The Far-Reaching Impact of Broken Brand Promises

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Let's pretend for a minute that there is no pandemic (feels nice, doesn't it?). Even before all of this started, keeping promises and staying committed to customer needs were probably the biggest drivers of brand loyalty. Fast-forward to now, when the pandemic has added significant stress and uncertainty to many customers' lives, and the stakes for keeping and breaking promises are suddenly even higher.

In the spirit of the #businessgoeson mantra, I would love to focus today's discussion on the critical need for organizations to keep their promises and commitments to customers regardless of world events. But, the world is different right now, and leveraging your CX program to keep a pulse on your execution of keeping commitments and protecting your brand promise is more critical than ever. Brands who fail will lose customers beyond the duration of COVID-19.

DO COMPANIES BUILD COMMITMENTS ON INTENT OR HOPE?

It goes without saying that companies never intend to break promises or otherwise fail to meet customer expectations, but cost constraints, environmental factors, and competitive pressure can quickly complicate this strategy.

Experience programs can help brands keep their promises—for example, a solid listening program with a strong case management/ closed-loop process can immediately let companies know when they're not keeping promises or meeting customer expectations. It's not enough for brands to hope their way to improvement. All hope and no performance has a disastrous impact on customer loyalty, customer retention, and brand reputation. At no time in recent human history has this been truer than during the COVID-19 pandemic.

BROKEN PROMISE, BROKEN TRUST

Let's take a look at how a brand's broken promise played out in the age of COVID.

A peer of mine recently took a flight from South Carolina to Washington state (I won't say which airline—it has enough on its plate already). My peer was horrified to discover that, despite the airline's promise to maintain social distancing and mask wearing rules, no such enforcement took place on her flight. Needless to say, the airline's failure to meet these commitments resulted in a stressful and, frankly, terrible experience.

It's bad enough for my colleague that she had a negative experience with this airline, but for that carrier, the impact goes far beyond the flight. In addition to avoiding that airline for the foreseeable future, my peer is also letting

everyone know about her experience, spurring additional prospective and existing customers to think twice before flying with that airline—at least for now. This reputational damage is also much the worse for the airline than it may otherwise be because it concerns a once-in-a-lifetime global health disaster. That's a pretty bad look from any angle, especially a customer experience one.

HOW CAN BRANDS PICK THE RIGHT PROMISES?

As I mentioned earlier, most brands don't intend to break promises and fail to meet commitments, especially if doing so ends in a story like the one we just talked about. However, it's also true that delivering a brand promise is much easier said than done. Every employee needs to be committed. Senior leadership needs to ensure the right tools, processes, etc are in place. Even so, there are times where companies may have to make trade-offs. So what can companies do to pick the right promises?

The first step here is to know your customer. Know what they're looking for and know what they consider to be important. We often talk about delivering at the moments of truth.

In the example above, safety was my peer's number-one concern, and her moment of truth began when she stepped on the plane. When the airline failed to deliver, it didn't matter how many other perks or promises it offered. If a brand can't keep the promise that customers care about the most, they won't care.

My friend certainly didn't care that the airline kept its promise to offer up snacks and beverages when it couldn't promise something far more important to her: safety.

Fortunately, brands can learn what their customers value—their non-negotiables—and ensure they deliver by implementing a CX program. The best such programs bring together customer, employee, and marketplace voices. This enables brands to know what is valued and, just as importantly, ensures that they create products and consistent delivery processes based on those values. And, these programs need to be dynamic so that companies get the most timely and actionable intelligence continuously. Brands that fail to listen and take action risk disrupting service delivery and, ultimately, both losing customers and tarnishing their brand.

UNDERPROMISE, OVERDELIVER

Think about the last time you needed an appliance fixed. Now, think about what the brand promised about the repair. It probably comes as no surprise that the dreaded appointment window is one of the most stressful parts of this particular journey for customers. It also creates a new set of questions for brands—for example, is it better to create a 2-hour arrival window and meet it 50 percent of the time, or a 6-hour window that's hit 90 percent of the time?

The point with this example is, again, that brands can use experience programs to discover what customers are comfortable with. It can help companies find the sweet spot that resonates with customers, meets their needs, and drives their loyalty. After all, it's always better to underpromise and overdeliver than it is to overpromise and underdeliver.

Relatedly, if any of these brands are reading this... Can I please get the first dispatch of my appointment window?

PROMISES KEPT

Nothing damages a brand quite like broken promises, especially when those promises are either fundamental to industry-wide expectations or have to do with unprecedented current events. Implementing a powerful, versatile Experience Improvement (XI) program is the best way for brands to create promises that are both important and feasible to customers. Companies can then deepen those relationships, create ever-better experiences for customers, and strengthen both their reputation and their bottom line.

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