Does the digital customer experience demand breaking old rules?

By Chantel Botha

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So many corporates I have worked with fear the world of digital and social media. Not because it is hugely complex, but more because it is unknown and unpredictable and forces people to be resilient and adapt to change much more quickly. Executives also assume this "always-on" digital world brings a new set of rules with which conservative corporates are not necessarily comfortable.

In this article, I want to present the argument that we just need to stick to the old rules but interpret them for this new world.

Mike Stopforth, CEO of Cerebra, claims people have an exaggerated view of digital and social media as a result of the numbers that astound them every time a Socialnomics video is released with the latest social media statistics. This is a world of one to many to millions - in fact, the scale is incomprehensible.

So let's discuss some of the rules I think are universal and apply irrespective of the media and customer service channel.

1. It's *personal*

I love doing human experiments! I urge you to try this next time you engage in a store with a person wearing a nametag. Ask him something and use his name, or comment on what a nice name it is. He will most likely make eye contact with you and smile. People love feeling special and most brands just miss the opportunity to be personal. It was true when we wrote letters and responded to complaints written to the newspaper, and it's true in the digital world of today! It's easy, or it should be. I really get worried when I receive an email addressing me as "Dear Customer". The sender should know who I am and use my name! I want to say, "Dear brand, you know more about me than my husband, why do you not use the knowledge you have about me in a non-invasive way to make me feel like I am the only customer you care about?"

2. Little *effort* for the customer

Various studies on consumer loyalty have found that people like engaging with brands that make it easy for them to achieve their goals and that "low effort" is a driver of loyalty. Loyalty in turn leads to longevity in the consumer's relationship with the brand, re-patronage as well as positive word-of-mouth. I question how well an experience is designed when I am asked the same questions over and over, and every time I engage with the organisation it's as painful as going on a date with a person for the first time. I feel like writing in font size 80 and capital letters, "Why do you ask me to fax forms and provide information I have given you before? If you want my signature, why not pre-populate forms and personalise them as if you knew me and cared?"

3. The customer should be in *control*

The days of dictating to consumers what channels they will use, what times they can use them and for which transactions, are over. It only takes one bank to extend its business hours to weeknights as well as Sundays and all of a sudden, you have consumers with very different expectations from their own bank. Moreover, their expectations are all that matters and they will vote for the brands that they love with their feet and their wallets.

In my experience, brands that don't listen to their customers have really large gaps between what their customers expect and what the actual customer experience is. I believe the brands that are eager to listen and engage and surrender control to their customers will be the ones that will thrive in the new experience economy where the rules are no longer founded in logic but have a definitive emotive origin.

Control means I can choose my username and password. I can choose when I log on or place an order. I can personalise the content you deliver to me. It means I can choose how you communicate with me.

4. It's a *conversation*, not a broadcast

The world of digital communication has enabled conversations through email, online chat and twitter, but some brands still stick to the broadcast culture of sending 1950's style memos that communicated the latest company rules or a corny campaign. On twitter, people find the campaign mentality of brands offensive and will simply "unfollow" them!

Mike Stopforth recently spoke at a conference and said, "When news breaks and sentiments are shared online, we need to move from broadcast to conversations. The difference in social media is not intention, its scalability."

I truly believe the scale of digital communication that allows one to communicate with many or even millions will force brands to go back to basics and re-evaluate their purpose, values and personality. In the experience economy, inconsistency and brand schizophrenia do not build loyalty - in fact, they erode consumer trust in the brand. Consistency and authenticity have become the fibre of successful brands woven into every interaction like the strands of silk in an exquisite piece of fabric!

5. Keep *promises*

In the digital world, traces are left that support customer transactions and requests. Many customers have told me they love sending companies email because then they have proof of when they sent it and exactly what was said. Many even prefer email to a conversation because of the reusable proof they have afterwards. This becomes very important when you make a promise or communicate a service level to a client. Too often auto-responses to emails will say "Your request will be dealt with within 24 hours" and it is not. I have facilitated sessions with teams where we looked at their digital client journey and specifically all the concrete promises made in the journey. When we then looked at the real-life situation, we ended up with a frightening picture of hundreds of broken promises of which most frontline staff were unaware!

I have also seen lots of evidence of specifically agents who deal with email often not keeping promises because they rely on someone else to provide answers. Rather than communicate with the client that they need more time, they just keep quiet. The client will perceive this as being ignored or the brand just not taking him seriously.

Promises should never be broken! And when you know you are not going to stick to a timeline to which you have committed, talk to your customers. They are a lot more forgiving than what we think if we are honest and take their issues seriously.

6. It's *emotional*. It's a relationship after all!

I just don't know why so many financial services brands' secure websites look like mainframes screens with too much make-up applied to hide its age. These user interfaces are simply ugly and unpleasant to use. I recently did a competitive analysis of a few South African financial services transactional websites and found they are all quite similar. One would think someone would take this unclaimed territory and come up with something sexy and beautiful that would entice people to log on and transact. Alas, it seems only FNB has the word "sexy" in its digital briefs.

The digital channel - whether used for marketing or providing a service or transactional capability - has the potential to be human, personal and highly emotive. It has the potential to represent the post-sales phase as a loyalty loop instead of mimic a sales funnel, and to have characteristics that would build and sustain a healthy relationship with the customer. It is after all more cost-effective to retain a customer than to recruit a new one!

See, the rules have not changed! I am of the opinion that we translated and implemented digital so badly that we now use the breaking of rules as a defence to justify poorly executed digital strategies!

It's not that difficult! Be focused, be deliberate, be true to your brand purpose and be clear about what you offer and what you don't. And lastly, if it's financial services related, it does not have to be boring!

ABOUT CHANTEL BOTHA

I'm Chantel Botha, the author of "The Customer Journey Mapping Field Guide" and the founder of BrandLove.
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