

Little things say big things

You could be killing your brand by failing to get the 'trivial' details right when you interact with customers

By Ted Matthews

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I recently flew to Chicago on Air Canada. After reaching cruising altitude, the steward announced that they would shortly be serving drinks and showing us a repeat of last night's CBC Television newscast. The drinks started, but the news did not. Eventually, the steward announced that they were having technical difficulties and told us, "Sorry, no news—the VCR isn't working."

What? A \$120-million aircraft and the VCR doesn't work? "Never mind missing yesterday's news," we wondered, "what about the rest of the plane—is it working?"

This little, but all too common, Air Canada-type glitch made me recall one of my favourite brand quotes. Donald Burr, CEO of the former People's Express discount-airline pioneer, liked to tell his staff: "Stains on our coffee trays mean we don't maintain our jet engines." Little things say big things!

A brand isn't the logo or the advertising, it's what people think of you. And that comes from thousands of touchpoints and interactions they have with your people, products and services in every location and at every moment. All those touchpoints—the positive ones, the negative ones and the bland ones too—add up to what people think of you.

At the same time, having a strong brand for your company has become vital. We live in a global market, which provides for hyperchoice in every category of product or service. This, in turn, is creating hyper-messaging, with all these firms competing for brain space in our prospects' minds. In fact, consumers/buyers are now using brands for self-defence. Their ability to screen out messages is becoming the only way to cope, so they select the brands and corresponding messages they will let in and avoid all others. They skip industry trade shows, filter out spam, ditch junk mail, screen their phone calls, mute commercials, download their own commercial-free music and read only narrow vertical magazines—taking in only confirmation messaging about their own personal-use brands. Ouch.

So growing your brand is tough! Today, one of the few ways you can still do so is with remarkability. That is, the product or service must be so special as to be *re-mark-able*, one that people will tell their friends and acquaintances about.

Back to the airline business for an example. People keep telling me how terrific WestJet and its people are: they're friendly, they tell jokes, the flights are on time—and I have never heard about the VCR not working! WestJet's managers have built their brand by understanding that it's the little positive touchpoints that lead to recommendations. After either experiencing or hearing about how terrific WestJet is, we will likely pay attention to its advertising and let it reinforce the same remarkable message with proof, by telling us that each person at WestJet is an owner of the company. Cool.

One of my clients is Upper Canada Forest Products, which distributes hardwood lumber across North America. In an old industry of tough, "take it or leave it" lumber guys, Upper Canada differentiates itself with a brand promise of "What you want, when you want it, by people that know and care." And as the first touchpoint proof of this promise, the phone only ever rings twice when you call them. They want you to talk to a live body, so if the person you've called doesn't answer by the second ring, your call kicks over to everybody's desk and another friendly and helpful person will grab it (fast) and take care of you. Nice.

In my work as a brand coach, I visit a lot of companies. The "It's the little things" talk is a great place to start because virtually everyone can use a little help here. The classic example is the "dead plant syndrome." Ever go into an office and see a dead plant in the corner? The plant that was bought to make the office look nice and friendly? The same one that withered and died without anyone noticing? I can assure you that your clients and prospective clients and

recruited employees have noticed. And if stains on the trays say that we don't service our jet engines, then a dead plant screams that you might be missing some important numbers if you're in the accounting business, or that the oil hasn't been topped off if you're in the car-rental business.

It always amazes me how many businesses I know that, after fussing to get every detail just right for their grand opening, later don't seem to notice the cracked walls, dirty washrooms or stacks of junk everywhere that have developed over time. Yet often, these are the first touchpoints for visitors.

I understand that all this attention to detail is hard work. As a rule of thumb, I suggest you use the question: Are we "opening day ready"? If this were the very first day you were open for business, would you accept the way your place looks, smells and sounds, and how your team is acting? After all, that will be what people think of you.

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