

Bypass the Brain and Go Straight to the Heart: Connecting with emotion builds a brand and keeps it vital

Mary Weisnewski

“The idea that business is just a numbers affair has always struck me as preposterous. For one thing, I’ve never been particularly good at numbers, but I think I’ve done a reasonable job with feelings. And I’m convinced that it is feelings—and feelings alone—that account for the success of the Virgin brand in all of its myriad forms.” — Richard Branson

In a surplus society full of competing products and services, how do you capture the attention of potential customers and make sure that they develop positive impressions of your brand? Lists of features and benefits alone are no longer enough to differentiate your product or service, especially when you often have only a few seconds to make a vital impression in such a noisy environment. If you can make an emotional connection and capture your customer’s heart first, you’ll have a chance to make rational arguments later. But if you miss it, you’ll be lost in the crowd.

Why we do what we do

Human beings are sociable creatures. Our tribal urge is strong; we want to belong to something. The best-known brands in the world have successfully used these basic human drives to attract and develop brand loyalty by creating authentic emotional connections that bypass the brain and go straight to the heart, tapping into powerful feelings about self-image, fantasies, aspirations and dreams. Although decisions about purchases and loyalties are based on both rational and emotional reactions, it’s the emotional response that motivates us to act. Recognizing that fact is the key to effective brand building. In the words of neurologist Donald Caine, “The essential difference between emotion and reason is that emotion leads to action while reason leads to conclusions.”

Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs states that since we are motivated by our unsatisfied needs, once we have the basics of food and shelter taken care of, we begin to be motivated by our need to be a part of something larger than ourselves. So it’s only natural for people to connect with products and services that speak to such powerful emotional drives and give meaning to our purchasing decisions, especially the discretionary ones.

Finding and connecting with your “tribe” of customers is the key to building a successful business, and building an emotional connection is the best way to reach those consumers who are most likely to remain loyal to your brand. For example, what do consumers feel when they think of Southwest Airlines? Some may feel great, because the style of service makes them feel like they’re part of the Southwest Airlines tribe. Others may have the opposite reaction, because their self-image does not align with the experience that Southwest offers. These tribal identifications are the most reliable predictors of whether or not a consumer will buy a ticket from one airline company or another.

And it’s not just the sexy consumer products that can harness the power of emotion to build a strong brand. Even an apparently neutral commodity like salt can connect with emotions. That little girl with the umbrella translates the rational message of Morton’s into the emotional response of trust that leads to brand loyalty. In the same way, decisions about business-to-business professional services are also motivated and determined by emotional responses. And that doesn’t mean that those decisions aren’t logical as well. Reactions such as “I love working with that company because it’s always a good experience” or “I know this is the most expensive solution, but I know that this company will stand behind their promises” are motivated by emotions, but they are also smart business decisions. Every company claims that it will stand behind its promises, but unless they have been conveyed in a manner that inspires trust and confidence—very powerful emotions—they’re simply meaningless words.

Brand awareness and brand strength

Awareness and strength are two very different aspects of a brand. Both are necessary for long-term success, and emotion plays a huge part in expressing and experiencing them. Advertising is highly emotional, which makes it an important vehicle for getting the message and the product in front of people in order to build brand awareness. But advertising alone can’t create something that is not really there. It can’t deliver the actual experience, or build a relationship or create a lasting emotional connection. It can only set the stage. No matter how good the advertising is, brands that don’t deliver on their promises will never earn the loyalty that comes from consistently positive experiences with the products or services. When emotion and experience work hand in hand, trust builds, creating the positive emotional responses that create loyal brand relationships.

Communicating emotion by design

Design is one of the most powerful tools for communicating brand emotions. It’s the glue that connects logic and reason with imagination and feelings. Good design expresses the essence of a brand in ways that speak directly to the emotions. Design communicates the intangible benefits through tone, style, color and attitude: loud or quiet, hip or elegant, exclusive or accessible. The most successful brands in the world, including Volkswagen, Apple and Nike, demonstrate and acknowledge the motivating power of good design by investing tremendous resources in the design, development and maintenance of their brand images.

If a company wants people to feel themselves reflected in their brand and say “it’s the one for me,” it’s important to remember that everything matters. Building a strong brand that has loyal followers is a complex undertaking and relies on hard work and coordinated effort. It requires consistent focus, innovation, careful listening and skillful execution over the long haul for a business—and its brand—to prevail.

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