

The Details Matter

Improving your customer experience might be the most effective way to market your concept.



The adage “the little things you do matter more than the big things you say” applies in fast food more than almost anywhere else. In a research study I recently conducted on quick serves, 48 percent of people said there’s a big difference between what fast food restaurants promise in advertising and what customers experience. For some chains, more than two-thirds of people reported a gap between brand promise and reality.

Executing a marketing program may be a lot easier than fixing operational problems, but today’s skeptical customers care less about cool ads and snappy promotions and base their purchase decisions and brand preferences on what they actually get when they visit a restaurant. They also use social networking tools to spread the word about extraordinary experiences—good and bad.

Therefore, your customer experience may be the most important tool in your marketing arsenal. Here are five ways to ensure that your customer experience is marketing your concept appropriately:

Concentrate on what you do better than everyone else. In an effort to compete with aggressive competitors, fast feeders often allow themselves to get distracted by new products, special promotions, or new services or formats. But pursuing all of these possibilities can increase operating complexity, not to mention customer confusion, and ultimately detract from the customer experience.

Instead, real competitive advantage is created through focus. Quick serves can learn from Sabrina Wiewel, president of Digital Tax at tax preparation company H&R Block, who says, “Figure out what you do best and then do it better than anyone else.”

Kristen Hunter, a marketing consultant with Chick-fil-A, says the chain’s distinctive “second mile service” drives its customer experience. “The first mile is the foundation—good customer service, hot food hot, cold food cold. The second mile is what we do that’s remarkable, like carrying people’s trays to their tables.” Playing to your core strength helps create a brand-building customer experience.

Execute with personality. Brand personality plays an important role in making quick-serve concepts distinct. Your personality shouldn't be communicated only through advertising and in-store visuals, though. The service, store environment, and even the menu items themselves should relay the brand personality.

John Costello, chief global marketing and customer officer of Dunkin' Brands, says that "personality is as important to guest satisfaction as functional benefits." He says his chain's customers appreciate the way it delivers its brand personality through everything it does.

Focus on your fans. Traditional marketing may be focused on getting new customers, but your customer experience should be all about retaining them. A chain's top customers generate disproportionately high sales and margin, so quick serves should make special effort to retain them through superior customer experiences.

Even your best customers visit other chains, so Dunkin's Costello says they should not be taken for granted. "They're cruising and others might steal them away," he says.

Through personalized service, ongoing two-way communication, and offers of special experiences, you can deliver a targeted customer experience that strengthens the relationship your highest-value customers have with your brand.

Treat your customers as people. The fast food industry's focus on speed of service and consistency can detract from the human element, which is critical to a great customer experience. Crew members need to be trained to see customers as real people, and operations need to be designed to facilitate personal interactions.

H&R Block's Wiewel says her company learned this lesson the hard way. "As we expanded, clients became transactions and we focused only on productivity. We cut nonrevenue-generating employees, like the receptionist who used to greet customers as they entered our offices."

After millions of prospects walked out of their offices and even more customers bought once but never returned, the company is now reinvesting in the customer experience. It focuses on making a positive first and last impression for each customer, and it uses customer data to personalize the experience.

Chick-fil-A embedded a personal element into the promotion of a recent new product launch. In order to get the chain's new Spicy Chicken sandwich for free, customers were asked to make an online reservation to visit a particular store at a particular time. Every morning, the store operator received an e-mail containing a list of the guests for the day so that the operator could greet each customer by name and personalize the service given to each.

Engage the senses. Ron Rogowski, a researcher on the customer experience team at Forrester, an independent research company focused on business and technology, says, “Interactions that engage users fulfill their emotional needs.” He says companies should use a mix of senses to create engaging customer experiences.

Other location-based businesses understand this. That’s why the fashion retailer Abercrombie & Fitch dims the lights and blasts rock music in its stores. Sheraton Hotels and Resorts created distinct smells for each of its hotel brands. The folks at H&R Block found that having freshly brewed coffee in their reception areas impacts the customer experience significantly; the smell of the coffee entices customers to stay when there’s a wait.

Quick serves can similarly leverage the sights and smells of freshly prepared foods and beverages. Distinctive lighting, flooring, tables, seating, and countertop surfaces can also be used to create memorable customer experiences.

Marketing is sometimes defined as “making and keeping customers.” With this in mind, it’s clear your customer experience may be the most effective way to market your concept.

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