

THE BLEND



ALL EYES ON THE CUSTOMER **BY GERARD TANNAM**

If You Don't Know Me By Now

When the good times roll and customers are spending freely, sometimes all you have to do as the owner of a business is open up shop and wait for the queue to form. Those are heady days indeed. So long as a ready market exists, the emphasis in the business tends towards production and delivery, and the customer can remain just out of picture: vague, silent and anonymous. Of course, the mantras of customer-care can very nearly be heard above the clatter of industrious activity but the truth is that your mind is naturally elsewhere, preoccupied with fulfilling orders and keeping things running smoothly along.

And then, one day, the orders come with less frequency, the wheels of production slow and the line at the counter dwindles away almost to nothing. And for the first time in a long while, you lift your head and ask: 'Where is my customer?' And the silence that greets the question is deafening.

As for the customers who once beat a path to your door, they haven't vanished into the ether (although you could be forgiven for thinking that they had). No, they're just elsewhere, maybe spending their money with a down-market competitor, or spending less often or perhaps not spending at all. So what are you going to do now?

You Will Never, Never Know Me

Rather than wonder where your customer has gone, you might be better off asking

another question instead: 'Who is my customer?'

Sometimes, it's easy to think of your customer only in terms of someone who stands at the counter and takes delivery of whatever you have to offer in exchange for payment.

In this two-dimensional world of the transaction, you don't know your customer at all. You see them only in terms of the mechanical exchange and when they take their business elsewhere, you're at a loss to know why. Often, you explain away their departure by blaming fickle human nature, cutthroat competition or economic downturn. But how do you account for those other businesses that enjoy loyal custom, maintain their prices and thrive in that same downturn?

You must account for them. Otherwise, you're in danger of growing fatalistic and handing over control of your business destiny to the vagaries of the commercial environment. When you look a little closer at those businesses that seem to fly in the face of the prevailing circumstances, one thing becomes evident: They know their customer.

They have forged a relationship that seems resistant to much of what goes on around them. They know where their customer is and why they are there. Of course, they often have to tweak their offer to take account of changing circumstances but the dynamics of the core exchange hold fast and they can count on their customers to stay with them.

You Should Understand Me

So how do you go about getting to know your customer? You can begin by watching them and seeing from their behaviour what matters to them and what prompts them to choose one thing over another. You must pay attention. Many of us spend a lot of time in the company of our customers, or at least in the places where they go, without paying any attention to what they're doing and why they might be doing it.

Of course, watching your customer only tells you so much. You can also move a little closer and ask them directly. This is often best done at a time when you don't have an immediate selling agenda (or perhaps when they've already bought from you). Maybe, for reasons of confidentiality or objectivity, it's easier for you to have someone else ask those questions on your behalf? No matter; the important thing is that you ensure those questions are asked and that you listen carefully to the answers.

In asking the questions, a lightly constructed conversational approach tends to work best. Remember that people often don't give a lot of thought to how they make decisions so don't ask them to analyse. Instead, invite them to tell you about their experiences in the areas where you are at work and tease out the significance of what they've told you for yourself. Listen out for those remarks that ring especially true in your experience. Sometimes, people will tell you what they think you want to hear so sift through what they tell you and ask whether it chimes with their behaviour and buying patterns.



About The Blend

All Eyes On The Customer is one of a series of articles in which Gerard takes a look at how to cook up a great brand, samples some of the ingredients you'll need to make one of your own and weighs up the impact of branding on different parts of the business mix.

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Finally, ask what your own experience tells you. As a social animal, you're likely to have found yourself in similar circumstances to your customer, so relive those moments in your mind's eye and ask what was important to you at that time and what moved you to act in one way or another.

All The Things That We've Been Through

From what you see and hear of your customer's experience, and from what you recall of your own, it should be possible for you to begin to form a picture and answer the question: 'Who is my customer?' Forming a picture is important. Very few of us can respond well simply to the abstract idea of something. Instead, it's powerful to picture the customer who stands at the heart of your market as though they were standing before you. Some marketers call this persona your 'customer bull's-eye'. This is the ideal customer, the one who wants exactly what it is you have to offer.

Draw on your experience and use your imagination to fill out the picture. Is your customer a man or a woman? How old are they? Where do they live? What's their trade or profession? Where do they holiday and what type of music do they listen to? Are they gregarious or solitary, serious or playful? And so on. It can even be useful to give your ideal customer a name.

Whilst you can allow your imagination to wander and improvise, you must create a persona that rings true. Picture your customer coming through your door. Would somebody else recognise them immediately from the description you've provided? If not, what other characteristics or behaviours would you add

to help someone else identify your customer at a glance? Or what further questions might you ask a prospective customer that could help you decide if they were truly in the market for what you have to offer?

Now that you've identified your customer bull's-eye, you have someone to sell to. Of course, you must be satisfied that this customer is not an exception and that there are enough people like them in your market to support your business. Whilst a quick win is not to be dismissed out of hand, there is little point in basing your business in the long term around sales to someone who matches poorly with your offer. As we have seen, this can leave you wondering where your customer has gone when circumstances change.

See Eye To Eye

This is not to suggest for a moment that you will sell only to someone who fits the description you've built up. Once you've identified your ideal customer, you will be surprised by how many others, who do not immediately appear to match their description, are drawn to your proposition. As you dig down deeper into the motives that drive your ideal customer, you can use your bull's-eye persona to determine what you have in common with your prospective customer and see whether there is a genuine opportunity or not.

You will see this principle at work in the marketing of many lifestyle brands. Typically, the brand speaks to the young and hip ideal but others, who do not share these immediate characteristics yet desire the kudos that these brands appear to offer, reach across and bring the same expectations to the exchange as the 'perfect' customer. In a sense, they become

your customer. In the same way as the lifestyle brand, you can convert those on the fringe of your own customer bull's-eye to the centre.

Oddly enough, whilst it often feels a little artificial or contrived, the creation of a persona makes the experience of building the relationship with your customer more real. In much the same way as a child rehearses adult relationships through play with a doll, the customer bull's-eye enables you to look beyond the mechanics of supply and delivery into the heart of your customer and speak to them with real understanding and conviction.

Just Get Yourself Together

As a result of this rehearsal and the confidence you bring to the exchange, you are much more likely to appear attractive to your ideal customer. In difficult times in particular, the brand that offers an alternative to the naysaying of others in the marketplace has a charm of its own. Somewhat surprisingly, those brands seem resistant to the spending-cuts that afflict many of their competitors. We have seen this before when the economy struggled: Certain brands thrive without compromising their own commitment to excellence and profitability.

Why not commit to having your business join this elite group of brands? In seeing eye-to-eye with their customers, these brands enjoy loyal and consistent relationships that outlast many of the more opportunistic liaisons in the wider market. Whilst they attend to the business of production, they keep their own eyes squarely fixed on the bull's-eye in their market. For these brands and for their customers, despite the prevailing conditions, the good times continue to roll.