

BECOMING A TALKABLE BRAND

HOW CUSTOMER TOUCHPOINTS LEAD TO CUSTOMER TALKING POINTS

by John Moore

Every successful brand strives to become talkable. The reasons are simple yet profound.

Each week, the typical American consumer will mention 60 brand names with people online using social media and offline in conversations. Additionally, recent research featured in a McKinsey Quarterly article indicates word of mouth is responsible for up to 50 percent of all purchase decisions made.

"Talkable brands penetrate the culture," said Christine Cea, Brand PR Director for Unilever. *"They become so seamlessly woven into the fabric of conversations that sharing brand-related information takes on a value of social currency."*

In other words, Christine is saying this: If you're not talked about, you're forgotten about. And being forgotten about is a recipe for business failure.

Let's be clear. I'm not talking about getting some buzz for your brand. Not at all.

I believe the word "buzz" needs to be eliminated from a marketer's vocabulary. Buzz is exclamation point marketing. It's a one hit wonder. It's one and done. Big bang one day, nothing the next day. Too many marketers are relying on the Big Bang Theory to get people talking.

And far too many marketers are living for The Dot and not The Line. The Dot, being a "One Day Big

Bang" approach to getting people talking. The Line, being an "All Day Every Day" way to becoming a talkable brand.

The average life expectancy of a Fortune 500 business is about 40 years. The average life span of a small business is a little more than eight years. Clearly, a business is not in business for just one day; it is in business for a series of days — a line.

It's a marketer's responsibility to give consumers reasons to talk about brands, products and services not just for one day, but rather, for a series of days. Starbucks does this. So does Apple. And Zappos is building its business on being talkable everyday.

For these businesses, being talkable is less about marketing channels and instead, more about customer touchpoints delivered through great buying experiences and receiving exceptional customer service.

Starbucks and Apple both deliver great buying experiences. Immediately upon entering a Starbucks, your senses come alive. You smell the coffee. You hear the music. And you feel the warmth of the in-store décor. Your senses are further heightened as you order your grande, non-fat, no-foam, extra hot vanilla latte using language only spoken inside a Starbucks. The final touchpoint in the Starbucks buying experience occurs when you take the first sip of your drink. It's equal parts exhale and enjoyment. The entire buying experience at every customer touchpoint inside at Starbucks is talkable.

The retail buying experience at an Apple store is similar. No other retail store looks like or feels like an Apple store. Your senses are on perpetual overload as you see, hear, touch and practically taste the delicious design of Apple's iPhones, iPads and iMacs.

Not only is delivering great buying experiences talkable, it's also profitable. According to a recent Harris Interactive survey,

"Businesses do not decide what customers talk about. Customers make those decisions. Because those decisions are up to customers, it's crucial for businesses to give customers reasons to talk at every customer touchpoint."

27 percent of consumers would pay 15 percent more for an excellent customer buying experience. (How's that for ROI!)

Zappos, an online shoe and apparel retailer, is the current darling of the retail world. And for good reason; they have a loyal and evangelical customer base. It's estimated 75 percent of Zappos total sales come from returning customers, and these repeat customers buy twice as much as new customers buy.

Zappos understands the hidden engine driving their success is delivering WOW customer service. To foster the spirit of WOWing a customer, Zappos decided early on to divert much of its marketing budget to seemingly mundane customer service touchpoints.

A slow loading website aggravates customers; that's why Zappos spends time and money to ensure its website loads faster than its retail competitors. Zappos promises to deliver orders to customers in two-to-five business days. However, the company, at its expense, over-delivers on its promise by shipping most orders for next-day delivery. Customers are encouraged to buy multiple shoes, purses and other apparel to see which fits best and ship back whatever doesn't fit at no cost for 365 days.

Tony Hsieh, Zappos CEO, makes the business case for being talkable by explaining, "Over the years, the number one driver of our growth at Zappos has been repeat customers and word of mouth. Our philosophy has been to take most of the money we would have spent on paid advertising and invest it into customer service and the customer experience instead, letting our customers do the marketing for us through word of mouth."

Starbucks, Apple, Zappos and every other business does not decide what customers talk about. Customers make those decisions. Because those decisions are up to customers, it's crucial for businesses to give customers reasons to talk at every customer touchpoint.

If a business gives customers reasons to talk not just one day but every day, then it's well on its way to become an endearing and enduring talkable brand. And the bottom line is listening to what customers are saying and responding accordingly — by tailoring the buying experience to their needs and wants, supporting them with superior customer service and giving them reasons to come back. That's the recipe for creating a truly talkable brand.

John Moore (Baylor BA '92) was formerly in marketing at Starbucks Coffee and Whole Foods Market; he now runs the Brand Autopsy Marketing Practice (www.BrandAutopsy.com).

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