

What is a brand promise?

A brand promise is an articulation of what target customers can expect from their experience with an organisation. It describes the proposition and the value that this represents to the customer.

- Carphone Warehouse, the UK retailer of mobile phones, promises “simple – impartial – advice.”
- Virgin Atlantic promises “to provide the highest quality of innovative service at excellent value for money for all classes of air travellers.”
- Midwest Express Airlines promises “the best care in the air.”
- First Direct bank promises “a bank designed around you, which doesn’t expect you to fit around it.”

Is that all an organisation needs to do? Is creating a catchy promise that has appeal for target customers enough? Not quite. Now comes the hard part.

The brand promise represents the decisions made by managers about the value the company will deliver to its target customer in order to earn their loyalty. As with other statements of direction, management must create the brand promise, own the brand promise, and relentlessly drive it to completion. The brand promise drives all of the company’s actions and investments in people, processes, products, technology and delivery channels. It creates a laser beam focus that provides clarity and cohesion to the firm’s many and disparate activities.

What does a brand promise look like in action?

1. It needs to be of value to target customers. Richard Branson believes the Virgin brand is based on five key factors: value for money, quality, reliability, innovation and an indefinable, but nonetheless palpable sense of fun. (Another, slightly snappier, version of the Virgin brand values is: genuine and fun, contemporary and different, consumers’ champion, and first class at business-class price)
2. It must relate to one of Maslow’s levels of need. Harley-Davidson, promises “We fulfill dreams,” which directly targets those seeking self-actualisation.
3. It must be actionable. A private banking group translated its brand promise into standards for each client interaction. A core value in their brand promise is to meet a client’s needs and expectations on the client’s terms not the bank’s. As a result, each relationship manager must understand how their customers want to be serviced, for example, at their place of business or at the bank. When presented with his employer’s brand promise, a bank employee commented: “I like that it is so well defined. It not only says that we provide the best service; it explains what providing the best service means and what it encompasses.”
4. It must be the focus and anchor for the organisation. It serves as the promise made to customers, what the brand represents to customers and employees and the internal values that are required to deliver it. In short, it replaces or aligns the numerous and disconnected missions, visions, values, brand values, and customer charters that we see in so many organisations, that often are contradictory, confusing and of little practical value in running the business.
5. It cannot be made lightly, it has to be delivered. In the words of Steve Jones, an author and professor at Galton University: ‘The good opinion of the public will become increasingly important to big brand owners. If you’ve got a message, it has to have some truth in it or you’ll be found out.’

All of an organisation's processes, products and people must be designed to deliver the brand promise every day. The simple proposition of the coffee and sandwich chain Pret A Manger is that it is "passionate about food" and it promises not to compromise quality in any way. This is why Pret goes to the unusual lengths of using a four-foot wooded paddle to mix the ingredients for its fruit and oat slice ("too pulpy otherwise"). Pret has made a clear, unequivocal, and ultimately highly successful decision as to what it stands for.

The key to winning customer loyalty - and advocacy – with your brand promise is to meet or exceed the promise with every customer in every one of his or her interactions with your company.

One practical application of this tenet can be viewed at Disney parks, where customers in long lines for attractions see signs indicating they will board the ride "30 minutes from this point". In fact, these customers will reach the ride or attraction in 25 minutes. Disney has an intimate understanding of customers and is firmly in control of its promises.

The principle of intentionally and consistently delivering on your promises is critical: whether it is waiting no more than five minutes for a cashier, being able to return the product "no questions asked," or being able to get a good night's sleep in your hotel room.

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