

Chapter 8: Activating the Brand

What Is It?

Not long ago, activating the brand meant launching a new advertising campaign. Yet, more recently, many strong brands have been created with little or no advertising support. Zappos, Google, Amazon, and Starbucks are just a few of the brands that rely on compelling brand experiences rather than advertising to build their brands.

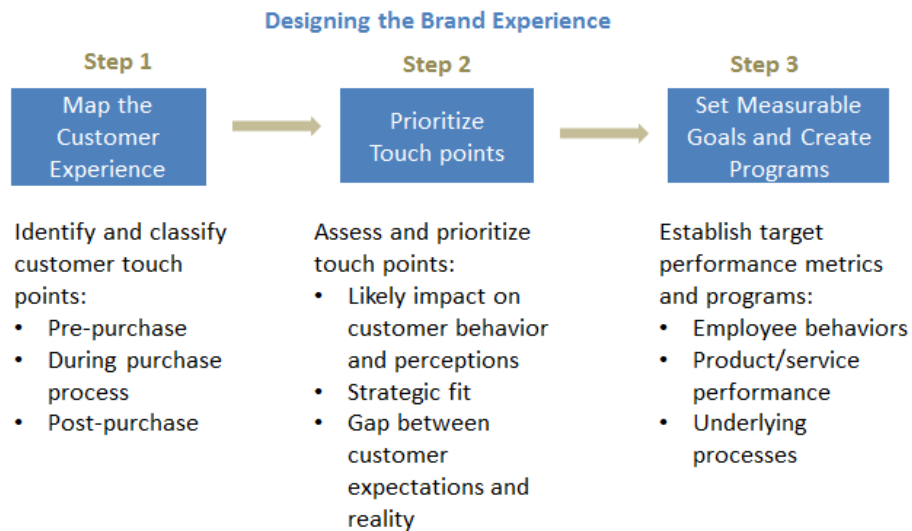
Brand experience encompasses everything a brand does and says that touches customers, before, during and after the sale. It includes the experience of using the product or service, but also the shopping and purchase experience (both online and offline), word of mouth and other peer-to-peer communications, third party reviews and endorsements, customer service and support, returns, and on and on and on.

The list of possible ‘touch points’ is long. Some of these touch points are under the brand’s control because they are either ‘owned’ or ‘paid for’. Others, such as touch points that happen via social media or word of mouth, must be earned. Regardless of how they occur, all touch points can be influenced. This fact underscores the importance of having a Brand identity to guide decisions that impact the customer experience. It is literally the ‘north star’ for filtering ideas and prioritizing programs that will most impact customer behavior and perceptions.

As with internal branding, designing the customer experience involves many functions in addition to marketing. When a guest checks into a hotel, for example, hundreds of impressions are formed before arriving at the room based on the ease or difficulty of parking, the doorman’s and other staff’s greeting, the layout of the lobby, the speed of check in, the cleanliness and décor, and more. Before arriving, guests experience the brand through the booking process and once in the room they make more judgments based on the room itself, its appointments and amenities. As champion of the brand, marketing must lead the organization in defining which ‘touch points’ are most important to activating the brand and bringing it to life, but it takes multiple departments to deliver that on-brand experience. The internal branding process should have laid the foundation so the organization is ready and eager to follow.

What You Need To Know

Designing a customer experience that is aligned with the desired brand identity requires three steps.



Customer experience maps differ for each industry. Mapping involves looking closely at the steps customers follow as they consider their options, make choices, and then use the product or experience the service. It is also important to include the post-purchase experience in the map. Post-purchase factors such as technical support, warranty and repair, returns, even follow up inquiries, thank you notes, bounce-back offers and gifts can all make an impact. Follow up actions often mean the difference between a satisfied customer and a delighted brand advocate.

There are many ways to document and display customer experience touch points. Customers and employees can be observed or interviewed. Some firms use ‘mystery shoppers’ or satisfaction surveys. Customer service calls, online forums and other forms of feedback can be useful. Some firms display the ideas in the form of a timeline, others as a ‘wheel’ to emphasize how follow-up from one experience impacts the next purchase. There is no one right way to develop your map, so choose the approach and format that best suits your firm or industry.

The next step is to assess how well the company delivers relative to customer expectations and the brand guidelines (see Chapter 5). The three criteria below are helpful in establishing priorities. These criteria can easily be scored and even weighted to determine which touch points should receive immediate attention.

1. Strategic Fit - How important is this touch point to delivering the brand promise?
2. Customer Impact - How important is this touch point to satisfying customers, encouraging purchase and developing trust or loyalty?
3. Gap - How far is the brand from delivering the desired experience?

The third step is the most difficult: envisioning how to improve the experience at each high priority touch point. As always, it is smart to start with goals and metrics. Programs for enhancing the customer experience generally include multiple components spanning people, products/services and business processes as well as diverse functional areas.

Patagonia, a brand known for living its values and putting environmentalism before profit, offers an example of the kinds of decisions required to align the customer experience with brand values. A conflict arose when the company's leadership realized they were reliant on petro-chemical based fabrics to produce their long-lasting, high-tech garments. They questioned whether to continue to use these raw materials or switch to a lower quality fabric that would be more environmentally friendly but would produce less durable garments.

Rather than decide themselves, Patagonia's leaders invited customers and employees (who are also customers) to weigh in. The answer was to stick with products that promised a longer life rather than for more environmentally sound, shorter-lived items. Asking for and acting on customer input on such an important decision provided a powerful on-brand experience that has helped to further solidify Patagonia's customer relationships. The company has other business processes that support this brand value: Patagonia actively encourages customers to send in their clothing for repair—usually for free—rather than discard or replace it.

Tools and Frameworks

A good starting point for mapping the brand experience is to divide touch points into three areas - before, during and after the sale. Identify all the ways customers interact with your brand at each point in the purchase process.

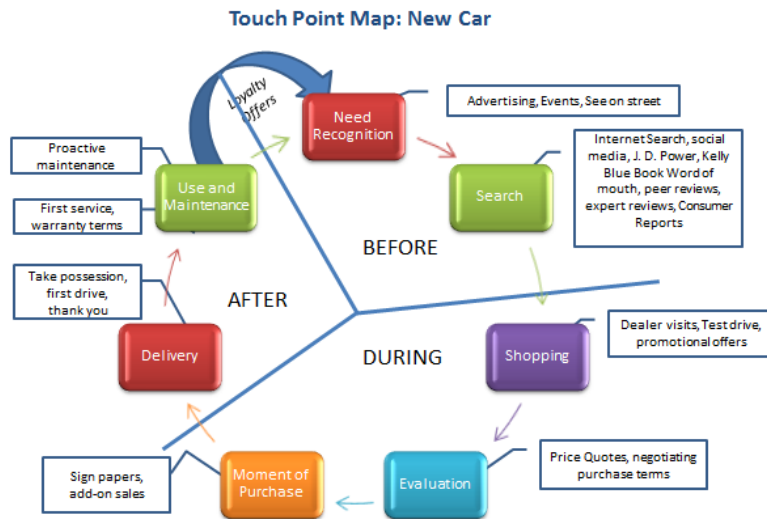


Once you have identified the key touch points, prioritize them. Factors to consider when prioritizing include impact on customer perceptions of the brand, size of the gap between today and tomorrow, cost of implementation, cost-benefit, and the touch point's ability to help your company achieve its longer term goals and objectives. Finally, the highest priority touch points should be carefully measured and examined to ensure they live up to the brand promise.


Starbucks built its brand by creating the Americanized version of the Italian espresso bar. In 2008, amid concern that the experience was becoming watered down and commoditized, CEO Howard Schultz took a close look at every element of the experience. His investigation led him write manifesto for 'transforming' the experience. He closed every one of the 7,100 U.S. stores for 3 hours to retrain its 135,000 employees on 'the art of espresso.' During the training each employee learned how to make better espresso. It was risky and costly, to admit something was drastically wrong, but ultimately his risky move paid off. Today Starbucks is once again the leader in providing a rewarding coffeehouse experience.

Examples of Applying the Frameworks

Purchasing a new car involves many touch points, sometimes over a long period of time. Each touch point contributes to the sale, post-sale satisfaction and the likelihood of a repeat purchase. Research on “Automotive Intentions and Purchases” dating back to the early 1980’s found that in 2011, 48 percent of car owners planned to buy the same brand of car as they currently owned. That figure is down 7 percentage points over the past decade. If an auto marketer could reverse that trend, the impact on their business could be enormous.

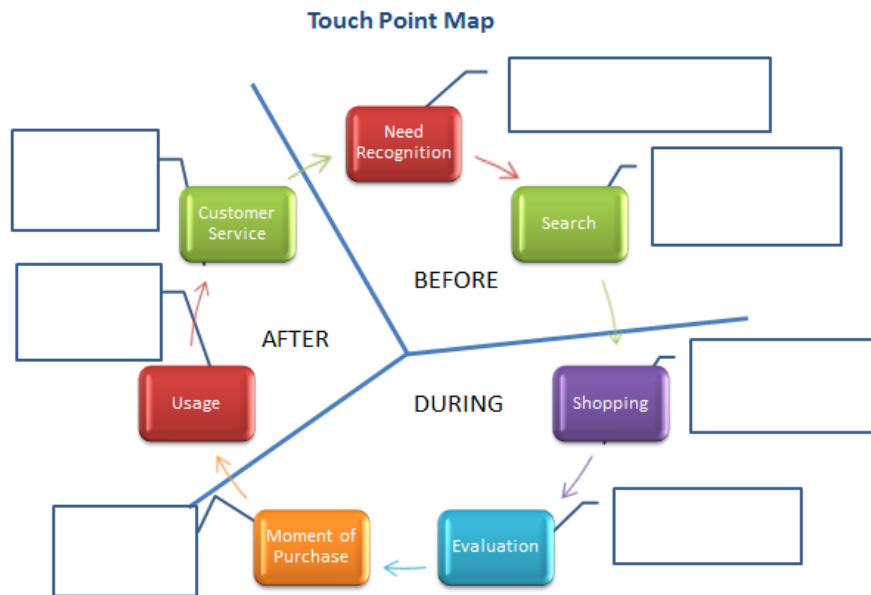


After identifying your touch points, score using the factors discussed above to prioritize them.

- What is the expected impact on customer perceptions of the brand?
- What is the size of the gap between where we are and where we need to be?
- What is the cost of implementation relative to the benefits?
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Practice Applying the Tools

When developing your map, include touch points that are under the brand's control, as well as those that are not. Advertising, product, and the web site are easily managed, but some influential touch points like publicity and word of mouth have to be earned. Social media has made peer reviews (think Yelp!), Facebook Likes and Twitter comments influential brand touch points, so think about where they belong on your map...they may appear more than once!



What Other Experts Say

“The customer experience, the brand and the strategy are inseparable.”

-- Andy Milligan and Shaun Smith, Uncommon Practice: People who deliver a great brand experience, p. 165

“Marketing is often performed by a department within the organization. This is both good and bad. It’s good because it unites a group of trained people who focus on the marketing task. It’s bad because marketing activities should not be carried out in a single department but they should be manifest in all the activities of the organization.”

-- Philip Kotler, http://www.kotlermarketing.com/phil_questions.shtml

“Branding is seen as the exclusive prerogative of the marketing and communications staff. This undervalues the role played by the other parts of the company in ensuring a successful branding policy and business growth. Only by mobilizing all of its internal sources of added value can a company set itself apart from its competitors.”

-- Jean Noel Kapferer, The New Strategic Brand Management, p. 31

“The easiest way to turn a service into an experience is to provide poor service, thus creating a memorable encounter of the most unpleasant kind. The surest way to provide poor service is to walk every client through the same rote, impersonal routine, never varying no matter who the individual client is or what he really needs.”

-- Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, The Experience Economy, p. 69

“Sometimes tackling issues at the individual brand touch point level is not enough. It takes broader systemic change, from processes and measurements to organization structure, to optimizing the brand driven business for success. Brand-drive businesses, let no barriers stand in the way of crating and environment where employees can become and remain passionate advocates for the brand.”

-- Scott M. Davis and Michael Dunn, Building the Brand-Driven Business, p. 245

Resources to Go Deeper

1. Shaun Smith & Joe Wheeler, Managing the Customer Experience, 2002

This book is based on the idea that experiences are what make loyal customers. The authors make a distinction between experiencing the brand and a Branded Customer Experience based on expressing customer values through people, products/services and processes.

2. Max Lenderman, Experience the Message: How Experiential Marketing is Changing the Brand World, 2006

This book emphasizes experiential marketing predicated on one-on-one personal interaction between a marketer and a consumer and engaging in memorable ways. While this book pre-dates much of the social media revolution, it relies on timeless principles for reaching out in compelling and relevant ways.

3. Scott M. Davis and Michael Dunn, Building the Brand-Driven Business: Operationalize Your Brand for Profitable Growth, 2002

This book offers a 'how-to' for understanding and prioritizing high impact touch points during the Pre-Purchase, Purchase, and Post-Purchase experience.