

Brand values: the other customer connections

Phone companies are investing heavily in brand awareness through product sponsorship, but Daniel Todaro argues that this is often counter-productive. Much better to emphasise benefits of the product itself...

Imagine a potential customer walking along a high street in search of a new mobile phone deal. For those not familiar with the ins and outs of the industry, and unaware of what exact components make up a good deal, it can be an exceptionally daunting prospect. In fact, any customer looking for the ideal mobile phone package can often find that the multitude of tariffs and headsets available in the market can make for an overwhelming shopping experience.

On an average high street there can be up to six specialist mobile phones shops, not to mention retailers such as Boots, Woolworths, Tesco, Argos also stocking mobile phones. On top of these, there are also several independent retailers jostling for customers' attention. With this in mind, it's easy to understand why many consumers decide to boycott the high street and call their network or go online to order the latest handset they may have seen on their last trip to the pub.

So with all this competition to consider, what can mobile phone companies do to achieve standout and engage consumers in this already cluttered retail environment?

We've already seen brands such as LG and Prada embarking upon well publicised and expensive cross-sector partnerships to attract the style conscious consumer, but these endeavours have often stumbled at the most important hurdle – the sale.

The other popular trend among brands is to employ the celebrity endorsement tactic.

From Kate Moss to David Beckham, big stars are selected to create a trendy, media-friendly vibe through which to promote the products or deals on offer.

Values

I would argue that this route can be perceived as a desperate marketing ploy and one that sometimes actually sends out messages which are irrelevant and removed from the actual brand offering itself.

The key is to look at the drivers behind consumer in-store purchasing decisions ...

Surely a favourable alternative for mobile phone companies wanting to boost their image and their sales is to focus on the actual values and benefits the brand itself has to offer to consumers. In short, brands should trust and ensure that the products and services they deliver to customers are endorsement enough to maximise sales. The best way to capitalise on this approach is to build a relationship with customers whereby they can fully understand and appreciate the products on offer, enabling them to make an informed purchasing decision as well as increasing their overall awareness of the brand.

Building brand awareness and understanding is therefore seen as fundamental to mobile networks and handset manufacturers alike. Retail marketers spend small fortunes on getting their messages across, with both above and below the line initiatives. For the store environment, a great deal of effort is placed on the production and implementation of point of sale activity with dummy handsets, demo pods and interactive displays. However it is debatable whether these efforts tie in fluidly and effectively with all other through the line activity.

The key is to look at the drivers behind consumer in-store purchasing decisions, and, even more importantly, the issues that influence them when choosing a handset. It's fair to say that there will always be a sector of the market that will purchase phones with image, style and aesthetics dictating their decision, but there are also many more people who will do so according to functionality, durability and additional features on offer. Both of these mindsets must be taken into account and catered for on a face-to-face basis in-store.

However, it's not enough to simply decide that conducting in-store promotions matching the themes and creative of a wider marketing campaign is the best way to connect with customers. There is always the danger that brands can overcompensate and bombard consumers with too many marketing messages and promotions.

Vodafone, for example, is likely to be running a brand awareness campaign, a consumer contract campaign, a consumer pre-pay campaign, a business user campaign and a campaign highlighting various new features and services – all at any one time. The number and variety of these promotions means that replicating these consistently with in-store activity is no easy task.

Choice

The mobile phone market is both fluid and fickle. Unlike brands such as watches and perfumes, which use celebrity endorsements and similar tools to excellent marketing effect, the harsh truth is that mobile phones are likely to be discarded by consumers as soon as a sexier, thinner or more functional model comes along.

In light of this, sales techniques and in-store promotions must be planned and timed to pick up on fluctuating consumer habits and to provide consumers with all the right information so that they can make an informed choice.

It is this kind of customer service and support, rather than brand collaborations as recently seen, that will engage consumers, build brands and ultimately drive sales. ■

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