

Continuous

Branding

**For Service-Based Organisations
Ambitious to Grow**

Craig Thatcher

CHAPTER 5

**Your Service
Brand is Great**

Your people are a crucial part of your brand and the way they personify it defines your clients' experiences. Unlike a product, your service is an unknown quantity to new clients until the very critical point of delivery and consumption.

Up until then, it exists only as an intangible promise. You can't expect new clients to know precisely what the quality of your service is like until they've actually tried it for themselves – no matter how well you explain what it's going to be like.

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Printed in the United Kingdom and published simultaneously in electronic format.

First edition, 2015

ISBN: 978-0-9932168-1-7

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Regardless of the size of organisation, leaders set the tone and culture. They have to be confident, inquisitive and crave new ways of thinking and behaving if they're going to grow their brand. They must also take brave, but not reckless decisions, even when those around them are not sure what to do. They also have to identify and face up to difficult issues by picking people with the right skills to help them achieve their goals.

EXAMPLE: A good example of how branding can help improve performance is Restaurant Associates (www.restaurantassociates.co.uk). In 2014, the corporate caterer and restaurant operator was awarded Business & Industry Caterer of the Year at the Foodservice Catey Awards. The judges were particularly impressed with how the brand had been re-positioned and was growing. The numbers were impressive and based on a turnover of £150 million (US\$ 235 million), client retention rate was 95%, employee engagement was up 6%, net promoter score was up a very impressive 45% and sales were also up 13%. "Producing tangible and enviable results", the judges' words, not mine.

Three and a half years before, the company acknowledged the things they weren't doing right. It had lost its edge and reputation, so they put together a tailored strategy with a branding agency to address those issues. It's impressive for a division of such a big company to do that. This was largely down to the bravery and leadership of Managing Director at the time, Andy Harris.

All service brands are built by the people who provide the service. So the people need to understand the organisation's culture, the 'promise' to clients and how to put this into practice every day. Motivating them all to move forward in the same direction is challenging but can be very rewarding. Continuous Branding will not make up for inconsistent, poor or over-priced service because the whole point of branding a service is to set expectations for precisely what the brand promises – with tangible clues so there are no disappointments.

Your clients' expectations are set as they progress through every stage of their journey. The longer it is, the more opportunities you have – but you also increase the chances of losing them, so try and keep it as short as possible without pressurising them unduly.

Your clients look for visual, audible and/or physical clues to assess the quality of the service that they think they'll experience from your brand. If you define precisely what that experience is going to be then you can demonstrate to your people precisely how you expect them to provide it. It's one thing setting expectations but how do you then encourage your people to exceed them? You can do this by explaining why your brand exists, and why they're such an important part of building it. In the following example it's the students who are the key link between the hotel and the guests' experience.

EXAMPLE: The Edge Hotel School (www.edgehotelschool.ac.uk) is the first hotel school of its kind in the UK and is based at Wivenhoe House (www.wivenhoehouse.co.uk), which is open to paying guests, and students enjoy a unique learning experience there. They study to achieve a degree in Hotel Management and are able to work alongside hospitality professionals helping to run Wivenhoe House, a real-life, four-star country house hotel. Having created the brand identity, the branding agency proposed the strap line 'Intriguingly Different', to arouse curiosity and conversation between guests and the students. And there's plenty to talk about – the architecture of the 18th century old house, the new, contemporary garden wing, the historic stories of previous owners, the parkland painted by British artist, John Constable and of course, the unique way the hotel is set up and run. The most inspiring stories are being created by the current students who practice there and will become future leaders in the hospitality industry.

Although setting an expectation of the quality of service is important, nothing is more important than the service experience itself. So when you're designing the service, make sure you consider every last tiny detail. However small, insignificant and apparently unrelated you think these details are, they give subtle cues to your clients that help to raise or lower their perception of the quality of their experience. In the next example, you wouldn't believe that there could be such a strong correlation between the quality of flat pack furniture instructions and the overall buying and assembly experience. So what elements could be having an effect on your brand experience?

EXAMPLE: I managed a project re-designing flat pack furniture assembly instructions for a leading UK multi-channel retailer. To assess whether the new instructions made any difference to the assembly process, one group of customers received the old instructions and a second group received the new ones. Both groups were interviewed afterwards by phone with an identical set of questions. The results revealed that customers with the new instructions felt their whole buying and assembly experience was much better than they'd expected and they were significantly more likely to make a repeat purchase than the group who had the old instructions. This neatly highlights the impact of just one component part of the journey on the overall brand experience – and ultimately on customer loyalty. Powerful stuff indeed.

If you're looking to save costs then cut them where your clients won't notice them. For instance, something as small as using wire coat hangers instead of wooden ones at front of house can affect your clients' perception of the quality and value of your whole service proposition. You won't pick up on this until it's time to charge for your service. If your prospective client has had their perception of quality lowered, then they won't be keen to pay your asking price – even if it's the most competitive you can offer. Anyone can cut the wrong costs. It's knowing the right ones to cut which make the difference to your success.

We all know that people don't buy from companies, they buy from people. Actually, they prefer to buy from experts they like and not faceless companies they don't. So don't hide your experts away. These people are the real, and only difference, between your brand and the next one. Never ever underestimate the advantage they bring. Given the choice, why would anyone buy from somebody they don't relate to, or even like? Would you?

When it comes to showing your people how to personify your brand you need to bring out the very best performance in them – by making them feel valued, important and cared for. This boosts their self-worth and if they feel good about themselves, they'll feel good about your brand too. Indeed, they'll buy into your brand themselves and feel motivated and engaged to deliver it to the very best of their ability.

There are many different ways you can achieve this – it's for you to use the ones that work best for your people and your brand. Small shifts in behaviour can lead to bigger shifts in thinking and result in a dramatic effect on the experience of your brand.

As your world becomes more competitive you need to provide personalised brand experiences that are unique to each of your clients. It might sound far fetched if you have many clients but remember that your brand is an ideal match for a certain type of client. They're going to be more similar to your brand and to each other than you probably think. This means you'll

be able to develop highly engaging and personalised experiences for your brand to share with them. Don't be afraid to surprise them in unexpected ways because they're far more likely to remember the experience if it was better than they expected in some distinctive way. Think out of the ordinary. And don't constrain yourself to always doing things the 'normal' way. It may only be a small way, but it will be different and memorable for it. Positive, memorable experiences are likely to be shared with others and spread the word about your brand on a very personal level.

All except the smallest of companies can be slow to make decisions and adapt, especially when they have to make big changes because they haven't invested continuously. Inertia occurs because people are uncertain about the future. Their futures. If you build change into your organisation as part of your operational model then you'll be in a far better place going forward.

The lack of speed and agility increases the mortality rate and brands die out because they simply run out of time through procrastination and stagnation. Assuming that there isn't something fundamentally wrong with your service, you don't have to be the best in the world but if you have speed on your side then you'll have a far greater chance of staying in the race, than if you don't. This also means you don't have to re-brand every few years when growth slows because you're committed to Continuous Branding and all the benefits it brings.

There's no longer enough time to be cautious. Everything is moving so fast that some retailers, for example, have changed their mind-sets completely. They're finding it's better to try something new on a small scale – fail – then learn from that mistake and move on, rather than spend ages thoroughly testing something only to find the opportunity has been lost or the market has taken a step in a different direction. It pays for them to have a backup plan for when things go wrong, as they can. This way of thinking is in direct contrast to the way they used to work, with new ideas being developed and tested, then trialled over a period of time in a number of stores before being rolled out across the entire estate.

The way your organisation delivers services every day makes the single biggest difference to how successful your brand will be over the long term. I bet you're thinking, 'that's totally obvious'. But if you maintain consistency every day, you'll blow most of your competitors away as the majority don't concentrate hard enough on getting the basics right 100% of the time.

EXAMPLE: I'm frequently disappointed by skilled trades people when I want work done in my home. Rarely do I select someone on the cheapest quotation and I've often chosen simply on the basis that they've turned up for an appointment on time and produced a quotation in a reasonable time scale. Others may not have made it to the initial meeting at all, or couldn't be bothered to provide a quotation. If your market is competitive – you have to work

hard on the basics. Once a tradesman has received my go ahead, they often don't fulfil the job right first time round either. Work has to be re-done because they've not listened to the brief, asked the right questions or recorded what was agreed. Think of the wasted time and cost of materials, plus the hit to their profitability because of their inefficiencies. When my son was a teenager and got his first holiday job with a local retailer, I told him his first task was to make sure he turned up on time every day – and that way he would beat off 95% of the other new starters. This turned out to be shockingly and depressingly true. Many of them couldn't get out of bed on time for their shifts and soon lost their jobs. At the most basic level I know that as an employer, I want good reliable people.

Your organisation will probably provide a mixture of formal and informal training and personal development opportunities to help your people be the best they can. You should also spend time talking to them about your brand, what it means to you and your clients, and why you do things the way you do. How you achieve this should be specific to your organisation. It should begin with all your existing people and be undertaken at regular intervals to continually reinforce your brand values. It can be demonstrated with inspirational stories of your people engaging with your clients. Individuals or groups should be praised and thanked for their outstanding behaviour and excellent service. Or perhaps they should be recognised for learning new skills and changing the way they engage with colleagues. You may want to formalise and ritualise all of this at an annual award ceremony, or make it a more casual

affair. Whichever way you deal with it, your people will see their peers being recognised and rewarded for the fantastic way they personify your brand. I do know that successful service brands have detailed inductions, backed up by recognition and reward programmes that communicate precisely what the brand stands for and how everyone is expected to personify it.

How do you achieve this? The creation of multi-sensory personalised experiences will allow your people to see your service brand perform. Give some thought as to how they should see it in action, hear it, taste it and smell it for themselves. By exploiting their senses, the experience will be memorable and they can more easily carry it forward to personify your brand at the point of delivery. In smaller organisations everything is a lot less formal, but nevertheless these activities can still take place – just on a less grand scale, but no less impactful. How do you want to personify your brand for your clients? It's not good enough just to issue instructions to everyone without explaining how they should be interpreted. If you talk about it you'll make it easier for your people to do their jobs – better results will be achieved and your brand will grow more consistently.

EXAMPLE: To support the re-branding of a business services brand, the design agency proposed that a light hearted learning tool based on a board game should be used to communicate, reinforce and discuss the brand values for new starters as well as old hands. It helped to ensure everyone was clear about what they needed to do every day, and why they should do it. The learning tool was designed to change their thinking and the way they should work together to improve efficiency, without sacrificing the quality of the brand experience for their clients. The game posed questions to each of the players in turn and how well they answered these determined how fast they completed the game. The tool provided managers with a very simple, practical and personal way of engaging small groups of people together – discussing the issues raised and the answers. It proved to be very successful.

Look at the tools you already have access to. See how social media impacts on the way people talk about and engage with brands – and provides them with personalised brand experiences. Take Twitter as an example. It was conceived and developed as a real time conversational tool. It's very immediate with breaking news, trending topics, or simply chatter. Dick Costolo (@dickc), CEO of Twitter, says they aim to be “the indispensable companion to life in the moment...”. This quote appeared in the Twitter feed of Rory Cellan-Jones (@ruskin147).

To get the most from Twitter you have to learn the art of conversation and be ready to engage and interact. This opens up huge opportunities for brands and branding. It's a means of projecting the finer points of your brand's personality to a very interested audience and a unique brand experience all at the same time.

Many organisations are also experiencing that Twitter is being used to broadcast complaints about poor service. Whilst uncomfortable for the organisation involved, this can only be a good thing if it improves the quality for everyone.

In an article, '10 reasons why people follow brands on Twitter' @TwitterAdsUK cited a key insight from research by Nielsen (@Nielsen). Here it is: "...Twitter users following brands are keen to hear more from those brands. This suggests there is a major opportunity gap waiting to be filled by brands that can develop engaging accounts."

The word 'engaging' is the most important word in that quote. You can do the usual marketing 'stuff' which obviously has great merit – promoting your brand, imparting sleek sales messages, posting beautiful brand imagery and running promotions and competitions. But brands can't just parade around and shout a lot on Twitter. That would be two dimensional and boring. Brands need to embrace those 'oh so fabulous in-between bits'! They're all those 'life in the moment' chances to talk to people and perhaps more importantly

– a chance to listen to what they're saying about your brand. The chance to be witty and charming. The chance to be warm and show integrity. The chance to make a difference to someone's day. The chance to be cheeky, if you dare and it's appropriate. The chance to join in and be 'on trend' within the wider world. The chance to give out information. The chance to right wrongs. In short, the chance to be helpful, useful and relevant in a far less formal way and yet with plenty of personality!

You can really bring your brand to life on people's screens – but it needs to look effortless and a seamless delivery of your brand's persona. In reality, it requires considerable investment in strategy, creativity, planning and organisation. It also needs enough savvy, well briefed Tweeters, able to think on their feet, and deliver content and responses in line with your brand strategy. Not an inconsiderable task! Get it right and it'll make clients feel good about your brand and they'll buy in on a very personal level.

In this chapter I've covered the importance of the client journey, setting expectations and providing personalised experiences to lead your brand and your people to higher performance.

In the next chapter, I'll explain how my findings and insights led to the development of Continuous Branding – and how its five principles could help you to consistently grow your service brand.

Key points in this chapter

- People don't buy from companies, they buy from people. Actually, from experts they like – so don't hide yours away. They are your only real point of difference, so make the most of them.
- Spend time talking to your people about your brand, what it means to clients and why you do the things the way you do.
- To personify your brand, make your people feel valued, important and cared for and you'll bring out the best performance in them.
- To outshine your competitors, provide personalised experiences for your clients that they'll find memorable and will want to share with others.
- Small shifts in behaviour can lead to bigger shifts in thinking and a dramatic effect on your clients' experiences of your brand.



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Craig Thatcher
branding specialist_author_managing director
M +44(0)7497 462520
craig@greenfisher.co.uk

www.greenfisher.co.uk
T +44 (0)118 933 8558

dba design
business
association