

HARMONIZING YOUR 'TOUCHPOINTS'

Consumers may come in contact with your brand on a daily basis. Use each interaction to strengthen their beliefs about your brand. BY SCOTT DAVIS AND TINA LONGORIA



Think about all of the different ways that your brand interacts with and makes an impression on your customers, your channel partners, your employees and all other critical partners that help to bring your brand to life.

Then, ask yourself this question: "Are you in control of all these interactions and confident that every 'touch' your brand has with those stakeholders is operating the way you want it to?"

If you answered "no," you're proba-

bly like countless other companies that have limited control over the interactions their brand has with stakeholders and are not even aware of all of the different ways in which their brand can impact or be impacted by these various interactions.

These companies risk brand denigration. Plus, they put their brand's success in the hands of others.

But if you are in control of these brand interactions or what we call brand "touchpoints," then your com-

pany is in control of its own destiny.

You most likely recognize that by consistently reinforcing and strengthening what your brand stands for, through each of these touchpoints, you can drive customer satisfaction.

With a high degree of customer satisfaction, your brand will tend to experience superior loyalty, greater word-of-mouth, higher price points, a higher degree of consumer forgiveness ("oh, that slip-up was just a one-time event") and, most importantly, higher levels of profitability.

Southwest Airlines, Lexus, Starbucks, Kraft and PepsiCo are some of the companies that actively control the multitude of touchpoints their brands have with consumers.

These companies each focus on constantly reinforcing their brand promise. These marketers also use every customer interaction to reinforce consumers' beliefs about their brands.

Defining brand touchpoints

What is a brand touchpoint? It's all of the different ways that your brand interacts with and makes an impression on customers, employees and other stakeholders.

Every action, tactic and strategy your brand has with customers or stakeholders, whether it is through advertising, a merchandising display or a customer-service call, is a brand touchpoint.

In our experience, every brand has at least 30 and sometimes up to 100 brand touchpoints that customers, employees and other stakeholders experience on a daily basis.

In general, brand touchpoints fall into three distinct customer-experience segments: pre-purchase experience,

purchase experience and post-purchase experience touchpoints (See Brand Touchpoint Wheel diagram on p.8). Let's define each.

Pre-purchase experience touchpoints

These brand touchpoints influence whether customers or future customers will consider purchasing your brand. Typical pre-purchase experience touchpoints for consumer packaged goods (CPG) companies include advertising, direct mail, samples, free-standing inserts (FSIs) and the company's Web site.

Specific pre-purchase experience touchpoint goals and objectives include:

- Retaining current customers. Keep current customers loyal to your brand by continuing to remain relevant in their lives.
- Heightening brand awareness. Make prospects aware of the main differences between your brand and a close competitor's brand.
- Shaping brand perceptions and expectations. Shape perceptions of prospects by helping them to understand the benefits that your brand offers vs. competitor brands.
- Driving brand relevance. Ensure that prospects link the benefits of your brand to important needs and wants in their lives, thereby recognizing the value your brand brings.
- Driving brand consideration. Steer the brand into a prospect's consideration set.

For a marketer such as General Mills, this means things akin to cereal promotions, coupons, online games, public relations, word-of-mouth, etc.

Purchase experience touchpoints

Purchase and usage experience touchpoints move a customer from only considering your brand to actually purchasing it.

Typical purchase experience touchpoints for CPG companies include packaging, P-O-P displays, in-store sampling, price, an influential sales rep in the store or seeing what the per-

son next to you just bought.

Specific purchase experience goals and objectives include:

- Instilling confidence. Maximize the value that prospects see in your offering and mitigate any doubts they may have about making the right decision.
- Delivering value. Make prospects understand the price-value relationship they are getting in your brand vs. other brands.

At this stage, you have to instill trust in the minds of your prospects and prove beyond a reasonable doubt that your offering will be better than others. Reassure them that their purchase will deliver the value they are expecting.

Post-purchase experience touchpoints

Post-purchase brand touchpoints are all the interactions that are leveraged after the sale to help maximize the total brand experience. The usage or consumption of the product is experienced at this stage as well.

Typical post-purchase experience touchpoints include product and package performance, customer ser-

vice, customer satisfaction surveys, loyalty programs, loyalty coupons, Web site visits and newsletters.

Specific post-purchase experience touchpoint goals and objectives include:

- Delivering on your brand promise. Meet or exceed customer performance and usage expectations. This includes delivering brand value above and beyond expectations as well as seeking new ways to delight customers.
- Increasing brand loyalty and advocacy. Good customers not only look to your brand for repeat and future purchases, but they also endorse and recommend your brand to others.

Of the three brand touchpoints, the post-purchase experience is the most under-leveraged (especially within CPG companies), yet offers potentially powerful ways to drive sustainable and profitable growth to the company.

Tide is an example of a brand that has not overlooked the post-purchase experience. For instance, Tide's Web site, www.tide.com, offers online coupons, advice on doing

PACKAGING STAYS TRUE TO BRAND PROMISE

Tom's of Maine does an excellent job of staying true to its brand promise through many of its touchpoints, including its product packaging.

Tom's promise is to provide natural care products made with pure, simple ingredients that are safe, effective and pleasant to use.

The packaging respects the promise

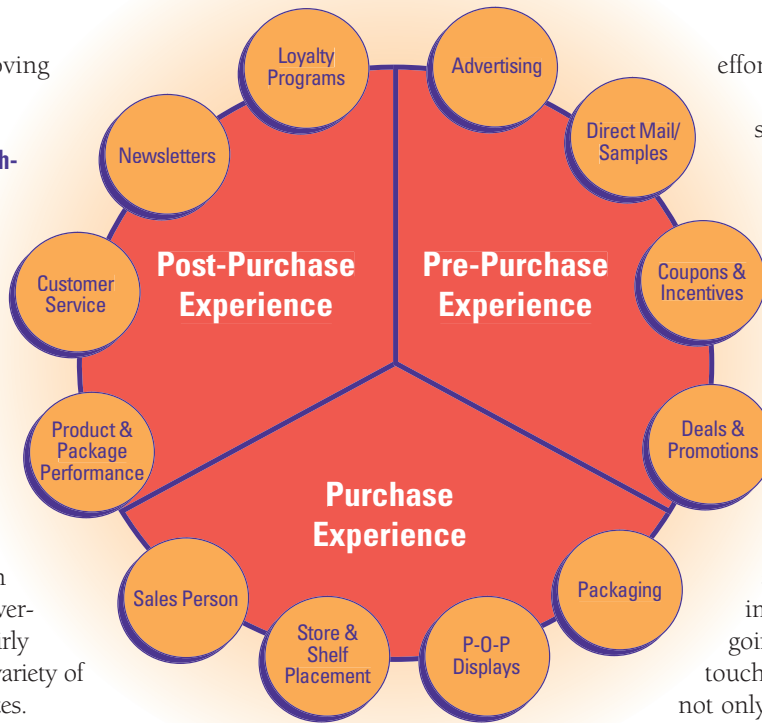
that the brand makes to its consumers. The packaging is simple, pure, environmentally friendly and not tested on animals.

Unlike most traditional toothpaste marketers, Tom's does not use bright colors with sparkling, holographic bursts on its toothpaste packaging. Instead, the company uses a simple, beige-colored carton with a picture of the plant (e.g., peppermint) that designates the flavor variety.



To reinforce the natural aspect of its toothpaste product, Tom's of Maine prints images of pulp fibers on the paperboard carton.

Brand Touchpoint Wheel



laundry and tips on removing tough stains.

Assessing your brand's touchpoints

Since you cannot focus on every single touchpoint due to time and resource constraints, you need to identify the handful of touchpoints that really drive the brand experience you desire.

We use four general steps with our clients to help them determine which touchpoints they should leverage. These four steps are fairly universal and cut across a variety of industries and company sizes.

Step one: Identify all the touchpoints that impact and influence customers' perceptions of your brand. Categorize these brand touchpoints by the three experience segments that we outlined above.

It is a good idea to ask multiple departments in your company for input on the touchpoints, as many of the touchpoints come from other areas beyond marketing.

Step two: Gain a deep understanding of how you are performing against each of these touchpoints from both an internal and external perspective. This should include an assessment of your touchpoints' strengths and weaknesses, the ideal end-state for each touchpoint as well as competitors' performance on each.

This second step is where the revelations start. You will hear from customers what impacts their perceptions of your brand the most. You will understand where your touchpoint vulnerabilities are vs. the competition. Plus, you will have clarity on what the touchpoint gaps are and what it will take to close those gaps.

Importantly, eventual touchpoint owners need to get engaged here to have their voice heard, to hear the market's perspectives directly and to

effort and resources.

Use a set of objective screens to prioritize your touchpoints. These screens include impact on customers' perception of the brand, size of the gap between today and tomorrow, cost of implementation, a cost-benefit assessment, as well as the touchpoint's ability to help your company achieve its longer-term goals and objectives.

Step four: Implement and manage your high-impact touchpoints on an ongoing basis. Whoever owns the touchpoint is now responsible for not only executing it, but educating employees on its value, understanding how the marketplace is experiencing it and leveraging metrics that will help to inform future decisions tied to that touchpoint. **BP**

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start to better understand the challenges that lie ahead for them in getting to the desired touchpoint end-state.

Step three: Based upon these internal and external perspectives, prioritize the touchpoints and determine which are high-impact and will have an immediate effect on brand perception and experience.

This will also help you determine where you should focus your time,

TALK WITH ALL CUSTOMERS

In conducting external research to find out your touchpoints' strengths and weaknesses, you should talk to three types of customers. These include:

- **Past or lost customers**

These folks can help you better pinpoint which brand touchpoints are negatively impacting consumers. They also can isolate competitors' touchpoints that have swayed them to move from your brand to another brand.

- **Potential or future customers**

These consumers can help you determine what is working well and not so

well in their pre-purchase and purchase interactions with your brand. Also, this group can tell you what your competition is doing well, in real-time.

- **Current customers**

These individuals can give you direct insights as to what you are doing so well that they have stayed loyal to your franchise. Newer customers, who are active with your brand today, can tell you why their participation with your brand has been limited and/or what touchpoints helped them make the decision to buy your brand over others.