convenience and location' often overrides 'value and quality' in the majority. I also consciously absorb how different industries engage with their customers through the service they provide – always looking to learn new ways in which we can enhance the customer experience our organisation provides.

The coffee shop industry is one that has moved at a dramatic pace in recent years with the leading brands going head to head with each other to gain market share. We have seen customer insight and trends being used through loyalty schemes to identify drive-thru, sit down and fast food style coffee shops as well as the introduction of 'babychinos' and the like to entice new target audiences into the coffee shop experience.



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These coffee brands may have done a fantastic job in identifying ways to improve the customer experience through making their product more relevant and convenient, and by putting customer needs at the core of their business strategy, but can they add the personalised touch to their brand in a similar systematic way?



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Don't ask my name

If I go into my local greasy spoon 'caff' I know the owner on first name terms and he knows what my drink preference is. I will also know some of the other customers and we will share a conversation just as I would down the local pub. It is because of these factors that I am a repeat customer who goes back to this establishment time and time again as a loyal advocate – even though the coffee shop down the road does a slightly smoother coffee in more luxurious surroundings. As my small local 'caff' and their 'milky coffee' cannot compete against a growing number of franchised coffee chains and their numerous 'latte' variations, it is essential that they focus on what does make them unique. Their main differentiator, and why I

continue to return, is the personal 'genuine' welcome you receive when you walk through the door and this is where the smaller, more nimble business can succeed over their dominant neighbours.

As they look to add a more personal touch to their business and be more like my local 'caff', the big coffee brands, (who no longer seem content with the insight they have gained to successfully differentiate themselves), are now asking for your name when you order a coffee so they can write this on a polystyrene cup. This allows the staff behind the counter to communicate with you on first name terms like they are your best friend. This is where personalisation can have a negative impact on a brand if not implemented correctly. As well as feeling contrived and awkward, it presumes that I want to have a personal interaction with them like I do with 'Bill' in my local 'caff'. This couldn't be much further from the truth, to the point where I have now started to give false names in opposition to this process, or more damaging for the shareholders of the brand, I turn to use their main competitor next door.

Some big coffee shop brands may have started off as a local, independent, personalised business at some point, and did have something unique, which is why they became successful. This success was built on their personality and values, but as they grew having spent millions raising their brand awareness, this has in many instances, diluted the personality that made them successful. What we see now is companies using contrived marketing techniques to bring back that personality through customer engagement that is more often than not leaving the customer feeling uncomfortable and confused about what the brand now reflects. The irony is that leading companies

in their industries often invest heavily in building their brands, whilst losing their personality along the way, to then have to spend more to retrieve back that personality. So whatever your industry, big is not necessarily always the best. Whereas smaller organisations can compete by using their personal customer relationship of understanding individual needs as their main differentiator to add value and loyalty.



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