

GET by Kyle Lacy Social



Brand Your Shopping Experience to Your Customers - and to their Friends

WE ALL HAVE A BRAND: I have a brand, you have a brand, the competitor down the street has a brand. The definition of “brand” changes daily, but the central truth is that it is built off experiences.

Your brand is the perception or emotion of your garden center maintained by someone other than yourself. It is defined by your customer’s experience. She shapes the identity of your company, and now, especially with social media, she can easily share her opinion with other consumers.

The marketing concept, “If you treat the customer right, they’ll eventually come back,” has not changed over the years, but the world has so dramatically changed during the past decade that we’ve started losing sight of this important part of business. Early on, retailers were determined to create the best shopping experience possible - because they were the only gig in town, and all of their customers were their friends.

Then, with the industrial revolution, when the transportation industry became more advanced, competition was heightened and marketing was born. When it first started, marketing was steeped in the idea that the more people interacting with your brand, the better. Ad men said, “We want a billboard on the freeway because 350,000 cars pass it every day. That’s major brand awareness.” And, for a while, it worked - TV, radio, direct mail and massive billboards built businesses across nation.

Now, the Internet and social media are shifting the opinions of customers in real-time. We have the ability to influence a decision within a split-second of communication. This valuable real-time customer is searching for an experience, not a coupon.

Social Feedback Is a Primary Influencer

We all live through experiences. You’ve had multiple experiences today, interacting with brands, people and objects. You’ve



taken away positive experiences, like the smile of the grocery checker, and negative ones, like the rude bank teller. Whether positive or negative, your experience draws a perception, and that perception tells a story. The multitude of your experiences draw and shape your opinion about everything, from soda and cereal to the box store down the street.

There is always opinion about your garden center (no matter what it is based on) and someone to voice them, online or offline. We can't control those opinions, and as marketers and business owners, we shouldn't want to. We must learn from customers' opinions in order to shape their future experiences.

While we work to influence customers' opinions, shaping and molding them, more importantly, we should encourage others to do the same.

Don't develop a social media or digital marketing strategy based on your ability to influence someone, but rather, on who the end consumer trusts - her friends. We trust people like ourselves.

The customers who truly matter are the ones searching for experiences, not brands. You're not looking for price shoppers, you're looking for advocates.

Here is an example:

When I was in Chicago last August for the IGC Show, I was looking for a great steak dinner. Google Maps helped initially, listing restaurants within walking distance, but didn't present the "experience." It didn't explain the advantages of eating at one place over another. Although I could have used a number of applications to find reviews (including Google Maps), I decided to ask my Twitter and Facebook friends. The post was retweeted and shared, and I got advice from my friends and their friends. A multitude of answers were delivered to me within minutes, and every point of contact led to the ultimate decision of where to spend my money.

Guess who I didn't hear from? Restaurants.

My ultimate dining decision was not based on Google reviews or a price comparison. It wasn't based on an advertisement I read on the train or a top 10 list in the local newspaper. It was

simply based on the opinions, perceptions and emotions of the individuals in my social sphere, my network.

I was given a taste of the total experience of my social sphere. I was searching for an experience, not a

brand. I was searching for opinions, not marketing.

Build a Network of Brand Ambassadors

Build a network of influencers who

are brand ambassadors for your garden center. These are customers who know your product, passion and purpose better than anyone else. They are the customers who will work to spread the news about your business. They love what you do, and they pay you for it. These local gardeners are better salespeople than any employee. They are the voice of your brand.

You may already know which customers are a perfect fit to be your brand ambassadors. If not, start here:

1. Check your garden center's customer database - Built on transactional data, your customer database will drive your brand ambassador program. Which customers are purchasing from you the most? What did they buy?

2. Are there overlapping names? Are there customers in your database who share and extol the many virtues of your brand using Facebook and Twitter? Do they interact with you on a weekly, even daily, basis?

3. Interact with major influencers - Communicate with your top customers, transactional and social. Offer a rewards program to those who help spread the message. Send them a message on Facebook or Twitter to encourage them to tell your story.

A brand ambassador or storytelling strategy allows you to interact and share content that is individualized in nature. It allows Barry, the great home gardener, to tell his gardener friends about his experience with your business.

People and opinions are important to successfully market your garden center. Fight for the customer in your store - and the loyalty of all their friends. ■