5 Tips For Boosting Your Brand

Karsten Strauss, Forbes Staff | **10/18/2013**

There are more angles to building (and destroying) your company's brand these days than ever. With various social media outlets in play – as well as the traditional means of getting customers' attention – businesses have to be more tuned in to the image they're projecting in order to be successful.

Get customers, keep customers, make a profit. With social media, brand building has never been easier, harder and more important.

To find out how to maximize impact, FORBES spoke with Taylor King, an associate account manager with Inward Strategic Communications—a Boston-based consulting firm that has advised such brands as Walmart, HP and Campbell's. According to King, companies have to maintain social media strengths in a handful of areas and gave us some examples of some companies that are doing it right.

Here's what he had to say:

Authenticity

Traditionally, brands look to sweepstakes, contests and other hokey strategies to grab consumers' attention. This may draw a bump in interest but ultimately does nothing to set them apart from the pack. A company's marketing plows have to grow from its established identity. One winning idea, according to Mr. King, is AMC's *The Walking Dead* and its "Dead Yourself" app, which turns pictures of fans into depictions of flesh-hungry zombies. "It was such an authentic strategy to say, 'I want all my customers to be able to make themselves into zombies,' and then you can upload it as a profile picture on your Facebook."

The subsequent buzz generates publicity for the television show and the brand while creating a novelty app that even those who've never heard of the show can find appealing and funny.

Reputation

Gone are the days when companies, brands and even people can strongly control their image. With so many social media outlets and a myriad of voices being projected and heard in real time, being aware of what people are saying has never been more important (or more time consuming). One way of leveraging that output is to use it. In the case of Tripadvisor.com – which is a brand Inward Strategic has worked with – hotel reviews use photos taken by users. "You trust what your friends are saying about a person, you're assessing what your peers are saying about a brand," King said. "It's everywhere: it's in a review, it's in blogs, and it's on Facebook." The first step to using customer feedback is knowing what it is and that means monitoring your social media reputation.

Response

Not only is it easier for consumers to sound off on a product or company, its easier for brands to respond. Maybe that's the reason why customers are starting to expect that they will. Brands that address a negative comment or situation with an explanation and solution have the potential to recover a relationship with that customer, King explained. There are other advantages too. "This is an opportunity to crowdsource great ideas from a customer and put it back into the brand." One brand that's doing it right is Starbucks, says King, particularly the "My Starbucks Idea' initiative, which allows customers to give the company their two cents. "They create this feedback loop where you submit ideas so people can like and comment on those ideas and it aggregates on a leader board," he said. "But then Starbucks notifies you when they've reviewed it. Then they notify you when they've implemented it."

Romance

Taking in feedback from the masses and collecting metadata on customers is fine but for a closer relationship with individuals, companies and brands have to go the extra mile and offer tailored experiences, says King. Gamification is a good way to do that, he added, and Nike does a good job with its Nike+, a service that lets customers track their own exercise data via a link to their activity monitoring devices. "It's very easy for the customer to digest and they create a competition and community around it."

This idea of building a hub of services for customers based on their purchased products and allowing them to interact as they wish is more than going the extra mile to achieve consumer connection. "People are getting into the romance of creating personal experiences."

Availability

The customer is royalty, or have said many of the prime movers in retail over the centuries, and the decision to place emphasis on customer service is a no-brainer for most companies and brands. A richer, more aware customer service experience, though, is not something that every brand embraces. Well, every brand should. "Nothing is worse than having to repeat the details of a problem again and again," says King. "Whether you have a mobile service app, call center or live chat feature, the ultimate focus should always be on what works best for the customer." One winner in the customer service and availability column is Apple, he says. "You can access somebody at will with Apple. If I have a problem, it's not a call-in number, I'm not on hold—it's online, through various outlets. There are just so many touch points that Apple has and everyone is knowledgeable and positioned as an expert. I think Apple does it right."