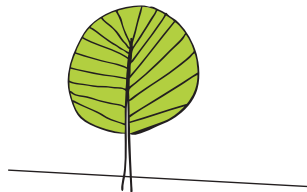
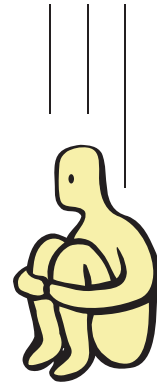


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# Brands: how to stop losing loyal online customers

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Research shows that nearly half of all UK online consumers have changed their mind about a brand as a result of using the internet. With products and services being peer reviewed, Googled and indexed by price comparison services, how much does online branding matter and if it does, what needs to be done to effect its successful communication?

Branding is most commonly associated with assets such as messaging, identity and design plus the product or service itself. However, a brand is more than these tangible elements, it's about the emotional and psychological feelings that enable a person to feel comfortable with, and relate to, the brand. This is why the core objective for any brand is the generation of trust. Obviously the product or service needs to deliver on the brand values; failure to do so is the quickest way to lose a customer's trust.

Many branding experts such as the global strategist John Hagel believe that we are on the cusp of a major shift in how we think about branding. Historically, a brand was seen as a promise that said: "You can rely on what we are offering because of our brand attributes." This will be replaced with a more customer centric branding where the message is "I know you better than the competitors and you can trust me to put together the right products or services to meet your individual needs."

John is correct in his analysis. Internet usage can allow a highly personal relationship between a brand and the user to develop because of a few fundamental differences with the brand online and how users interact with it. When combined and carefully implemented these factors lead to a deeper, more personal relationship between the individual and the brand, with the possibility that the online relationship will become the principal channel for the brand's relationship with the individual.

To be effective, brand values need to be communicated throughout your online activities. Although your website cannot be truly personified it can have attributes that will allow it to represent your company with the same personality you would hope for from your staff. The site can serve, guide and help customers to find the content, services and products they need. How the site does this and the user's perception of the interaction experience will form the customer experience. The development of a positive customer experience is central to successful online branding.

To develop a good customer experience start by looking at your website's information architecture. By reviewing how the content and service features are structured and categorised, coupled with an analysis of user behaviour and requirements, you can produce a structure that delivers a richer experience.

One that delivers both content and action that meets customers' expectations in a friendly, helpful manner.

The development of an intuitive user interface design is based on how you present the information. This is when typical brand attributes are integrated, i.e. the logo, navigational style, font, colours etc. The development of a good interface can sometimes rescue poor information architecture although it will only be a temporary saving as the memories that users have of their experience will not be as positive as they should have been. The design of the interface should meet the needs of the user, coupled with the brand objectives of the business and the product or service.

On top of the architecture and user interface sits the content; this needs to reflect both the architecture and interface design in its tone and approach.

The key issue about the importance of the online branding to successful customer experience is the need for it to be complementary and corresponding with all other brand channels. This can be difficult because of the interactive nature of the online experience, the fact that customers can define their relationship with the brand, and that users can communicate both with other users and the brand directly. No other medium offers this level of

relationship complexity or the potential, at fairly low cost, to develop deep, long-lasting brand adherence.

To develop a successful web strategy the brand, its values and ethos, need to lie at the core of the relationship. They will influence the information architecture, interface design, and content strategy to deliver a customer experience that will engender trust. Although the internet is a great leveller of products and services, users will develop deeper relationships with brands they feel they share a personal empathy with.

Research indicates that users are switching brands based upon the research they conduct online, with much of this research based upon other users experiences of the brand and the selected product or service. If a business can develop deeper brand relationships with their users and then leverage these 'brand trustees' to convert other prospective purchasers online then you have a great business model. This currently happens involuntarily for a number of brands but the objective must be to work towards its inclusion as part of a winning web strategy.

**This is what we do...**



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