

The Brand Promise

Identifying the Single
Most Important
Measurable in
Building Value

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Motek promises to make their customers “Heroes.” Advanced Circuits guarantees the “Quick Turnaround” of custom printed circuit boards. Rackspace promises to deliver “Fanatical Support.” FedEx is promising “peace of mind.” Southwest Airlines has been delivering “low fares” from the very beginning. McDonalds has gone back to “speed.”

What is the promise you’re making to your customers that both really matters to them and makes you different from your competitors? Would it be obvious if I went to your website or looked at your marketing materials? This Brand Promise decision is at the heart of an effective strategy to differentiate your firm from the competition. And your devotion to delivering on the promise must be maniacal and complete or the promise becomes an empty slogan.

Key Decision

Think back to when Federal Express burst on the scene in the early eighties. What was it that made Fred Smith’s new company such a sensation? The answer: It got packages where they were going by 10:30am the next day, no ifs, ands, or buts. That was Federal Express’s come-on to a world that previously knew only the Post Office. It was FedEx’s measurable brand promise.

Their 10:30 a.m. deadline was much more than a marketing slogan. It was the key decision that drove all others. To make the promised arrival time, FedEx knew it needed to get its planes out of Memphis by 2 a.m. To get the planes in the air on time, FedEx needs me to get my package to the station at Dulles Airport by 10 p.m. Backing up even further on the time line, the FedEx box nearest my home has a 5:15 p.m. pickup time to allow those orange-and-purple trucks to complete a route and get to the airport. From the first business plan Smith wrote and up until quite recently, the company’s strategies and tactics existed simply to deliver on this one measurable brand promise. (Nowadays, Smith’s delivering on a somewhat different brand promise, but more on that later.)

Determining a brand promise is a fateful moment in the life of any company. Choose the right one – the one your customers respond to, the one you can track and execute day after day – and you win. It’s truly that simple. Choose the wrong one, and you’ll probably flounder for years, never quite hitting your goals. So, how do you choose the right brand promise for your organization?

Making Heroes

Ask yourself, what is your customers' greatest need? Not their wants – they'll "want, want, want" you to bankruptcy if you let them! What you're looking for is what really matters to the customer that also demonstrably differentiates you from the competition.

Take Motek, a supplier of software systems that run large distribution centers. What the heads of these distribution centers personally need are promotions out of these corporate equivalents to Siberia – its hard to get visibility when you're miles from where the real corporate action is at headquarters. This is why Ann Price, CEO of Motek, has nailed their "hero" promise. Take a minute and go to www.motek.com and click on the Heroes button in the upper left hand corner of the website. Then click on Mr. January, Rocco Palumbo. Price literally measures her company's success by the number of promotions her customers receive and she advertises this fact, hiring magazine-quality cover photographers to create the pictures you see on her website!

And while you're at it, go to www.4pcb.com, www.weldaloy.com, www.rackspace.com, and www.EagleU.com and study how these firms highlight, communicate, demonstrate and execute on their brand promises. Some of them are not the most elegant sites you'll see, but they communicate a clear message.

Everything Changes

Now, if you're an observant consumer, you probably know that Federal Express isn't touting delivery at 10:30 a.m. as a brand promise anymore. Why? Because things change, and that includes brand promises.

In many ways, Federal Express lost its brand promise due to its own success. Today, there are many shippers making overnight delivery claims, even the U.S. Postal Service. Delivery by 10:30 a.m. is now merely table stakes, meaning you have to deliver on this promise to just be in the game.

FedEx's latest brand promise, "peace of mind" raises the stakes. The measurable deliverable is the customer's ability to know where his or her package is at all times. FedEx figured this out several years ago, and quietly spent a billion dollars a year making sure that customers big and small had the necessary terminals installed to handle this new tracking capability. They handed out disks containing the necessary software like so many AOL freebies. Now the brand promise is being sold via the marketing slogan, "Relax, It's FedEx."

Please note that Federal Express hasn't stopped guaranteeing delivery at 10:30 am.; they've just upped the ante. They deliver early AND their tracking gives you peace of mind. In a couple of years, it'll probably be early delivery AND tracking AND...well, something else, as the previous brand promises become mere table stakes. Just like Federal Express's, your once-revolutionary brand promise will someday become table stakes, and probably sooner rather than later. Start working now on the next value-added improvement. If you don't, somebody else will beat you to it.

Two Key Articles

There are two “must read” articles to help drive a brand promise. The first is Jim Collins’ (famous author of “Good to Great”) HBR article “Turning Goals into Results: The Power of Catalytic Mechanisms” – you can download the article at www.jimcollins.com (click on Library then Articles). The second article is one I wrote entitled “The X Factor.” Go to www.fortune.com and search on my last name Harnish – you’ll see it in the list – I promise!