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Everything Your Company Does is Marketing

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I was excited to open it. The website had been compelling, and the box was beautifully designed. The product was exactly as advertised. And then I saw the sheet.

It was a simple slip of paper, containing the assembly instructions, apparently cranked out on the company’s photocopier. The text was skewed on the page, so whoever copied it apparently couldn’t be bothered to make sure it was straight before pressing the button. The instructions appear to have been generated with word processing software and an office printer. Two things were obvious: the individual who produced the sheet knew nothing about graphic design, and the copy I received was clearly a copy of a copy.

Immediately, my estimation of the quality of my purchase dropped significantly. It was evident the manufacturer had invested handsomely in the design of the product and the box. So why had they taken such a cheap, trashy approach with the instruction sheet? I knew why. Because it didn’t matter. Who cared what the instructions looked like?

It happens all the time. Companies making high-quality products or offering impressive services forget that every “customer touch” affects what people think about them. A well-written, nicely laid out instruction sheet could have enhanced my impression of my purchase and the company that made it. Instead, my final impression of my purchase is that this manufacturer is cheap and careless. I’ll think twice before buying from them again.

All too often, companies view small elements of their contacts with customers as throwaways. Package inserts, product stickers, automated emails, even invoices all send messages that can unwittingly chip away at the companies’ hard-earned reputations.

The simple fact is that everything that may end up in your customers’ hands is marketing. Every point of contact between you and your customer presents the opportunity to either strengthen or carve away at your image. You can make the best driver golfers can own, but if you skimp on the packaging, it’s going to look cheap. The machining of your parts screams precision, but when the shipping clerk haphazardly jams the warranty document in the box, you look sloppy. You take pride in your team’s friendliness, but that billing notice you just sent was cold and abrupt.

An example of a company that really understands this principle is Southwest Airlines. The next time you travel somewhere on Southwest, pay attention. Everything you see not only carries Southwest’s graphic image, but also exudes the company’s longstanding sense of humor. Your bag of in-flight snacks will carry a quippy message, as will the napkin accompanying it. The posters you pass as you venture down the jet way are funny. At some airports, I’ve seen the screens at unused gates displaying messages like “No flights, but plenty of empty seats.”

Those are all little things. You may miss some of them, and frankly, you probably wouldn’t notice if they weren’t there. But each time you notice one, you may smile a bit, and your impression of the airline gets stronger.

How many “little things” does your company produce or send that could just as easily enhance what customers think about you and make them more likely to return? Is your instruction sheet a dull list of commands, or a friendly conversation between you and your customer? Are your technical bulletins as exciting as a fifth-grade dance or do they build a rapport with your customers? What about your promotional products? The golf shirts you hand out at tournaments can be just another garment, or they can work for you. Why pass out tired trinkets at trade shows when you can hand out something unique that’s tied to the product you’re pushing?

This approach takes a conscious effort. You have to be willing to take the time to consider every step of every way you connect with customers. You also have to take an honest look in the company’s collective mirror. That can cause some challenging internal conversations — and it’s a good reason to consider turning to outside marketing expertise.

The fact that an outside marketer doesn’t yet know your company as well as you do is an asset in this process because they’ll experience every “little thing” as new, just as your customers will. They’ll examine everything you do through your customers’ eyes. Your engineering team may think your instruction sheet is perfectly accurate, but an outside expert will be able to explain why non-engineers find it incomprehensible (and why you’re getting so many support calls for that product).

A little attention can pay big dividends for your reputation and customer satisfaction. So despite a familiar book’s advice, it really pays to sweat the small stuff.

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