

THE WAY FORWARD AFTER A TUMULTUOUS DECADE



Our Retail world was pretty well whacked in the last two years, and 2010 will be a year of rebuilding our Brands with a new Value Proposition. The most serious question we all must ask is what does our Customer want?

We have learned that Greed is not good, resources are limited and the consumer is resilient yet wary. Definitely, it will not be business as usual. We had a lot of gloss in the past, and an emphasis in the selfish "Me" Experience. Right now, there is too much pain and heartbreak in the marketplace, and we need to return to the "We" mentality - what is good for the family, the environment and community - the comfort and genuine factors.

So, firstly our Customers will value some authenticity - we are what we say we are, no-nonsense, no hype. Brands who can accentuate the Main Street mentality will flourish, for most consumers are sick to death over the abuses and arrogance of the Wall Street excesses. As most of the "Brandscape" is homogenized and bland, honest yet innovative presentation will have Consumer play. High end hospitality, services and retail stores will need to dial back their imaging, for, even with a loyal constituency, sashaying that cachet will seem vulgar.

Brands which practice some consistency and constancy will prevail. Recently, companies constricted to maintain business. Staff was dismissed, discounts and deals were the name of the game, and shops, restaurants and hotels shuttered and changed hands. Standards disappeared, so, when a customer arrived at your door, they did not know what to expect, and the Experience was "uneven" (a generous phrase). And, we threw our dispirited and over-tasked employees at them. Thus, we created a huge disconnect - our Standards (and distinction) had been devalued and our Ambassadors poorly skilled and motivated, so our message was unbalanced, as well. Service delivery (the true differentiator) languished! A new phenomenon drove sales in the last quarter of 2009 - Social Media. Those who managed Social Media well prospered; the rest of us were flummoxed.

But, the Facebooks, Twitters, blogs and the next generations will be with us, so we need to learn and employ a digital strategy. This is not about sales; it is about relationships, and Social Media is an avenue to what we all hope to accomplish - a rapport with our customer. Talk about elemental Feedback and the need to structure that Feedback into meaningful information and solidify that Customer or Guest relationship.

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