

COLUMNS

## Customers love you? Think again

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By **Gregory F. Furman**

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It is a truism that, as a thinking C-suite executive and luxury marketer, no matter how well you think your organization is doing to greet, serve, sell, follow-up and deepen relationships with your best customers and prospects, there is always more than ample room for improvement.

I challenge you. As an exercise in validating this premise, call your own organization and test your brand's telephone warmth and intelligence of reply. Ask for yourself. Do not worry. Not likely they will recognize your voice because you rarely call your own organization through your switchboard.

Tone deaf

I guarantee many of you will be flummoxed, astounded and shocked at what happens when you call: endless rings, no human reply and a convoluted voice mail system.

Add to this a cold "Who are you?" in a way with which you will not be pleased or no volunteering of name of the person taking the call, and infuriatingly – to me always when this happens – demanding you identify yourself before you know to whom you are talking.

This phone introduction colors all face-to-face personal contacts yet to come.

If you think you are immune, take me up on my challenge. Hopefully you will be one of the very few of the hundreds of brands we talk to each month that actually get it right.

Then there is the subtle and increasingly more sophisticated dance as the most affluent best customer or prospect walks in the door.

How friendly is too friendly or not friendly enough? What about the failure to meet and greet at all? You walk in and there is no one to greet you, given the recent spate of budget cuts in many companies. Even worse yet, you walk in and it is like witnessing an in-store coffee break where no one deigns to budge to acknowledge your presence. Have you not been there?

### Inequity

Never before has great, iconic luxury brand equity counted for less in the face of tepid, inadequate, even arrogant, service, voice or attention. And never before have the 80 million boomers – who need little other than great experiences and memories of those experiences – and the 86 million millennials – the future of luxury buying – been more critical, sharp-eyed and demanding.

As much as they may love your brand, its great tradition and its brilliant products or services, the wrong note on entry will send them fleeing with a vengeance to your arch-competitors.

Last week at an intimate Inner Circle CEOs Salon luncheon, Richard Shapiro, customer retention and service guru, provocateur and author of two Amazon best-selling titles, spoke about the hidden-in-plain-sight failure of brands to granularly address the issues outlined above and more.

No surprise that the second decade of the 21st century is witnessing a convergence of forces moving customer loyalty to the edge of extinction.

Customers are empowered by increasing control over the retail process, as the digital, global marketplace delivers ever greater choice and saves them time, money and hassle.

The challenge for companies and brands across all service categories and channels today, from ecommerce and contact centers to bricks-and-mortar and mobile, is to engender loyalty. But the loyal customer is truly an endangered species.

### Common-sense prescription

- Think outside the box to ensure a competitive edge
- On-board new customers so they come back
- Train associates to invite customers to return
- Create the human connection customers
- Communicate with customers after the sale
- Inspect what they expect

- Leverage technology to enhance the customer experience
- Incorporate the eight steps into an ecommerce business, contact center and bricks-and-mortar environment

Do read Mr. Shapiro's "The Endangered Customer: Eight Steps to Guarantee Repeat Business," which presents a dynamic roadmap for organizations that want to create loyalty in the age of the empowered consumer.

I believe in under-promising and over-delivering and have always been suspect of guarantees. In this case, I am comfortable with mine and Mr. Shapiro's.

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