

Experiences MATTER



By Stan
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In previous issues of L&GR, I've commented that the key to creating a relationship with your customer that leads to repeat purchases over the long haul — the Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) philosophy — is providing the customer with positive experiences, not just selling them product at a price.

Some pundits state that we need to be focused on experiential selling, rather than transactional selling. We all know what transactional selling is, but exactly what is experiential selling?

One point of confusion is that the word “experience” is both a noun (a thing and sense of being) and a verb (to find out), as in “you can experience the experiences.” And the terms “experiences” and “experiential” are both definitive and “squishy” at the same time, meaning that we can identify specific traits, characteristics or activities that are part of the experience, but it's difficult to directly measure whether which or any one of the elements encompassed within an experience is successful.

We also need to understand that a positive or negative experience can only be judged through our customers' eyes, the overall perception and impression of everything that transpired during their visit to your store.

You can only provide the opportunities for the consumer, while it is the consumer who determines the personal value of the experience.

So we don't have direct control of the customer's experience, but we do have control over what the customer sees, feels and the way she is treated. Here are just a few of the opportunities, the components, traits and activities that, in aggregate, could make up the customer's total impression and experience. (Note that Distinctive Gardens, the 2018 winner of the Merchandiser of the Year recognition highlighted in the November 2018 issue of L&GR, considered and incorporated many of these in their winning strategy!)

1. **Educate them:** what nugget of new information did they learn during their visit? This could be a new product or category, a new “how to” or a fix to a problem they're having.
2. **Energize them:** we know that plants and flowers are more than just pretty, and can truly improve one's quality of life. How can you get your customer excited about all the benefits plants and flowers provide?
3. **Engage them:** by nature, plants and flowers are hands-on products, definitely not one dimensional. How can you motivate the customer to physically touch and feel our products, or provide some activity that gets them physically involved while in the store?
4. **Entertain them:** let's face it, most retail stores are blah and just plain boring! How can you use music and sounds, color and signs, and displays to break out from being ordinary to something that's enjoyable, entertaining and memorable?
5. **Connect with them:** every touchpoint you have with the customer is another opportunity to reinforce your brand to them, to tell your story. Be authentic and be consistent, whether it's your print marketing and social media messages, the interaction between the customer and your sales team and cashiers, and your displays, merchandising and physical building.
6. **Have fun:** if you've ever shopped Trader Joe's, the first thing you notice is that the associates are really having fun doing what they do. And their upbeat spirit is contagious; just listen to the banter between them and their customers and you'll see that it's genuine fun, not something forced. And more families are shopping together these days; what can you do to have some fun for and with the kids? Think painting small containers and planting seeds, memorable fun activities.
7. **Expect the unexpected:** Costco is the master of the treasure hunt, timely, seasonally appropriate items or categories that aren't part of their core assortments that are featured on endcaps, or in bulk merchandising areas, often with demonstrators to promote that product. These products aren't advertised and are only in the store for a short period of time, creating a sense of urgency so the customer has to come back frequently to search

for the treasure (or miss out on the opportunity). There's value in being a bit unpredictable!

8. **Enthrall them:** in general, the customer expectations for in-store shopping are pretty low. Those retailers who are able to exceed and blow away these expectations are few and far between, but are very memorable. The expectation for great product is a given; it's the opportunities for the customer to create great experiences that put you over the top.
9. **Show them excellence:** most customers have no idea what a good experience should look or feel like...until they see one themselves. Set the bar high (and your competitors will have problems trying to keep up).
10. **Provide solutions:** retailers sell product, but their customers are coming into the store to buy a solution to a need or a problem. Learn to listen to what your customer really needs, what issues they have, and then use your expertise to identify their solution.
11. **Relate and respect them (and their time):** Target and Nordstrom don't have customers, they have “guests,” and it's not just lip service. This designation helps the store teams look a little more personally at their guests, showing a bit more empathy, courtesy and respect; you serve your guests and don't take them for granted.
12. **Inspire them:** help them dream big! Show them how to be successful with our products on a scale greater than what they thought possible. Every customer's value system is different, as are their individual needs and motivators; this is why you need to create multiple opportunities for each customer to engage with and be exposed to individually. The magic of positive experiences is when you touch the customer on multiple levels with the multiple opportunities you've offered, and create such a positive outcome (product and “experiences”) for them that they are anxious to come back again.

Experiences really do matter and truly make the difference... 🌱

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