

Beware: Phone Branding In Progress

The Phone Brands Invisibly, Immediately, Intimately & Permanently

It was a surprisingly steamy day in Sydney and I had scheduled too many meetings out of the office. Everyone ran late and I was exhausted and growing grumpier as the day progressed. Returning to my cool and quiet office, I fumbled at the door searching for my keys when the phone began ringing. I hurried to unlock the door and nearly tripped, as I dived for the phone.

It was Anthony J. -- a telemarketer!

But I know how to handle unsolicited calls - Just say no! Before I could however, Anthony said the magic words. Remember when you were a kid, the magic words? Well in unsolicited telemarketing there's a magic sentence (or some version of it) you're supposed to say: "Is this a good time to talk?" (Unfortunately, many organisations think its better not to ask permission because they're more concerned with getting sales than with being courteous. So they just talk fast hoping the person they're calling can't get a word in edgewise.)

Anyway, he painted a compelling picture of the great work the Make-A-Wish-Foundation would accomplish with my little donation. I was irresistibly drawn in by his personal commitment. He encouraged me to ask questions, never talked over me, gave me his full name, the name of his manager and a contact number, if I had questions later, wanted to make an additional donation or confirm the legitimacy of the call. Terrific!

Then, I asked if he'd answer some questions outside the purpose of the call. I wanted to know if he was calling from the Foundation itself. Surprisingly, he was with an outsource service bureau. Lest anyone think this a commercial for any particular outsourcer, I don't intend to mention their name (if you're curious, send me an e-mail).

How They Brand

But that's not the end of the story. I got to thinking of what a wonderful example this was for our industry. Some days later I couldn't resist calling the managing director of the service bureau to ask him his secret.

He was as enthusiastic and motivated for the Make-A-Wish Foundation as Anthony and was thrilled to share his ideas about how he led his staff. He believed three things helped them distinguish and brand themselves among other service bureaus. Perhaps the same three things, working in harmony, could make a positive difference for the industry's initiatives (outsourced or in-house).

- They take time necessary to select fantastic, caring people and thoroughly train them in practical and particular skills
- They immersed and engaged staff at every level in the business reality of the mission and vision
- They create and have staff trained to deliver a well-rehearsed and natural-sounding, *fully-scripted* presentation. (NOTE: The original objective of direct marketing is to measure business results against costs to prove breakeven -- which cannot be done when telemarketers "wing it"!)

Did this call leave me with an impression of a brand? Yes, a good one. In fact, this call was probably one of the top three great unsolicited calls I've received in the last 10 years. Did their branding effort work? Yes, the Foundation got a donation and I now know of a special outsource service bureau (not in Sydney) that delivers the quality promise we all seek (no matter which end of the phone we're on).

Origin of Branding

Branding came from the idea of marking every animal in a herd or flock with a unique mark or brand. These were either cut or burned directly into the animal's body. They were permanent, everyone could see the brand and easily and instantly recognise to whom they belonged. And unless you were a rustler, you ensured your brand was unique and difficult to actually copy.

When we use this term today, although the ways we brand have multiplied, the basic principle of having a recognizable "mark" that separates one organisation from all others is what we mean.

Bad Image of Telephone Marketing

Other than magazine articles and news items, when I look around for the brand of telemarketing, I look to TV and TV advertising to try to identify the brand.

One of my favourite illustrations of the brand was on the TV program, Ally McBeale. One evening, upon receiving an unsolicited telesales call, as only Ally could do, she reached inside the mouthpiece of the phone, dragged the telemarketer out by their hair -- bulging eyes, headset and all, to tell them she wanted their home number so she could call them back when it was most inconvenient for them!

Or the "lock-em-in" commercial by a mobile phone service provider that opens with a class of new telemarketing recruits being given an "inspiring" pep talk about how to get more sales?

Two guys with rolled-up shirt sleeves and loosened ties, still wearing headsets, pace before the class and roll-play a fast-talking, disrespectful-of-the-customer way to manage calls. It's meant to encourage new recruits to take advantage of customers, get more sales and lock them into long service contracts. Most of all, it perpetuates the idea that telemarketing people are hungry, stupid and heartless!

Protectors of the Image

The Australian Direct Marketing Association's, Call Centre Council has been working for more than the 15 years I've lived in Australia, to clarify and protect the brand image of phone-based marketing. More recently they've been joined by the Australian Teleservices Association and Customer Contact Management Association to build the positive side of the brand -- but it's not easy to manage this invisible and inestimably powerful media.

They are faced with many challenges because, in an effort to reap great benefits from what is mistakenly believed by many to be an inexpensive media, some contact centres are running their centres unprofessionally.

Some centres are inadequately budgeted and led by people who haven't a clue how extremely different managing a non face-to-face operation is from other types of operations. They choose or are forced to hire people who are poorly suited for phone work (but are

desperate for money); they limit training to “need-to-know” only and staff are inadequately motivated, supported, nourished and compensated.

Others would rather invest in expensive and expediently-designed telephony and technology equipment (intended more for cost cutting than customer satisfying). Still others cut costs by outsourcing or even offshoring their phone-based businesses, never imagining the negative effects of cultural disparity and how “off loading” this critical part of their business requires more (not less) focus, effort and budget than if they simply determined to do it right themselves.

Then unfortunately there are the few “bad apples”, who take advantage of the anonymity of the phone to set up fly-by-night operations. We regularly hear about phone scams that grab huge sums of money from unsuspecting, trusting customers by unethical marketers who find the temptation to abuse this incredibly intimate branding tool, irresistible.

The result of these poor business practices is negative branding of our entire industry, plus a raft of media “exposes” on the dark side of telemarketing, State-based privacy legislation, do not call registries and TV ads that poke fun at our good efforts. If phone marketing was a company it would have little, if any, brand equity today.

A Couple of Excellent Phone Brands

When I think of an excellent phone brand, the first organisation that comes to mind is AAMI. And although I’m not happy they’ve changed the lady with the headset and warm smile in their TV ads (thinking I wouldn’t notice), they always remind me how responsive and friendly a phone channel should be. Then, I think of AGL -- before they automated. They had the best people on the phones! I also think of the new ads Westpac is airing about “Ask once.”

But my favourite right now is a series of ads promoting Colonial First State that remind the viewer of how difficult it is nowadays to deal with a big organisation by phone -- they infer they’ll do better (Since I’m a customer, I’ll be watching.).

My favourite of their series shows a woman heading back to her desk to return a call from a Mr. Albert Davies (a name you can’t forget if you see the ad). She dials and is answered by what sounds like an automated voice.

"Hello, you've reached the home of the Davies family. To speak to me, say Albert Davies."

With a look of unbelief on her face, she carefully pronounces the name. But her accent doesn't perfectly satisfy the "automated" system. After four attempts to please the automated voice system and get through to the real Mr. Davies, we hear the voice over: "You wouldn't do this to us. We won't do this to you."

Let's Be Practical – Dialers & Outsourcing

At the end of the day, what are we thinking? Adding the phone to business was supposed to add an efficient, cost-effective personal touch, from which we could earn the trust of the customer and build stronger, more profitable relationships not train customers to become "self-loading freight". Yet today, the push is more to building technological barriers that prevent intimacy; then when the technology fails to deliver, blame the technology

For instance, the issue for or against using predictive dialers in business: this INERT piece of equipment was initially invented to eliminate errors by the person dialing phone numbers all day. Then, recognising how few dialed calls actually reach someone on the first attempt (and before everyone had answering machines), it was used to increase the effectiveness of outgoing calls. But the dialer is not responsible for abusing the customer, anymore than a handgun can be held responsible for shooting someone.

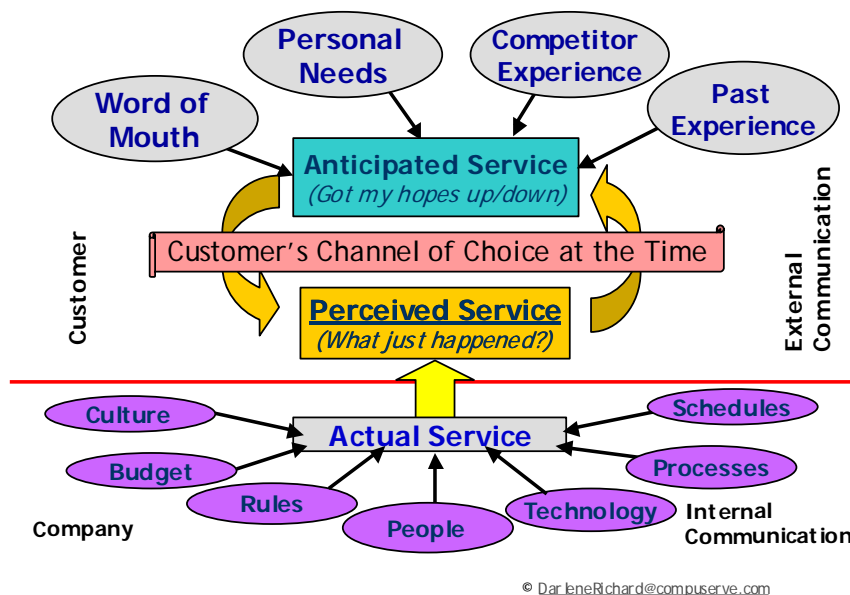
Just because a dialer can be set to dial numbers faster and faster doesn't mean that's appropriate. It reminds me of one of the old "I Love Lucy" segments where Lucy and her friend Ethel get jobs at a candy-packing factory. As they begin to feel self-satisfied with how quickly they're wrapping the candy pieces, the machine delivering the candy on a conveyor belt begins to speed up. It doesn't take long before disaster ensues with candy pieces flying everywhere!

Another misconception of today is to abandon the responsibility of growing our business to someone else (sort of like hiring a business "matchmaker") - with the motive of reducing the number of staff we support and cutting the costs of our operations to build profit.

Don't get me wrong, there are some great outsourcing businesses out there that have a critical part to play in our business. Yet, if we don't speak directly with our customers, how can we ever expect to establish those illusive "relationships" we're always waxing

eloquently about? And for that matter, how do we ever expect to break even with these expensive operational units? Statistics (that I've personally substantiated in many contact centres) prove that 26% to 40% of all calls can result in a relationship-building sale of some type (up-sell, cross sell or resell) if handled properly. But you have to speak with the person first!

Everything Brands – Customer Expectations



Because everything brands -- everything must be considered in the message everyone in the organisation offers, because the messages all blend together in the customer's mind to create one unique brand, including all of the above illustration plus:

- the personality, attentiveness and voice qualities of our non face-to-face staff
- the appearance of our brochures, mailings, web site, TV and print ads, even our staff
- the look of our "store front" and ATMs
- our values and reputation in meeting them

Does the Phone Brand?

Does the phone brand? Of course! Today, the phone is the critical component in managing the brand experience and building relationships with customers -- *because* we've minimised face-to-face opportunities. The key indicator of a brand's success at demonstrating that a company takes the customer's best interests

seriously is how consistently they minimise the stress and hassle of interacting with that company.

It doesn't matter if you handle calls in-house, outsource to a local service bureau or offshore to a foreign country; or if you're doing customer service, technical help-desk support, order taking or sales, inbound or outbound -- the phone brands.

The phone brands through technology you support your staff with. Customer and knowledge databases have to be current and quick. (Ever hear someone during a call say something about their computer running slowly?)

Telephony, such as automatic call distributors and predictive dialers, brands. This equipment must be carefully selected, applied, adjusted, managed correctly and monitored to ensure customers and staff are well catered for.

Automated voice systems, whether voice activated or key pad driven, brand. If you fail to check the quality of recordings, steps in the message-trails, on-hold messages, capabilities and limitations of vocabulary, you may be sadly surprised when complaints begin to bubble up to senior executives. (How many times have you called an organisation to be greeted by a wonky recording or music on-hold that's too loud, soft or silent?)

Conclusion

We'd be foolish not to recognise the financial impact of the phone in the "experiential" and "real-time marketing" world in which we do business today. Any time, anywhere and in any way our brand touches a customer or prospective customer, we risk our business' brand.

Other than face-to-face, the telephone is the single most powerful voice of the brand. And because it's so invisible, intimate, immediate and permanent, it's also the area that can potentially make or break the customer's hard-earned trust in us.

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