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Special Feature

Getting Emotional With Customers

By Jeannette McMurtry

November 17, 2006 -- Throughout this column (and my book), I've written about the power of passion among consumers for brands, and the emotions that drive purchase decisions. For years, I've been a bit obsessed with the force of emotions in all purchasing decisions, business-to-consumer and business-to-business. My first experience with brand passion was with my grandfather. His passion was his Chevy Truck. And his neighbors' was his Ford Truck. The two constantly got into very heated discussions about which brand was best, to the point where they were simply better off not talking at all. Along these same lines, another brand that evokes such passion is Harley Davidson. Riders will wait years for the perfect bike, and join thousands of others in organized rides around the country where they show off their pride, swap riding stories, and get even more attached to the Harley brand of motorcycles. Rumor has it that the most requested tattoo in the U.S. is the Harley logo. Come to think of it, I've never seen a Harley that wasn't immaculate, clean and shining, the owner's pride and joy.



So why am I writing about emotional marketing yet again? New research further drives home the importance of creating passion amongst your customers. Professors at top universities throughout the U.S. have studied this dynamic and claim that a brand's ability to create passion amongst its customers is what will set it apart from its competition, according to a recent article in Selling Power magazine. Scientists call the study of emotions and purchasing behavior neuroeconomics. And according to this new science, all purchasing decisions even business-to-business are emotional.

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Duncan Berry, PhD, and Principal of Applied Iconology, has spent years studying the link between personality type and product design, or why certain people are attracted to certain types of marketing presentations, specifically packaging. Berry studies consumers' facial expressions and body language and how these elements subconsciously influence product selection on the grocery shelf.

According to Berry, "People can't articulate the emotions behind a purchase because it typically is subconscious. On average, we encounter 30,000 products at a grocery store in less than 30 minutes of shopping time. There is no time to compare or evaluate products or prepare rational decisions for each product choice. As a result, most of us look for cues we recognize."

The cues we recognize might be a brand icon or package that reflects our own emotions, expressions and even personality. It all makes sense. This is why we see advertising, specifically TV spots during the Super Bowl, that cater to the personality of the viewing audience they are trying to reach. Unconventional, off-the-wall, irreverent and individualist are the themes we see most often for Generation X and Y audiences. Does the personality of

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- these ads fit? I think so.

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So what does all this mean for marketers of medical products and equipment? You can't consider your product category as one that caters only to rational decision making. You must acknowledge and understand the emotions that drive the decisions. Does an office manager patronize the sales reps that provide the most emotional fulfillment by making her or him feel smart and successful? Are purchasing decisions based upon the peace of mind that comes knowing that patient care won't be compromised by faulty equipment? These are the kinds of emotions you need to understand and cater to in your personal communications, your marketing communications, product and sales literature.

Following are some suggestions for business owners wanting to capitalize on the emotions behind their customers' decisions:

- Explore the emotional side of decisions among your customers by drilling deeper than the customary satisfaction surveys you might do, suggests Berry. Talk to customers to get a deeper understanding of the influences behind their decisions. Ask probing questions as in many cases to help them understand themselves why they make the decisions they do.
- Align your message with an emotional appeal, not a sentimental message, continues Berry. Sentiment might catch someone's attention but it doesn't necessarily tap the emotions.
- Conduct an audit of your current brand presentations. Do the colors, logo, graphic presentations in ads and brochures cater to the decisions that drive your customers' behavior? If your primary customer is female, use icons and images that appeal to the emotional side of women. If your product skews to a male audience, your presentation will likely utilize a different set of imagery and even words and promises.

Regardless of what you are selling, you are selling first to an emotionally charged person, not a business. And 90 to 95 percent of the decision process is emotional, in virtually any setting. In most cases, people buy on emotion and then justify their decision with facts. According to an article by Ken Orwig, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas was quoted as saying, "At the constitutional level where we work, 90 percent of any decision is emotional. The rational part of us supplies the reasons for supporting our predilections."

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