

Volvo meets customer 2.0

 By [Patrick Carmody](#)

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Volvo is widely recognised as one of only a few brands that have summited the Everest of Brand Positioning i.e. it has succeeded globally in owning a single-minded, relevant and sustainable idea in the mind of a valuable market segment. Well, a recent dysfunctional experience with the brand dismantled something that took over 50 years and millions of dollars to build. Albeit, in the mind of one customer.

Glossary (for the Volvo Brand Team)

Customer 1.0: naive and silent (less knowledge, small voice).

Customer 2.0: knowledgeable and powerful (can influence others).

Womb to Tomb Marketing: seeing the customer as a lifelong strategic asset to the business (a customer lost represents the loss of multiple transactions over a long period of time).

Brand Positioning: owning a sustainable and relevant idea in the mind of a profitable market segment.

A Total Brand Experience: aligning all departments to deliver a seamless, customer-centric experience.

The Dysfunctional Brand Experience: The opposite of the above i.e. the service staff act as a layer of impenetrable clay between the customer and the unaccountable corporate head office. Stop the customer from bugging us at all costs! Our systems are the best we can offer at this time.

Everything Communicates: Everything communicates!

The Power of one?

After leaving the Volvo dealership feeling powerless, I wondered if one family's negative service experience could damage a global brand. In the days of broadcast media, the answer, quite simply, would've been no – customer 1.0 was voiceless and naive. With the democratisation of media, however, one experience told to millions could be devastating. Here goes.

The Car is a lemon: Deal with it...

I won't waste too many column inches with Isabel Jones-type whining but the incident was the third in almost as many

months that our car had incurred serious financial and potentially physical damage to the owners. This near death experience cost us R7,000.00. Our previous visit to the dealership cost R18,500.00. Quite pricy for a quaff from the water cooler and some filter coffee. Mechanical breakdowns are quite hard for a brand team to control but our doubts over the product were exacerbated by the dealership's frontline staff – their service ranged between indifferent and rude.

Owning a word in the mind of the consumer

My relationship with Volvo prior to this was remarkably healthy. In fact as a consultant and lecturer I regularly use Volvo as a case study in great brand practice. It is widely referred to as one of the few brands so focused that it owns a word in the mind of the car consumer: safety. It has achieved this through traditional brand communication married to safety-first product development and a complete service package.

Ideal target customers

Back to the dealership, where we spelt it out for the manager: we are potentially lifelong customers and have a generation below us who could also buy into the brand (if we do). I even demonstrated this by making sure that I had my heavily pregnant wife and two-and-a-half year old son along for the meeting with the manager. Heck, we looked like we were straight out of the brand managers target customer PowerPoint presentation.

He then completely blitzed the brand manual by saying that our 2001 car was a first launch of a new model and all new model Volvo's give countless problems. Come again? He also went on to say that he couldn't compensate us and could not influence the 'departments' (Parts or Sales) that could. Surely a brand of this stature in 2008 should grasp the concept of designing a 'Total Brand Experience'. Or perhaps it has but it is yet to cascade down to the service department. But, hang on, what could be a better place to start. The coal face. The front line. Where the rubber really hits the road.

'Womb to Tomb'

To add to this there is even a move within the auto and other industries towards 'womb to tomb' branding: instead of 'selling a car to a customer' they are 'providing drivers with a lifelong transportation solution'. Hence the Volvo pay-off line: 'For Life'. It is not unrealistic that a young couple in their early 30's with kid/s could buy into the brand to the tune of 6 or 7 more Volvos over a period of 40 years. One could argue that this could easily amount to a few million in loss of sales to the company.

I made it clear to the manager that he still had an opportunity to win us back if he could explain in the next day or two how Volvo planned to regain our confidence in the brand. It is now a few days later and we have heard nothing. So I guess for one family Volvo will have to be an example of a promise broken from hereon. You see, the social media customer is demanding and ruthless: this one may well influence thousands of others to think twice when they enter the Volvo's '2 children, one Labrador' life stage.

ABOUT PATRICK CARMODY

Patrick Carmody is going back to his safe-gated community, ex-Volvo driving soccer wife and 1.7 kids. This will appear on his blog: <http://bespokebrands.blogspot.com>
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