

Brand Sabotage: How to spot it, and how to stop it when your own people don't walk the talk.

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Your organization has jumped hurdles getting the brand strategy launched and now it's on the street, spreading your organization's message to the public. So why haven't the satisfaction scores improved, let alone the employee morale and commitment? Because, inevitably, you and your organization have to face those "branding barricades."

You know the kind. Your heavily promoted "caring" organization has an ogre in the ER or Admitting. The latest campaign features a ready-for-anything trauma center, but when patients arrive there's no room for them. The advertising directs the public to your call center—which is only open 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday and/or closed for lunch. Or the bottomless voice mail system that keeps employees from accessing the HR department.

It's downright brand sabotage. And though it's not deliberate, it's undermining every scrap of the marketing plan and killing the potential for success in the marketplace and at home with your own employees. So how can you overcome it?

Branding, you see, needs to be more than a billboard, jingle or logo. It must be about painting a picture in the mind of the customer, based on the actions of *everyone* on your team. It's walking the talk and *living* the brand with every single customer interaction.

Laying the Foundation: The Brand Promise

Every kind of effective branding starts with the components of the brand promise: they include research, strategy, planning, advertising, PR and communications. You combine them all to attract customers, heighten their expectations and create interest in your product or service.

The first rule of avoiding brand sabotage at this stage of the game is **don't make promises you can't keep**. You have to be able to deliver on them—and actually do it!

The Power Lies in Customer Service

There's only so much of the brand promise you can control. When your message hits the streets and your prospective customers respond, it's up to every single person in your organization to deliver on that promise.

Everyone needs to walk the talk of the original marketing plan. And everyone can do it. They just need the tools and motivation to be able to do it.

First, Human Resources is a critical link—serving as the interface between the organization’s employees, the organization and its customers. To reinforce the overall plan, HR needs to build its own tactical plan for how it will support the brand strategy and fulfill the strategy’s promise to all of your organization’s customers—including employees!

There are four critical areas where HR can assist service lines, departments and managers:

1. **Selection.** *Paint a picture* of your ideal employee and what the subsequent hiring criteria should be for that employee. This will also be your template as current staff are assessed and developed. *Build recruitment processes* for managing the selection process, objective and timely review of all candidates (internal and external) and the process for bringing new employees into the organization and its “branded” culture. Then, *train all managers* on the selection processes, tools and customer oriented culture—so that no matter who they interview, it will be an outstanding experience. *Your goal: to make your organization a place that people are attracted to and want to work for.*
2. **Training.** *Develop training and development programs* that support the overall branding strategy. Employee orientation needs to be more than giving a quick departmental overview, making sure the prospect passes the health tests and showing a “customer service film.” *Teach managers* how to build a template orientation program for an employee’s first 30 to 90 days on the job. *Develop a criteria checklist* to measure successful completion of the orientation process. And at the completion of orientation, each manager should be able to *build a professional training and development plan recommendation* for the employee to continue working on. HR should also have a core curriculum program that employees can access for ongoing training and development needs. Additionally, there should be *leadership training programs* to develop managers and future leaders along the lines of the customer-focused strategy and culture.
3. **Performance Management.** It’s paramount to reinforce your organization’s strategic and tactical initiatives and overall culture with *specific performance standards* for each employee. This provides them with a clear set of expectations, their accountability for being successful in their job and delineates the activities, behaviors and results desired.
4. **Reward and Recognition.** People focus on what they are reinforced to do and by what they receive rewards and/or recognition for. *So make sure to have systems in place across the board* that, again, reinforce the overall strategic initiatives (goals for the organization to achieve), tactical objectives, and how employees can directly contribute to their achievement. *Build methods for the organization and managers* to provide reward and recognition (monetary and non-monetary) that motivate employees to work toward a common goal.

What’s in it for Your Employees?

In any situation where you’re involving people and translating it into tangible behavior, you need to accept that everyone’s tuned into one radio program: **WIIFM**. We all listen to it at one time or another—“What’s In It For Me?”

Buying decisions or relationship decisions are personal and emotional decisions, and are unique to everyone. Think, for a moment, of your own life. You make customer decisions in your job, at home, with your bank, your grocery store, even your Web site choices. Think of why you relate to certain people, or choose not to.

It's the same in health care. As you build brand behaviors, measure expectations and sell your internal team on these behaviors, look for the mixture of behaviors that are of interest to them. For example, with a physician, you might appeal to his/her commitment to productivity, high quality of patient care, efficiency and a positive reputation among patients. **Bottom line: position the value of brand behavior in terms that are of benefit to every member of your organization.**

To help people tune into the benefits, think about the four basic levels on which they can be experienced:

- Corporate-level benefits** are those that are good for the organization. Things like increasing market share, retention of covered lives and operating margin.
- Department-level benefits**, like increased volume and improved productivity.
- Personal benefits**, such as job security and a sense of pride in successfully delivering patient or support services.
- Customer benefits.** When your organization keeps its brand promises and makes them tangible, your customer connects them with a provider he can count on. And you become a trusted health care partner.

5 Signs of Emotional Awareness

At the heart of delivering on what you promise is developing an emotional awareness throughout your organization. There are five qualities any organization which strives to provide superior customer service must have:

1. Can your employees "read" people?
2. Can they show empathy?
3. Can they build a rapport with customers?
4. Can they be calm and focused when under fire?
5. Can they recognize when their own emotions are in the way?

Don't fault your staff for not inherently knowing each of these skills. Make it a priority to educate your team and give them the tools to make these skills second nature. So the next time a patient insists, "If you don't give me something for this pain, I'm going to scream until you do!", your team will have the emotional awareness it takes to handle the situation effectively.

Empowerment for Problem-Solving

“How can you people even think about sending my wife home so soon?”

Carrying out the brand promise isn't easy. There are always going to be difficult customers who aren't always easily satisfied, and sometimes not ever satisfied.

Empowering your team to take ownership for situations goes a long way in building positive—and lasting—relationships with your customers. That includes:

1. Encouraging employees to ask questions.
2. Emphasizing the importance of listening and pinpointing a customer's problem or complaint.
3. Teaching your team how to position win-win options for the customer.
4. Underscoring the importance of asking for help, rather than compromising a situation.

Taking Responsibility and Initiative

“And just what are you going to do about this?”

Everyone in your organization needs to live the brand. Essentially, that means taking responsibility for his or her individual job—as well as the satisfaction of every customer the employee comes in contact with. Show employees the power they have by encouraging specific kinds of actions and language:

1. “My job”—create an environment where everyone can take pride in what they do, at all levels in the organization.
2. Encourage employees to always warmly greet a customer, whether it's in person or on the phone. Build a script and style for the message, and teach your employees how to do this consistently.
3. Stress the importance of acting quickly on a customer's request or complaint. Remember, responding to a customer concern is everyone's job.
4. Show the benefits of following through on a request or resolving a problem, no matter how insignificant it may seem. No problem is too small.
5. Nurture an environment where people know when or how to say, “I'm sorry,” whether to a customer or a co-worker—and whether the employee directly caused the problem or not. It's a phrase that goes a long way.

Explain and Inform

“I don't understand what you're telling me.”

Ninety-nine percent of the time, customers simply want the truth in language they can understand. They'll respect your honesty and remember how they were treated next time they have a choice in where to go for health care.

Show your staff how to explain and inform effectively, and you'll create an environment that shows respect for your customers, both internal and external. Some steps include:

1. Fully inform and explain a situation or solution.
2. Use language the customer can understand. Everyone processes information differently—take the time to listen to your customer and find out how to talk to him or her.
3. Confirm that your customer understands what you're saying.
4. Encourage questions to prevent any miscommunication later.
5. Be respectful in your communication, every time.
6. Anticipate what other information your customer may want or need.
7. Explain delays right then and give your customer the opportunity to adjust or make alternate plans.

Putting Your New Tools to Use

Now that you've got the goods to empower and inform your employees, pass along the information in a mock situation. This is the time to observe how employees choose to handle the situation—and the time to smooth out some of the kinks. We've talked about some common health care situations. Now let's talk about some ways to handle them:

"I've been waiting here for 45 minutes and I want to see the doctor right now!"

Some questions to consider:

- What do you think the problem is here?
- What is the patient feeling? Why?
- What would you say to the patient?
- What could have been done to prevent this situation?

Now, let's say:

- The staff member in the story says, "The doctor is very busy. You can't expect to see her the minute you walk in the door. I'm sorry, but you'll just have to wait until she's ready to see you."

- ❑ What do you think of this response and how would you handle it?

Consider this angle:

- ❑ The staff knew the physician was going to be late, and wanted to alert the patients before they began to ask. You are the staff person. What do you say when you step into the waiting room?

- Tips:
 - Listen for emotional concern.
 - Show empathy, acknowledge inconvenience
 - Be non-defensive
 - Take initiative—“Thank you for asking.”
 - Apologize – Say, “I’m sorry.”
 - Solve the problem.
 - Make a concrete plan to help (call the physician, for example).
 - Present options (stay or reschedule).
 - Inform or explain.
 - Be respectful and professional.
 - Don’t put the blame on anyone.

Now, run through this scenario using the correct skills:

- “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the delay. You were on time and have a right to be upset. I’m sorry you’ve waited so long. Doctor Smith had a serious emergency and is behind on appointments. I’ll call right now to see when the doctor will be able to see you. Then you can decide if you would like to wait or if you’d rather reschedule your appointment. In the meantime, would you like a magazine or some coffee?”
- Other tips to remember:
 - Provide employees, patients or family members a printed copy if the information is complicated.
 - Provide employees with a printed copy of acceptable responses and training for their use on common situations.

- Let the employee or your customer read it over first. Then discuss it together. Then ask your questions.
- Work with each unit or department to craft a realistic scenario that covers all the bases.
- Involve the team and share difficult encounters you may have had.
- Demonstrate the right way, too.
- In the future,
 - Take the initiative to help build and walk the brand.
 - Define the standards.
 - Hire to the standards.
 - Orient and educate.
 - Evaluate performance.
 - Reward and recognize.
 - Hold yourself and your employees accountable.

Postscript: Branding Takes Vigilance

As one of your organization's key "Keepers of the Brand," your job never ends. It requires ongoing vigilance to help everyone recognize that they're responsible for getting and keeping a customer. And, in order to spread that message, keep these final tips in mind:

1. Evaluate the roles in your organization for what they could or should do to deliver the brand promise.
2. Make sure your message matches or fulfills the brand strategy.
3. Make sure internal behaviors like actions, words, deliverables and tools deliver on the brand promise.
4. Confirm that your tools (people, products and services) are up for the job—or evaluate if you need new and improved ones.
5. Create measurement and accountability *always*. People are the single most important tool for creating and achieving a customer-oriented strategy. Select, train, educate, evaluate and reward them for proactive customer and brand management.

A Final Thought

With all the money spent on marketing to prospective customers, there's no room for brand sabotage in any organization. Brand sabotage can cost you employees, customers and the ability to thrive in your community.

Above all, it's important to recognize that the most important components of any marketing plan aren't your media tools—but your people tools. Look around in your community: you'll find that the organizations focused on retention and growth have identified their employees and their culture as the most critical elements for success.

As you participate with your leadership in building strategic initiatives, make sure you're focused on creating both internal and external customer strategies *with accountable outcomes*.

Positive and effective customer service—inside and outside your organization—is something that we all want, but something that's only done well by few. Make it your goal to one of the few who strives to provide a culture that prizes great customer service above all else. Then watch the results!



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