

BRAND TRUST IS YOUR TRAJECTORY TO MARKETPLACE RELEVANCE



Consumer Trust was called the most perishable of assets in a recent article in Business Week. Given the assault on our various Brands and our inability or choice not to respond to this market dynamic, we find ourselves at a loss of credibility in the public eye.

We've pretty well shot ourselves in the foot, limping along with the projected economic recovery. We have let our Performance Standards lapse, our staff depart and product quality become minimized. We know the status, and our Customer knows it, as well. There is some rebuilding to do!

So, how do we repackage ourselves and put some trust back into our Brand equation? **First, a little honest retrospection is required.** We are not and will not be operating like we were just two years ago, luxuriating in public consumption and gleeful spending. That is gone, yet our Brand message probably still resonates with that tact. If we do not deliver on that promise, we have no credibility.

Our Consumer is very savvy and niggardly with disposable spending, now and going forward. Ergo, look at your marketing and advertising, from your web site to your collaterals - **what are they saying, what messages are you communicating, what expectations do you emit?** Your Consumer demands honesty, truth and authenticity in the world of "spin". The train has arrived, and you did not stop, look and listen.

Ah, the listening! You simply cannot change, adapt, or progress until you bring your Customer into the loop. They want you to succeed, if you show the interest and effort. Our Customers have so many means to share their thoughts and concerns. If you rely solely on comment cards, you might as well lock your doors. Your Customer is wired, bombarded, just like you, with data, but that data is not information. That you must sift, a bit like the old gold miner with his pick, pan and a likely stream. The nuggets are there, but they need to be sorted, aligned, and reported in an actionable fashion with you ready to respond with the potential for "Eureka"!

You have many means to reach out, and your Customer has similar avenues, which you do not control, such as blogs and user generated reviews. But, the key is to manage what you can and be responsive (react) to those means for which you cannot. You want to direct the conversation, rather than engage in daily donnybrooks. Perception always rules reality.

Internally, you have trust issues, too. Look at your staff. Can you blame them? They have watched their friends become "redundant" (an awful British term), shifts shortened, benefits reduced, required to do more with less, yet dutifully serve your Customers with a high level of execution and courtesy. There certainly is no trust in Corporations and even Main Street is suspect. **Beyond the challenge to again curry favor with your Customers, you need to rebuild your Team and their Brand allegiance.** Time to reengage!

This is not an overnight assignment; this is an ongoing investment, for your Ambassadors are the solution. Service is the differentiator on the new "Brandscape". Commit to this paradigm. Bring

your staff into the conversation, the process and the rewards. Tap them for suggestions, empower them with accountability, shower them with appropriate praise and develop their potential. This all starts with involvement and your demonstrated respect.

Discuss with them the Guest Experience; provide what you have learned from your “feedback” mechanisms; what are the demographics; what is the competition; through their eyes, does the marketing match the actual picture and delivery. Revisit the Job Descriptions with them as editors. Reestablish the Performance Standards, not just the mechanics but also the behaviors. Understand that **continuing training and development is a worthy investment**, and, with the many means to accomplish this through “blended” platforms, there is no longer an excuse.

Finally, take a fresh look at your product and the facility which houses your enterprise(s). In the hotel world, a rather significant operator recently let it slip that they were willing to accept a reduced rating of excellence. Perhaps, a realistic appraisal, but quite a public faux pas, and they and others have been back-peddling since reputations shot to heck.

First, you have to consider the source of these ratings. What is real anymore? Mobil has become Forbes, some rely upon stature based upon their amenities with no determination of service, others are self-rated. Marketplace rating is just a quagmire, and, **with the Internet, everyone is a critic** with their opinions carried over a massive bandwidth. You cannot win but for losing. So, you must build from your Credo, your Brand message.

Of course, you have responded to market dictates. Preventive maintenance schedules have been delayed, as have extensive renovations. Costs have been reviewed and slashed wherever possible, from office supplies to detergents, amenities and foodstuffs. Your Consumer gets it, for they, personally, have undergone the same exercise. They respect due diligence and expect due value. You simply cannot present an offering that cannot be delivered.

You may be bloodied and bruised, but you have a unique opportunity here. Trust is earned. People are not stupid. Retail was designed to respond to the marketplace, and for many years it was directed by clever marketing. But, now with more circumspection, your Guest, patron, fan, subscriber, call them what you may, your CUSTOMER demands more. Gain their trust, and they shall return, plus tell others.

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