

# Creating a 'Wow' Experience for Your Customers

Setting achievable brand expectations — and exceeding them — will delight and surprise your customers.



By Stan Pohmer

Recently I was driving with my 5-year-old grandson down to a Minnesota state park, where they have free-roaming bison you can sometimes see from an unprotected road running through the park. He'd been talking about this park for weeks and was super-excited to get up close and personal with the animals and focused on getting there as quickly as possible.

Halfway there, he screams from the backseat, "Papa! Stop the car!" I jam on the brakes and veer into a driveway off the rural highway, my heart in my throat thinking something was seriously wrong. I turn to ask what the problem is, and he points to a huge (I found out later it was 30,000-square-foot huge) yellow barn with Spiderman and other superhero figures climbing on the roof, with billboards of whimsical signs announcing that this was the home of Minnesota's Largest Candy Store, located in Jordan, Minnesota.

Once my heart rate dropped from 190, we decided to go in and see what it was all about.

Now, understand that the exterior of the building was impressive with its distinctive yellow color, signage and a side of the barn decorated with what is claimed to be the largest jigsaw puzzle in the world, but walking inside, I was blown away. Two rows of double-sided tables and wall units running the length of the barn on concrete floors filled with over 3,000 varieties of candy plus locally made pies and pastries, many different flavors of popcorn and cotton candy, local favorites of soda from around the U.S., and a display and inventory of every jigsaw puzzle made by the top six puzzle makers in the world! It was overwhelming to see, definitely earning a "wow" factor. But, as the barker on the late-night TV infomercials says, "Wait, there's more!"

They created three domes within the barn, each one with a different theme (Harry Potter, Superheroes, and Whimsical with unicorns and Disney types), each rimmed with themed statues and painted ceilings like a basilica. And below each dome was a 15- to 20-foot statue for photo ops with the kids. And if that wasn't enough, they had a seven-piece animatronic singing band that played different rock hits every five minutes throughout the day, along with a manned fortune teller booth. And in the front of the barn by the cashiers, there were what appeared to be two porta-potty doors marked girls and boys; behind the doors were super-clean traditional restrooms. By the way, this seasonal (mid-May to November) operation only accepts cash and checks; they have 10 ATM machines scattered throughout the store.

## Back to Basics

What made this immersive experience a major "wow" was the fact that they had all the basic fundamentals covered as well. There were lots of well-trained staff in store-logo polos, each assigned and responsible to certain areas of the store, making sure the displays remained stocked throughout the day and chatting up the customers. Attendants were assigned to the restrooms. One team member constantly roamed the aisles with a broom and dustpan to maintain the pristine floor.

The breadth and depth of the assortments, logically displayed and well signed, were mind-boggling. Multiple checkouts, each staffed with a two-person team, packed all purchases in boxes, not bags, to make it easier for the customer to pack in their cars. It seemed like everything was designed with the customer in mind, and then executed flawlessly.

## Customer First

Two examples exemplified this. First, it was a given that customers (me included) put an item in their carts only to find something else they liked better as they walked the almost endless aisles; the store anticipated this, so they

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had well-signed carts at the end of the runs requesting that customers place the unwanted items there, rather than just putting the items randomly back onto the displays.

And, knowing that many customers would want to taste the sodas they just purchased, immediately outside the exit door was a 4 by 8-foot wall display with at least 50 ornate bottle openers for the customers to use, as many of the “craft” sodas weren’t pop tops or screw offs. These are little things, yes, but they added to the experience and demonstrated the reality that the store anticipated customer needs.

### Lessons to Take Home

I think it’s safe to say that I was blown away, the proverbial “kid in a candy store,” on this visit, and I was definitely wowed. But here are some takeaways that you might want to consider.

1. It’s critical to get the fundamentals right and meet your brand promise before focusing on delivering the “wow” and inspirational factors. Many of the “wow” things are really basics that every retailer should be getting right, but many retailers are falling short, so those who execute well get extra customer credit for their accomplishments.
2. From a customer’s perspective, it’s better for their experience to be consistently good — not sometimes excellent and sometimes poor. Without consistent execution, you’ll never be able to deliver on the customer’s expectations of you.

3. Whatever your brand proposition is, the essence of that value proposition and delivering on it are the No. 1 thing that defines greatness and “wow” for consumers. Your brand sets the customer expectations and the benchmark the customer measures their experience with you by.
4. “Wow” = surprise and delight. To many customers, this simply means a hassle-free shopping experience — the absence of any friction.
5. A key contributor to “wow” is human interaction with an engaged, well-trained, knowledgeable, available and professional staff. This includes your entire staff — from sales associates to cashiers to your customer service and back-office team — anyone the customer can interact with during their entire journey with you.

Other retailers have set the bar low for customer perception of what a great experience is, providing almost unlimited opportunity for you to show them what you can deliver. Setting achievable brand expectations and not only meeting but exceeding them will delight and surprise your customers. That sets the foundation to create the “wow” experience to truly set you apart from your competition... 🌊

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