

The 10 Brand Commandments

Editor's Note: This article is the final installment in a series by industry experts David Brewster and Maurice Minno on how c-store executives can better compete in this transformative economy.

Early in 2008 our group, ISUS (Inventive Strategies & Unique Solutions), received a distress call from a long-standing, multiunit C&P client. His business woes: Sales were declining by double digits, as were his customer counts. Having been in the business for more than 20 years, he asked us a very simple question: What am I doing wrong?

We put on our detective hats to find out. After many long and heart-wrenching conversations, we conducted one of ISUS' on-site "10 Brand Commandment" audits.

Our 10-step brand audit process examined everything about our client's retail brand through the lens of his typical customers. From that perspective, we found a pathway to reposition his retail business with a complete customer-centric focus.

This 10-step framework, we believe, provides a useful guide to help you evaluate your own brand through the eyes of your customers. Some of you might consider these steps obvious. But how many times have you seen a baseball team fail to execute a crucial bunt or sacrifice to move the runner into scoring position? Likewise, it is astounding how even the best of operators can fail on the fundamentals.

Commandment One: The Truth of Your Mission

Your retail business mission must be communicated with simplicity yet with gusto. Thus an emotional basis is forged for your customers to connect with your reason for being, your essence, and the heart and soul of your brand ... and your retail business. Using the information they collect from their five senses, they understand your brand mission.

Notable brand "truth of mission" examples are "Zoom-Zoom," "Coke Adds Life," "We the People," "Army Strong" and "The Few, the Proud, the Marines."

Commandment Two: Customer Knowledge

Most of your customers probably live within 3 or 4 miles of your store. They are your neighbors and should be your friends. They have a gender, cultural and ethnic heritage.

They have economic challenges and successes. Your business exists only as long as you satisfy their needs. Thus, find simple ways to satisfy them.

Commandment Three: Offer Range, Depth and Quality

You can fulfill your customers' needs only by providing an appropriate and high-quality assortment of products and services that your customers want. Because you cannot be all things to all people, don't try. You can be really good at things your neighbors want ... and become famous for just that.

Commandment Four: Customer Service

When you're really good at the things you do, it will show. Your customers will recognize how deeply you really care about what you do and about them. This means hiring, training, empowering and compensating fairly the right employees. It is they who will foster a local, neighborhood essence in each of your stores. Genuinely given "welcome" and heartfelt "thanks" are just two examples of unmistakable hallmarks of memorable customer service.

Commandment Five: Brand Operations

The environment you create in your stores reflects the sum of your core capabilities brought to life by the sights, sounds, touches, tastes and smells that all harmonize in your retail environment. Your environment must align with your mission. Three retailers that we believe have suc-



successfully mastered their core capabilities and demonstrate their superior retail brand operations are Chick-fil-A, Wegmans and Trader Joe's.

Commandment Six: Physical and Graphic Environment

The physical and graphic elements of your store's environment are everything your customers see. Your store must be easy to navigate from the entrance to the end zone. And graphics must be clear and easy to understand.

Commandment Seven: Messaging

Your messages are composed of physical and graphic elements, of auditory and olfactory (smell) impressions, of your facility and staff attractiveness, of your service style and standards, of your products offered, of your customers' expectations. Keep it all clean, crisp and simple, from your heart and head to theirs. Speak the truth of your mission and color that truth in terms of your customers' needs.

Commandment Eight: Customer Engagement

Customers expect to be emotionally engaged during shopping. The greater this connection, the more memorable your brand will be registered in their directory of favorite

stores to shop. Engagement comes from an energetic atmosphere complete with fresh and bold product displays, freedom to touch, to hear, to see, to move, to chat with an employee. All are signs of a dynamic experience that today's customers want and actively seek out.

Commandment Nine: Change, Embrace Change

Product trends, supplier response, costs, and bad economic dynamics all happen. Even so, you must be aware and act with agility and intelligence. Change as your customers do—and for them. Change to meet tough challenges. Change or die.

Commandment Ten: Brand Value Proposition

Ultimately your business is about how you value all of the various elements and the many tradeoff decisions you make to arrive at your retail brand model. Your customers also make tradeoffs as to where they decide to shop.

Their framework for evaluating your brand proposition vs. the competitive marketplace is based on five factors:

1. Your freshness, quality and depth
2. Speed of service
3. Customer experience
4. Value (of price and product quality, as well as their shopping experience)
5. Convenience

These five elements and the many defining characteristics that make up each one of these form your brand's value proposition.

Closing Thoughts

The devil is in the details. In the details everything is important. Everything is, and should be, interrelated, and must always tie back to your customer.

Each of the ISUS 10 Brand Commandments can be implemented in your store by your conscious attention. We call this "attention design," meaning purposeful change to enact improvement. Everything speaks to, of and from branding by design.

When CSP first discussed this series of articles with us almost a year ago, we all agreed that each article would be based on real-life experiences and related to actions most retailers could undertake during these challenging, or any other, times. We hope you have gleaned from our life experiences and found value in improving your business. ■



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