



By Sonia Graham

A Prime Opportunity for Customer Service

Are your customers primed to be warmly or coolly receptive to your service by the time they enter your business world? Recently, a report in the New York Times described a Yale University experiment that demonstrates this very priming. Study subjects, on the way to the lab, were intercepted by a harried lab worker carrying books, papers, a clipboard – and a cup of coffee. The cup of coffee was either hot or iced, and the passer-by subject was asked to help by holding the cup of coffee.

The subject helped out and went to their appointment in the experiment. The experiment consisted of top-of-mind judgment of a hypothetical ‘person.’ A statistical correlation existed between the subject’s judgments of the ‘person’ as hot or cold –dependant upon the cup of coffee the subject had held briefly in the hallway before the experiment.

This is incredible! The subjects of this experiment were pre-conditioned, or “primed” by the environment before they entered the lab, just as your customers may be before they enter your place of business. So, what can you do?

Look around your business. What do customers see, feel, hear, smell and perceive as they arrive and enter your door? What emotions are triggered? Is your customer experience ‘warm’ or ‘cold’? We call these perceptions “physical evidence” –the strongest, most subtle and most overlooked aspect of service delivery in most businesses. Disneyland is dialed in to physical evidence: external noise, smells and line-of-sight are controlled to ensure

nothing interferes with the experience of being at “the happiest place on earth.”

First, pick the low-hanging fruit. You cannot control the traffic enroute to your business, and you cannot control the Light Rail Construction, so focus on what you can control. How you tailor your customer experience depends a lot upon your customers, their expectations, and your business. Ensure that the customer experience upon entry (be that entry by phone, internet, parking lot, etc.) is aligned with the experience that you reasonably expect to optimize for your customers, and thus maximize your business. A live person should answer your phone whenever possible. If you use a recorded message, listen yourself, and assess whether it is clear, concise, and conveys next steps, or not. Check your internet site for ease of use and for complete information that is appropriate to the internet medium. Make sure your parking lot has enough parking spaces, and that the lot is clean and welcoming with good signage. Tell your employees not to take the close spots; leave them for customers.

Another perception-related experiment involved subjects playing an investment game. The game was set up at a long table, and at the other end was either a briefcase and leather portfolio, or a backpack. ‘Investors’ were more judicious and conservative in their game decisions with the austere business markers compared with the free-wheeling investments of those in the presence of a backpack. The definition of

professionalism depends upon your business and your business goals, but the surrogate markers of your professionalism matter. Think about what image you want your customers to perceive and what attitude you want them to adopt while working with your business. Verify that your physical evidence primes your customers in the desired direction.

You’ll see a lot of attention to the customer experience in this article series. Customer experience makes a world of difference, and it can be the differentiator that drives your best customer to your door rather than your competition. Furthermore, customer experience at its essence is not expensive to implement or maintain, but can be very costly to ignore.

Take a step back from the high level of professional investment you bring to your business, and look at it through your customer’s eyes. Do you like what you see? What can you easily change today, for little or no cost? Look at yourself and your staff. Is appropriate attention paid to providing each customer with service commensurate with the lifetime value that you will lose if that customer goes to your competitor?

Often, it is just a matter of paying attention, and of ensuring that, regardless of whether the cup of



coffee they held briefly outside was warm or cold, your customer experience primes your customers to optimize their experience, and maximize your business.

For monthly service-related articles and tips, subscribe to the Maximum Business Advantage “Service Excellence” newsletter at ServiceDeliveryExcellence.com, or request to be added to the mailing list at EVW@Graham-MBA.com. Drop us a line if you would like to see the New York Times article that discusses the psychological phenomenon of Priming. We cannot post it, but we can provide you with a courtesy (non-commercial) copy.

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