

# The Art of Engagement

Let's see... while I have one daughter who isn't yet engaged, I do have a son and a daughter who were both engaged and are now married, so I guess that makes me somewhat of an expert on engagements.

Over the past few weeks, I've spent a lot of time in stores of all sorts — national home improvement stores, locally owned garden



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centers, specialty stores like the Apple store, department stores, florist shops, supermarkets and warehouse clubs. Not surprisingly, the customer service and my experiences varied dramatically from store to store, and not necessarily in a predictable way!

In some venues where I expected high service and a great experience, I was sorely disappointed, yet in stores where my expectations were lower, I was blown away by the outstanding service and overall shopping experience.

Now I'm a fairly analytical person, and it disturbs me somewhat when my reality and my expectations aren't aligned correctly, so I took some time to think things through so I could understand, or at least rationalize, why this incongruence occurred.

Let me share some of my observations of my store visits:

## The Apple Store

I went to the Apple store to decide whether I wanted to purchase the new iPad and I came away with an experience that exceeded my high expectations (and with a new iPad). I felt that the store staff genuinely wanted to help me make the right decision based on my needs, which they took the time to learn. They demonstrated the features of the iPad that would benefit me.

The merchandise was displayed so I could play with it and compare the different models, and there was always a sales associate nearby to answer questions. There was so much cool stuff to play with, too!

Low prices were never Apple's forte, but they've conditioned us to expect that in return for leading-edge technology.

## JCPenney

JCPenney is going through a total

transformation, moving from a high/low pricing strategy to everyday-low (EDL) pricing. They're in the process of reformatting the store layout to accommodate multiple brand shops—a store within a store concept. And, they've completely revamped their entire marketing approach and strategy.

In order to pay for the lower margins resulting from the shift to EDL pricing, they've eliminated most of the department sales associates, have gone to centralized cash wraps, and dropped the commission sales incentives in specialty departments like fine jewelry and men's suits.

When I had a question, it took 10 minutes to hunt down an associate and then got surly responses. Even as the student of retail that I am, I'm still confused about the big picture goal and how all these changes will come together, and I guess I'm not alone — JCP just announced their Q1 2012 comp store sales were down 18.9 percent.

## Costco

Costco's merchandise and merchandising strategy fulfills their emphasis on price value, with their ever-changing treasure hunt, an "expect the unexpected" philosophy thrown in to keep you coming back frequently. One doesn't expect to find a lot of staff on the sales floor, but I always seem to find someone quickly if I ever have a question.

And when the checkout lines were backed up last weekend, they had people at every lane pre-scanning and boxing up my purchases to keep the lines moving quickly. And everyone at the front end chatted me up and was extremely

friendly despite the pressure to move me through as fast as possible.

## The Local Garden Center

I'm not averse to paying more for superior quality and exceptional service, but there's major disconnect when I don't get either, which happened during my shopping trip to a locally owned garden center.

Admittedly, the garden center was really busy, but the product was in dire need of water and the sales person I talked with, probably a seasonal hire, frankly had an "I don't care" attitude.

Needless to say, I didn't spend any money at this store and will think twice about going back there again.

## Home Depot

Conversely, on that same day, I shopped a Home Depot that was a pay-by-scan store. The prices were considerably lower than the locally owned garden center I had just left, the product was fresh coming off the truck, the displays were full and crisp, and the associate I spoke with, a member of the growers merchandising team, was knowledgeable, enthusiastic and very helpful.

## The Takeaway

Distilling down my observations from all of these different retailers, two key things stood out. First, no matter if you're high-end or low-end, retail is still a people-to-people business and the whole concept of relationship selling is becoming increasingly more important.

Secondly, it's critical that the retailer execute flawlessly and consistently whatever their stated

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value proposition is. If you want to position yourself as high quality/high service, then everything you do, everything you communicate in your marketing, everything you talk about in social media, the content of your Internet presence, and all of your staff need to be in total sync.

Webster's dictionary defines the word *engage* as "to attract and hold by interest; to connect or interlock with, to mesh." All of the above are concrete illustrations that support the importance of engaging your customers and employees.

Engaging your employees means getting them to understand and get them to buy in and be supportive of your corporate culture/DNA and goals, to understand their importance in making the consumer successful, to make the buying process as painless and pleasurable as possible for your customer. It means giving them the training and the tools to do their jobs and meet your expectations. It means giving them clear guidelines on what's expected of them. It means making them feel appreciated as a team and as individuals. It means finding ways to energize and incent them to excel, recognizing their achievements and finding "teachable moments" to help them grow.

Please remember that though business strategies might look great on paper, it takes people to execute them; if your people believe in them and are motivated, you're well on your way to success!

Effectively engaging your customers will result in moving them from transactional purchasing to experiential buying and building long-term trust and relationships. This starts with a sound business plan that supports and is 100 percent in sync with your company values and culture.

Then make sure that your customer fully understands who you are and what your position in the marketplace is. Make sure everything you do and say supports who you are and manage customer expectations. And be consistent with this over time.

An engagement is a promise... to yourself and someone else, be they your employees or your customers. Breaking an engagement is never fun, can be butt ugly, and in a business environment, can have long-term negative effects on your company,

your sales and your profits.

I got engaged and made a promise to my wife more than 35 years ago. Over the years some things changed, challenges were faced, and new adventures started. But the spirit of that original engagement remains shining and one can't ask

for much more than that... **LGR**

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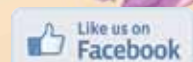
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