

# A Learning Curve (Continued)

By Stan Pohmer

I'm a student of retail and retail trends. I've always studied consumer behaviors and changes and attempted to predict how and when they will affect the way we do business, what consumers needs and expectations are and will be and how we should position or re-position our industry's offerings to adapt to all of these

changes. I spend a great deal of time analyzing retailers from all over the globe, reading white papers and research studies, and talking to leaders in other industries to better understand the "bigger world." Then I apply what I learn to our more finite world, so that I can better anticipate and respond

to those things we need to do to maintain competitiveness in the retail arena and relevance to our consumer.

One of the more thought provoking papers I've read recently was published by Ziba, a design and innovation consultancy located in Portland, Ore. Ziba is a pretty large, yet dynamic organization representing 42 fields of multi-faceted expertise and a multi-cultural perspective that serves many Fortune 200 companies. They took a team of their leading designers, researchers and creative minds and, over three weeks, identified what they saw as the 12 trends that will rule products in 2013. I'm going to list all 12, and 'The Lesson' is how I see the applicability of them to our businesses:

1. The mind is a competitive environment.

The way consumers make choices or decisions about what they buy or where they shop is not a completely rational process. Rather than drawing logical conclusions based on clear needs and preferences that drive choices (the way we'd like to think our consumers are behaving), the consumer is constantly battling with conflicting ideas and beliefs and pitting them against each other.

**The Lesson:** Be okay with chaos. Embrace this inner conflict and acknowledge the complexity. Though your value proposition must be consistent and the core of your consumer messaging, serve it up in different ways to appeal to the different ways consumers think and act.

2. Customer-facing employees are your brain

and your backbone.

The crucial element in any customer experience is still people, no matter how much technology has transformed the landscape. Your success is the culmination not only of the strategies and initiatives you, as a leader, put in place, but of the multitude of small decisions your frontline employees make on a daily basis.

**The Lesson:** Listening to the collective wisdom of your team is more important than ever. Taking full advantage of the ground level expertise means fostering better communication with them, and putting the needed resources in the hands of those who face your customers. Though we need to better employ technology to communicate with our customers, we also need to focus on using it to help our employees do more, more intelligently.

3. Analog will never go away.

As important as digital is and will be as an integral element of our overall consumer communication process, it will not displace the more traditional communications tools and programs we've successfully used in the past.

**The Lesson:** A brand (your store image) that seamlessly communicates your message and value proposition across all methodologies makes the most sense to your consumer.

4. Worth is determined by philosophy, not price.

How do you determine a product's intrinsic worth? Increasingly, it's the idea behind the product and the philosophy of the brand that created or is marketing it. If two competitors carry the same product, it's the retailer whose ideals resonate with the consumer that is preferred and more valuable.

**The Lesson:** Your values are a competitive advantage. Knowing what you stand for and conveying this is no longer an intellectual exercise, it's an absolute necessity!

5. Narrative is a delivery vehicle to make information stick.

Narrative is how we understand the world and make decisions. We use stories as a framework for organizing the messages we receive, and narrative is how we remember things.

**The Lesson:** Start thinking and communicating in stories. Consumers aren't just purchasing the products we sell, but the stories about all of the benefits our products provide and how they enhance their quality of life!

6. Repair and Repurpose are the new killer apps.

Though the new apps, software introductions and hardware are the sexy things that get all the

media attention, it's finding ways to upgrade and enhance what we already have that builds relationships.

**The Lesson:** Yes, new and unique items give you something to talk about each season, but it's helping the consumer be successful that builds credibility and long term relationships.

7. Technology moves too fast to care about.

Moore's Law states that microchip speed and capacity (on which our digital world is based) doubles every 18 months; this law breeds product obsolescence. To overcome this, talk about experiences, not technology.

**The Lesson:** Technology is there to help enable or enhance an experience, and shouldn't be allowed to get in the way of any human interaction.

8. Flawless execution is tomorrow's great user experience.

Smart brands will highlight reliability and function and make them just as exciting as a new product feature. Consumers are hungry for an elegant return to flawless basics.

**The Lesson:** Outstanding execution at store level coupled with ensuring that we make the consumer successful, satisfied and are providing the solutions they need will bring the customer back, time after time.

9. Brand loyalty is how we escape fatigue.

Making choices is exhausting — mentally, emotionally, and even physically. The consumers' purchase options have multiplied rapidly, and it's wearing them out. More than anything else, this is why they form brand loyalties. Once they believe that their values and choices align with ours, they're happy to leave choices to the brand that's earned their trust, and shift some of the burden off their shoulders.

**The Lesson:** When your brand promise and the execution at ground level are in sync over time, you start earning brand loyalty. By demonstrating that your values are aligned with your customers', you establish a trust that lets customers relax and become more comfortable. They start to believe in you and the relationship begins.

10. Human interaction has never been more precious.

Almost every transaction in a customer's life can be automated, and they're beginning to resist the lack of the human touch.

**The Lesson:** Look for places to act more human. Human intervention can become the differentiator between a beloved brand and a commodity.



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11. Gen Y is creating its own service economy.

Gen Y interacts with its peers, communicates among itself, learns from one another and has created its own ecosystem of services provided by people their own age.

**The Lesson:** Listen and learn. Understand what drives this generation and act upon it. Gen Y is defined by optimism, social engagement, and digital fluency; and these attributes can attract older (read; your existing) customers as well. Act as an enabler, not the controller. Find ways to engage this younger generation at their level, not yours; take away the inhibitors that intimidate them.

12. Everyone is a specialist.

We're all specialists in our own way, but trying to be everything to everyone is a losing proposition. The success stories of 2013 are companies that are unafraid of putting a stake in the ground boldly indicating where their expertise and passions lie ... and where they don't.

**The Lesson:** As we've discussed before, it's as important to know who you aren't as it is to know who you are! Identifying your core values and principles, defining your compelling value proposition, executing on them at store level and

in your consumer messaging, are critical to building relevance and loyalty, and establishing your competitive advantages.

Life for me is a continued learning experience, a process of finding new ways to improve and creating a pathway to intelligent change. Hopefully you found

a nugget or two here that can help you in your journey... **LGR**

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