

{ Delivering on Your Brand Promise – One Location at a Time }

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Is there a worse time for a customer to realize your organization doesn't deliver on its brand promise than when you need it most?

Our family was on the road, in the middle of a long day of travel when our toddler experienced her first bout with the flu. It was a stressful situation, but we felt somewhat relieved when we spotted a major mass merchandiser and took the next exit. We're frequent shoppers of this retailer so we knew the brand promised wide, clean, brightly lit aisles and shelves stocked with quality items as well as friendly, helpful employees. Unfortunately, this store didn't keep that promise. The children's Tylenol was expired; an employee directed us to the wrong area of the store for Pedialyte, and the only children's thermometer we could find was covered in dust and, after we purchased it, we discovered it didn't work. The entire experience was frustrating and left two, still panicked parents. About 100 miles or so later, we tried a second time at the same retailer and had an experience just as we were promised and expected.

So how could a single brand have stores so drastically different?

From a customer's perspective, we know our experience wasn't unique. It happens all the time. A customer leaves a location without experiencing the brand as promised – causing damage to the brand and hindering the potential for future business from this customer and others they tell.

That's why delivering on your brand promise at every location is so critical and why organizations today are beginning to place greater emphasis on ensuring experience levels are

consistent from store to store. It's all about creating that competitive difference. Although the concept sounds simple, the execution is not.

Delivering the Brand Reality at the Location Level

Delivering your service level brand promise across diverse locations and through each employee can be daunting. The desired experience isn't always delivered to the customer at that critical touch point for reasons ranging from inadequate leadership commitment, insufficient operational processes, poorly equipped and unmotivated front-line employees, to high employee turnover. Given today's business imperative for superior customer service, organizations must engage and empower employees to provide each customer with the promised brand experience.

This process typically starts with learning what customers want and the extent to which customers perceive they are receiving it – through experience measurement. Mystery shopping serves as an important component in the arsenal of tools available to measure the customer's brand experience. One of its strengths lies in the ability to measure the gap between the brand promise and brand experience. Mystery shopping provides a simple way for organizations to measure compliance with pre-defined standards. Mystery shoppers are in a unique position to help an organization get feedback on a wide array of attributes. They can take a holistic, checklist approach to evaluating the experience. But a program's success depends on measuring the right things – thus, any program should be well-founded on an understanding of what is most important to the customer,

will deliver the brand image, and will create operational effectiveness.

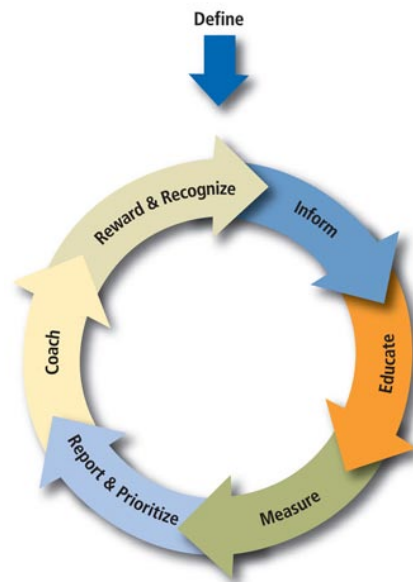
Unfortunately, measurement alone does not lead to the desired performance improvement at the location level. The practice in far too many organizations is to hand mystery shop results and other customer feedback to managers, accompanied by a directive to “use the results to take action.” The consequences? Quite often, action isn’t taken or the impact of actions taken is unclear. Mystery Shopping is not a solution, in and of itself, and on its own will not have a positive influence on performance improvement. It is only when it is part of a continuous performance improvement process that it is most effective.

Aligning Measurement with a Closed-Loop Process of Improvement

Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, W. Edwards Deming popularized the notion of viewing quality improvement as a continuous, closed-loop process. This same approach has been discussed in connection with customer measurement and management for at least 15 years. The idea is simple: Use measurement to identify issues, develop solutions to address them, and then gather new measurements to determine if the actions taken are having their intended effect. Apply this process on a continuous basis to monitor and manage customer experiences in ways that will lead to desired business results.

Applied to the brand experience, this approach is best implemented through a closed-loop process designed to not only measure gaps, but to close them by co-creating and putting solutions into place that enable employees to help deliver the desired brand experience. This process, which we call the Brand Experience Improvement Process, uses mystery shopping to measure performance and then aligns it with tools that provide exceptional delivery and create continuous improvement.

The Brand Experience Improvement Process



Three basic types of sub-processes, when systematically applied and aligned; provide the basis for the Brand Experience Improvement Process:

- **Understanding** how front-line employees are delivering on the brand promise
- **Enabling** employees to consistently deliver the brand promise with communications, actively reinforced training and coaching
- **Motivating** front-line employees to embrace change with integrated incentive and recognition plans aligned with the brand goals

These three sub-processes are executed in the following steps, each building off the next to drive performance:

- **Defining Brand Standards**

Improvement efforts are only meaningful if they are directed toward areas that matter to customers and, ultimately, financial performance. At least three sources of input should be compiled and used to identify the appropriate brand standards for measurement and improvement efforts including the desired brand image, processes and metrics for operational excellence, and Voice of the Customer research to identify areas of the customer experience that most drive overall satisfaction. Once these standards are defined, companies must translate these inputs into the desired employee behaviors so that they can be communicated to employees and measured.

- **Informing Through Communications to Initiate Alignment**

Communication is a critical component of any successful initiative and the brand experience is no exception. Communications will build awareness for the customer-focused purpose, the desired brand experience and its importance, each employee's impact on the customer and other employees, and set expectations for supporting tools and measurements of the initiative.

- **Educating Managers and front-line Employees**

Outstanding brand experience companies also ensure managers and employees who impact the customer experience understand and know how to execute on the brand promise to the customer. Tactically, this means education. However, studies show that 30 days after a training event, the learner recalls only 13%. By actively reinforcing training with a call to action at intervals of 24 hours, 7 days and 30 days post-training event, knowledge retention can reach nearly 100%. Therefore, to ensure the efficacy of the education, it must be actively reinforced.

- **Measuring Competency and Compliance**

Once managers and employees have been educated on how to best deliver the desired experience, successful brand experience companies perform ongoing, location level measurement via mystery shopping to identify areas of non-compliance with the standards.

In addition to customer experience measurement via mystery shopping, gauging employee competency to deliver the experience needs to be a key element of any measurement process. A certification process should be used to measure each employee's mastery of knowledge and skills to deliver the brand experience.

- **Reporting and Prioritizing to Focus Improvements**

Mystery shopping results need to be communicated to management and to front-line employee supervisors responsible for improvement. One of the challenges for management is to determine what to do next. The goal of any reporting effort should be to not only distribute the information in a timely manner, but also to create focus for the end use. These reports should prioritize areas with the highest impact to the customer, the company's desired brand image, operational excellence, and the financial bottom line.

- **Coach for Lasting Results**

Coaching is critical to the sustained success of any performance improvement initiative, but often not included in the improvement effort. Training alone has been found to increase performance by 22% where training in conjunction with coaching is proven to increase performance by 88%. Coaching can be successful at the location level by equipping managers to coach and provide support throughout the coaching implementation.

- **Reward and Recognize for Sustained Change**

Finally, this last step in the closed loop process motivates employees to embrace process and behavior changes by rewarding and recognizing for improving compliance with standards. A significant percentage of organizational change initiatives breakdown at this point because it's the integration of communication, education, and repeated and positive reinforcement that drives sustainable behavior change. Changing behavior is challenging, but effective reward and recognition plans, integrated with education and coaching, stimulate lasting results by motivating associates to embrace process and behavior that continuously deliver customer delight.

Results Require Alignment

Many organizations might say they are performing these activities today, but unfortunately, the gaps in their efforts contribute to dismal results. By using this integrated process that aligns these activities so they are working in concert together, organizations can reduce the common problems associated with the "standard" deployment of a stand-alone mystery-shopping program. It provides the tools needed so that managers are no longer given the results of the mystery shops and told to "fix it" without the performance improvement and motivation tools that are paramount for success.

Summary and Conclusion

Your brand exists to generate higher sales and profits, year after year. The brands that deliver best on their brand promise will show that growth. Most organizations have initiatives in place, listen to customers and learn from them, but unfortunately the majority have lackluster success.

The key to overcoming these obstacles lies in tying measurement directly to the tools and motivation your front-line managers and employees need to delight the customer and deliver the brand as envisioned and/or promised through advertising and marketing initiatives. If you have a trusted brand as mentioned in the introduction, it is imperative that all locations deliver on the brand promise. If just one location

fails to deliver on the promise, it's likely that customer will not return to any of your locations. Understanding what is happening at each location positions you to enable your front-line employees to deliver on every opportunity and to celebrate success by recognizing their performance – all while delivering on your brand promise.

Engaging employees around a focused, continuous improvement process, creates the momentum needed to demonstrate the value of the brand to each of the customers who experience it. The result is an optimally aligned organization – with brand, customer, and employee priorities in sync, making customers happier – one experience at a time, and delivering the financial growth needed to win in the marketplace.

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