

6 Brands must advocate on behalf of customers

As brands seek to build closer and more personal engagement with consumers, the ethical dimension will become increasingly relevant – both in terms of customer expectations and opportunities for brands to engage with people in areas that have meaning to them.

Anne Bahr Thompson is a brand strategist and author of *Do Good – Embracing Brand Citizenship to Fuel Both Purpose and Profit*. She explains: “Traditionally, businesses have nurtured customers and cultivated employees who will advocate for their brands. Today, employees and customers are looking to brands to advocate on their behalf, for things that matter most to them.

“People are increasingly looking to buy great products and services from companies that have ethical operations, do great things for the world, and advocate for the things they care about. Ultimately, people are demanding greater value for their cash, and businesses must holistically align brand development with sustainability and corporate citizenship initiatives.”

However, Bahr Thompson warns, brands should only take stands and get involved with causes that align with their larger purpose, rather than one-off or pet initiatives.

“While these might create a short-term promotional life, people are savvy and easily identify cause programmes that are ‘bolted on’, or opportunistic marketing efforts. At best, such programmes will fall flat or fail to grow revenue and fans sustainably. At worst, they’ll significantly erode a loyal customer base that may suspect you’re taking advantage of a current issue.”

7 Marketing should be a KPI for your business

The cross-organisational evolution of marketing to develop customer engagement inevitably points towards a more holistic, integrated approach within enterprises. Breaking down silos does, however, require focused leadership.

“Fortunately, organisations are starting to recognise that marketing is a board-level function – and we are seeing more chief marketing officer positions,” says Hughes, from The Marketing Pod.

“Marketing should be a brand KPI, and everyone within an organisation should be a brand



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ANNE BAHR THOMPSON, BRAND STRATEGIST

ambassador. Everyone should be listened to; operational teams often have the most insightful feedback and can be an important voice of the customer, but there isn’t always an avenue available for them to give their opinions.”

As organisations break down the siloes that exist across their enterprises, marketing is ideally positioned to step up and provide leadership, says Pegasystems’ Collyer.

“Marketing is uniquely placed to understand consumers and champion the customer experience – but the void will be filled by other functions if marketing doesn’t respond quickly enough. In a world of AI-enabled, outcome-centric thinking, flatter structures will enable talent to shine and encourage creativity.”

8 Traditional hierarchies no longer exist

AI and other technologies increasingly allow brands’ values to guide every interaction with an individual, in and across any channel. This will give organisations the opportunity to connect with consumers and encourage communities around the brand. However, developing a strong community is about engaging with customers and being timely, relevant and targeted.

“The challenge for brands is genuine integration within communities, both online and in the real world, through listening and participation,” says Jenny Zhang, strategy director at creative agency Superimpose Studio, whose clients include sports and fashion brands Adidas and Cheap Monday.

“The unilateral relationship between brands and consumers is collapsing – traditional hierarchies no longer exist. This new generation does not respond to brands; brands respond to it.”

The power shift has surfaced in a variety of ways, such as increased co-creation and customisation of product, crowdsourced campaigns and the rise of microinfluencers. For the next generation, inspiration is a considered choice. For brands, telling a story is no longer enough. ✍