

CREATING A MESSAGE THAT CONNECTS WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS

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Why is it that there are widely varying degrees of success between different companies' ability to sell products despite having very similar offerings? That is, why for example does Company A consistently outsell Company B, even though they have virtually the same products to offer customers? The answer is in the message. Business history is full of companies that have had great products, in many cases better products than their competitors, yet weren't successful because of their inability to create an emotional connection between their product and their customers. No matter how great your product is, no matter how well engineered and designed, if it doesn't "connect" with your customers it will not be successful.

What do we mean by "connect"? Purchasing behavior is largely an emotional experience. Strong brands (e.g., Nike, Disney, Starbucks, Nordstrom, Apple) have been consciously created using the most compelling emotions related to their products'/services' core attributes. How do you make a potential customer "want" your product or service? How do you explain the utility of your product or service so that customers relate to it and personalize it, and ultimately become emotionally connected to it?

The first step is to have an internal brainstorming session with key executives and communications people in the organization, and ideally guided by an objective third party expert in this type of idea-generating moderation. In this brainstorming session, a list of all the possible purchase attributes is discussed and analyzed. Purchase attributes are those factors or features that potential buyers would consider in making their decision of whether to purchase the product or service. Examples of purchase factors would be reliability, aesthetics, particular product functions, and after-sales service. This initial set of purchase factors is then pared to a manageable list of 15-20. This list is then taken to experts in the industry, and with small groups of current and potential customers, and tested with them. From this initial testing the list is further pared down to 10-12 for subsequent quantitative testing, in a survey with the target audiences. The survey will identify the top 2 to three factors that people most strongly consider when purchasing a product or service in the category.

Once these top purchase factors are identified quantitatively, focus groups are conducted in order to go deeper into the emotions behind the attributes and to identify the pieces needed to craft the brand message. Using a Brand Laddering technique, you start with each of the top purchase attributes identified in the survey and progress to the highest aspirational aspects related to each attribute. For instance, the basic product attribute, or characteristic, of "reliability" could be strongly tied to the personal benefit of "less hassle," or "one less thing to deal with," which in turn may lead respondent to "can focus on the important issues of our company," and then to "can begin to think about new ideas, rather than worrying about how I'm going to fix this broken product." Finally, you get to the aspirational point – what will really "sell" the product, that is, "the message" – which might be "I feel like a valuable person in our company," or simply "I feel good about myself." (See Brand Ladder diagram below) In the analysis phase, a decision tree structure is created that visually maps the core user associations.



With these emotions and aspirations determined, you now have the pieces with which to build a message that makes customers want your product. At this point it is a matter of putting these pieces together to clearly communicate the core value message of your products or services in a compelling and motivating fashion to your customers. How is this done? Through further, final testing using imagery and word analysis that determines the best presentation for your message. In this testing, which can be done either in an online survey with visuals, or one-on-one interviews, or ideally with a combination of the two, we determine what images and words, and in what combination, will most effectively elicit the key emotions uncovered in the earlier research (e.g., “Can focus on the important issues of the company,” or “I feel like a valuable person in the company because I use this product”), and thus create the strongest customer-product connection.

At the end of this process you have determined exactly which words and images are going to work best in delivering the value message of your products. Simply talking about your products’ or services’ features and benefits isn’t enough; a company must frame them in an emotional package which creates desire in its customers. This is the key to brand success.

Contact us for more information about the Brand Laddering process:

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