

Safir Adeni

Mani
Bharadwaj

Ninad Karpe

Munesh
Khanna

BRANDS & CUSTOMERS

Pradipta Sen

Aneeta Madhok

SP Narayanan

Mohan Bhandari

N Sundaresha Subramanian

BRAND IS NOT a static concept anymore. It's a continuous process and should move along with market dynamics to be effective. 'Do brands really help get customer attention?' was the theme of the round table and the participants were Dr Aneeta Madhok, dean, NMIMS, Mohan Bhandari, CMD, Bilcare, Hutch Essar, Munesh Khanna, MD and head of investment banking, DSP ML, Ninad Karpe, MD, CA India, Pradipta Sen, corporate group head, Emerson Electric, SP Narayanan, VP and head, value added services, and Safir Adeni, CEO, SITEL India. Mani Bharadwaj, senior director, Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu India, moderated the event.

For starters, the CEOs warmed themselves up with some subtle humour and a lot of laughter. While Madhok joked about how as a teacher she loved to talk, Karpe introduced a new line of thought saying Indian market has stood conventional economics on its head. Contrary to the theory that demand creates supply, he said, now supply is creating demand. He cited the example of ipod, wherein technology created the product, then came supply and demand followed later. The ipod refused to go away as it became the CEOs' favourite reference point during the course of the discussion.

During the discussion that followed it was Karpe who emphasised the importance of brand in the days ahead. "Today we see young people in their teens who are so brand conscious. They know exactly what they want. Four-five years down the line, when they grow up and get the purchasing power they are going to spend so much on these brands. It's something companies can't ignore," he said. At this point, Emerson's Pradipta Sen elaborated how his company's decision to develop an umbrella brand of 'EMERSON' though their sub brands were doing well clicked. "We saw a distinct change in the way customers perceived us. Our business did not change. But the value proposition through the branding exercise changed completely although we work in a B2B environment," he said.

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Bilcare's Bhandari was not convinced. He doubted if clubbing some top league products with others not-so-good ones will be a right strategy. "This will create unnecessary expectations and affect their positioning," he said. To this, Sen added, "If not done well, this strategy could be a disaster as it would end up destroying the strengths of sub brands." But the concept can be used to raise internal standards and motivate the backbenchers to increase their standards on par with the top league products, he said.

When Khanna was asked about the relevance of branding in financial services, he said, "Since the products here are largely customised to the individual needs like an IPO or private equity solution, branding ultimately boils down to the individual who delivers the service." As the discussion turned to the flipside of branding, Ninad explained how a Sunday afternoon sales call can bring down the brand image built over years. Madhok agreed and said she expected her service provider too, to have a work-life balance. But Adeni begged to differ. For him, one has to be extremely customer/market-centric. He had the

table in splits when he said, "I don't have a work-life balance, why should they. I would like them to think of me 24/7." For Adeni, a brand creates the perception, an image of class and luxury and that's where it's extremely powerful. "The ipod sells half the time just because it's an ipod," he said.

Besides the brand of Apple, ipod's success was largely due to its design differentiation, said Madhok. Tomorrow's brands are going to be driven by design differentiation rather than anything else, she added. "By design, I mean not just fashion or style but also form and function." Adding to her point, Narayanan of Hutch said, "User experience and usability of the product are key. We need to exercise care to ensure these aspects."

Summing it up Bharadwaj said, "The brand should depict and embody the kind of experience the customer is going to get. If there is a mismatch, there will be a backlash in terms of customers turning away from the company. So, a brand is required, but meeting the expectations created by this brand is more important."

Gaining a detailed and an indepth view of customer behaviour and to proactively anticipate their future requirements, is perhaps the only way that organisations can enhance customer value and sustain competitive advantage in the market place today. As part of the CEO Forum discussions, I have spent much time deliberating with peers, on how companies could develop a predictive value metrics around customer requirements, and seek to integrate it with the overall business model. I am confident this process would be able to dynamically transform our understanding of customer needs and help us serve the customer better. It is this endeavour to consistently maximise customer value, that has led us to embed some of these customer needs and behaviour patterns into the technology life cycle to create what we know as "Intelligent Communications" for organisations. Clearly it is evident to me that this concept will go a long way in co-creating sustainable value for our current and future customers. Sustaining customer loyalty is more than just delivering the right products or maximising satisfaction or being extremely responsive. Today, converting customer value into a competitive advantage is a science, a fine art, that has to be perfected using intelligent communications, mixed with a fiery passion for customers' business.



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