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Recreating cheers: an analysis of relationship marketing as an effective marketing technique for quick-service restaurants

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper reviews brand equity and customer satisfaction as they relate to customer loyalty and relationship marketing in an effort to understand and mitigate some of the challenges facing quick-service restaurants (QSRs) today.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors reviewed over 30 articles on the subjects of brand equity, customer equity, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, communal relationships, relationship marketing, and pseudo-relationship marketing, as well as researched and evaluated current marketing techniques used by selected QSRs.

Findings – It is concluded by the authors that customer satisfaction, brand equity, and loyalty are invaluable to the formation of customer loyalty, as is the understanding that customers' relationships with companies need to be treated with the same respect as personal relationships.

Practical implications – Customer loyalty has been shown to be beneficial to a company, both tangibly and intangibly. Companies are cautioned in their use of relationship marketing techniques used to foster customer loyalty and encouraged to use methods that benefit both themselves and their customers.

Originality/value – This paper analyzes many different factors that affect customer loyalty, as well as discusses how relationship marketing techniques can be utilized by the QSR industry.

Keywords Relationship marketing, Catering industry, Brand awareness, Brand equity, Customer satisfaction

Paper type General review

Introduction

Companies recognize the value of customer satisfaction and loyalty, but often do not appreciate the difficulties associated with obtaining them. Rust *et al.* (2004, p. 110) stated:

> Most managers today agree with the notion that they should focus on growing the lifetime value of their customer relationships ... Indeed, given the cost of winning new customers (much higher than that of keeping current ones), and the ultimately finite universe of buyers out there, a mature business would be hard-pressed to increase profits otherwise.

This paper will review the literature on relationship marketing, loyalty, and branding and then examine some of the difficulties facing quick-service restaurants (QSRs) and potential solutions that can be found through obtaining loyalty and customer equity via relationship marketing.

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Customer relationships with companies

As Rust *et al.* (2004) stated above, companies understand the value of having and growing customer relationships. However, this is often easier said than done. Fournier (1998) looks at the customer-brand relationship in terms of the "ego significance" of the chosen brands, whereby customers choose brands based upon their understanding of the brand as it relates to themselves. Therefore, for companies to truly understand how to form a relationship with their customers, they have to consider the total "brandscape" of the customers, or the totality of brands that each customer utilizes and, as such, identifies with. Customers do not choose meaningful relationships based upon the functionality or type of service class of the product, but upon other, more subjective measures.

When customers form these brand relationships, they take on the same form and meaning of social relationships. Aggarwal (2004, p. 88) proposed that when customers "form relationships with brands that mirror social relationships, norms of social relationships are used as guiding principles in their interactions with brands." Aggarwal (2004) evaluates the difference between exchange, or "quid pro quo," relationships and communal relationships, in which benefits are given to others without an expected return of benefits. If companies hope to form social relationships with customers, and thus engage the customers on a deeper psychological level, they will need to form communal relationships with them as well.

How is customer loyalty beneficial?

Bloemer and Ruyter (1999) demonstrated that the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is stronger in high-involvement service settings, such as restaurants. If restaurant patrons are satisfied, they are more likely to translate that satisfaction into a sense of loyalty. Restaurateurs should, therefore, focus their efforts on increasing customer satisfaction, helping customers to recognize any positive emotions they had about the service experience, and increasing the customer's level of involvement (Bloemer and Ruyter, 1999). Customer satisfaction and loyalty can also translate into financial benefits for companies. Bowen and Shoemaker (2003) found that a reduction in marketing costs results from having loyal customers, in part because it requires less marketing to maintain a current customer. Loyal hotel customers often also engage in "partnership-like activities" such as "offering strong word of mouth, making business referrals, providing references and publicity, and serving on advisory boards" (Bowen and Shoemaker, 2003, p. 32). Youjae and Suna (2004) found that loyal customers have a higher overall attachment and commitment to a brand and are less willing to switch to competing brands.

Customer satisfaction versus customer loyalty

Although customers may be satisfied with a given experience, they may not necessarily become loyal customers. In general, customer satisfaction measures how well the service/product offering matched a customer's expectations, whereas customer loyalty measures their likelihood to return and their willingness to engage in a partnership with the company (Bowen and Shoemaker, 2003; Shoemaker and Lewis, 1999). Loyal customers are more likely to form a communal relationship with the company; however, customer satisfaction is still a very important factor in obtaining and maintaining customer loyalty. Shoemaker and Lewis (1999, p. 353) explain, "we can have satisfaction without loyalty, but it is hard to have loyalty without satisfaction."

Hausfater (2005, p. 70) points out that if "the dining experience is not satisfying, no [loyalty] card program in the world will cause patrons to make repeat visits." Youjae and Suna (2004) explored the difference in satisfaction between loyal and non-loyal customers, finding that non-loyal customers' satisfaction was based mostly on the current transaction, giving the satisfaction instability and fragility. The satisfaction of loyal customers is not only related to the current transaction, but also on the accumulation of all of the customers' experiences with the company, lending it stability (Youjae and Suna, 2004). Thus satisfaction can lead to loyalty, and loyalty can, in turn, keep satisfaction levels more stable.

Are loyalty programs creating loyal customers?

Hospitality companies have already bought into the "points" currency in an effort to engage customers and form communal relationships with them. TGI Friday's rewards repeat patronage with gift certificates and stays at Radisson Country Inns and Suites, among other rewards (Mattila, 2001). However, do these programs truly assist the customer in forming a communal relationship? If reward programs encourage customers to price/deal shop, then they are not encouraging brand loyalty.

Mattila (2001) points out the three main prerequisites to a strong brand relationship: emotional bonding, affective commitment (the consumer markets the product/service for you), and forgiveness of the occasional service failure. Frequency programs are not measures of these and actually "encourage deal-induced responses by customers who are in pursuit of the best prices or richest rewards" (Mattila, 2001, p. 74). Mattila stresses that the loyalty sought by restaurateurs involves a commitment by customers on many levels and cannot be bought by free items and gift certificates. In part, this is because loyalty is not merely frequency or repurchase intention, but the result of a strong emotional bond forged between the customer and the company.

Hausfater (2005) cautions that despite the popularity of loyalty card programs, it is important for companies to understand that the most important loyalty-building tool for restaurants is the customer's experience. Reward/frequency programs can be beneficial in encouraging customers to return to a restaurant, but should not be used alone. Rather, such programs should be looked at as a way for the company to create more opportunities to potentially satisfy their customers and begin to form relationships with them.

Understanding brand equity and customer equity

Brand equity can also be an important factor in creating short-term customer satisfaction and long-term customer loyalty. Brands have changed and are no longer lifeless artifacts created by owners/managers; rather, they have become living entities with personalities that customers can form relationships with (Cooper, 1999). Brand equity, in the simplest of terms, is the value of customers' relationships with a brand. These relationships are formed based on a mix of actual facts about the brand, such as consumer reports, advertising messages, packaging, word of mouth, and usage experience, as well as subjective measures (Ambler, 1997).

Dunne (2004) suggests that brand experiences are made up of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual attributes, each of which allows companies a way to intimately connect with their customers. Dunne (2004, p. 11) goes on to point out:

> The value consumers take from a brand come not from its inherent qualities, but from their interaction with it. It's not just about end results – how well it does what it's supposed to do – but how the consumer feels while doing it.

This implies that satisfaction with the service provided alone is not enough for the customer to form a relationship with that brand. Rather, it is consistent, long-term satisfaction of the entire service experience that encourages customers to forge an emotional bond with a company.

Rust *et al.* (2004, p. 113) urges companies to focus their efforts on "customer equity (the sum of the lifetime values of all the firm's customers, across all the firm's brands) rather than brand equity (the sum of customers' assessments of a brand's intangible qualities, positive or negative)", in part because acting in the best interests of a brand is not necessarily acting in the best interests of the customer. Additionally, when brands focus on their customers and not only themselves, they are more likely and able to respond effectively to any overtures of loyalty. Blackston (2000) recommends that the relationship between brands and customers be looked at both through the analysis of the customers' attitudes and behaviors towards the brand and the analysis of the brand's attitudes and behaviors towards its customers.

Customers' attachments to brands

Escalas and Bettman (2003, p. 339) propose that customers "use brands to meet self-needs such as self-verification or self-enhancement". However, brands must first distinguish themselves in the customers' minds. Lozito (2004) suggests that restaurant brands incorporate emotional benefits, such as music, lights, and aromas to differentiate the brand in the customers' minds. He asserts:

> The emotional brand experience starts creating a bond from the minute the patron sees an ad, a name, or a logo and doesn't end until the music, lights, and aroma are only a recent memory. Every touch point in between is an opportunity to differentiate and reinforce the brand promise (Lozito, 2004, p. 58).

When this occurs, customers often form a connection, or relationship, with the brand. This relationship is an important component of brand equity and leads to customers being "more forgiving of marketer blunders" and "less likely to switch to competitors' brands" (Escalas and Bettman, 2003, p. 347).

Escalas and Bettman (2003) consider reference groups to be the most important source of brand associations that lead to the formation of a brand relationship. They point out that when a customer's ego is involved, or their self-conception is linked to a brand, "the company behind the brand may be able to gain an enduring competitive advantage because this type of connection is difficult for competitors to imitate" (Escalas and Bettman, 2003, p. 347). A customer's relationship with a brand can transcend the product itself and may be transferred to the company.

Aggarwal (2004) discusses the lack of distinction in customers' minds between brand and the manufacturer of the brand. This perception is more likely for service brands such as hotels and restaurants, perhaps in part because of the higher level of customer involvement. Fournier (1998, p. 367) brilliantly sums up the concept of brand equity by pointing out that "consumers do not choose *brands*, they choose *lives*". Similarly, when customers choose a restaurant to dine at, their choice is not merely based on the type of product offered by that restaurant, but by the experience offered or expected.

Brand loyalty

Kim and Kim (2004, p. 116) assert that "effective marketing programs on branding cultivate customers' confidence, which induces customers' loyalty and their willingness to pay a premium price for the brand." In the hotel arena, Kim *et al.* (2003) suggest that for hotel companies to build brand loyalty and earn the resulting financial benefits, hotels must ensure that customers are satisfied, have intentions of returning, and will recommend it as a first-choice hotel to others. As with our earlier discussion of loyalty in general, "brand-loyal customers rarely buy as a simple reaction to the stimulus of promotion" and while "promotion can reinforce the existing behavior of existing customers, most repeat purchases … are made on the basis of long-term views and attitudes" (Kim *et al.*, 2003, p. 345).

Customers who share similar views and attitudes often come together and form a "brand community". This idea is introduced by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" that is "marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility". They point out that developing a strong brand community is a critical step in actualizing the concept of relationship marketing (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). When a customer shares their brand experiences with other customers, they are more likely to form a relationship with the brand.

When a customer forms a relationship with a brand, they also place their trust in the brand. Trust is a fundamental component of brand loyalty and companies should strive to ensure the trust is not broken. Blackston (2000, p. 104) proposes:

> The degree of intimacy depends on the brand's success in creating a personal link with the individual consumer, of acknowledging that the individual is *more* than just a statistic or a client code. Intimacy means showing that the brand knows the individual consumer. A corporate brand that does not act as if it *knows* who its customers are will not earn their trust, regardless of its credibility and reliability.

As discussed above, distinction of the brand in the customer's mind is a crucial stage in the formation of a communal relationship between the brand and the customer. However, companies should also distinguish customers in their minds and actively participate in the relationship, ensuring that it is two-sided. In other words, when a customer becomes loyal to a brand, the brand needs to become loyal to the customer in return.

How does brand/customer equity benefit companies?

As with loyalty, brand/customer equity can also provide benefits for companies. Kim and Kim (2004, p. 117) point out that the "power of a brand is in what resides in the minds of customers". If customers recognize a brand and have positive associations with a brand, it can add value to the customer's experience with that brand. Kim and Kim (2004, pp. 128-9) also discovered that, "for marketers, the value of a successful brand lies in its potential to reduce substitutability" and that "strong brand equity can cause a significant increase in revenue and that a lack of brand equity in hospitality firms can damage potential cash flow". As a final point, Kim and Kim demonstrated that positive customer-based brand equity improves a company's performance, in terms of both revenue and stock prices, and allows them to charge premium prices.

Youjae and Suna (2004, p. 360) suggest that "accumulated investments in knowledge of a particular brand may lead consumers to repurchase the same brand because repurchase means a more economic behavior than starting to search for a new brand and othen making a new investment in new-brand – specific knowledge." Customers do not want to have to form a new relationship with a different brand, so instead, repurchase the same brand (Youjae and Suna, 2004). Companies who understand and value these communal relationships can expect to receive the benefits described above.

What is pseudo-relationship marketing?

Overall, customer satisfaction, loyalty, brand communities, and brand/customer equity are invaluable to companies. However, companies need to be careful in their utilization of relationship marketing techniques used to gain trust from and form communal relationships with their customers. Fournier *et al.* (1998) found that customers were not impressed with the new direction of marketing efforts towards relationship marketing:

> When we talk to people about their lives as consumers, we do not hear praise for their so-called corporate partners. Instead, we hear about the confusing, stressful, insensitive, and manipulative marketplace in which they feel trapped and victimized. (Fournier *et al.*, 1998, p. 43)

This is attributed in part to the disparity between the requests of friendship, loyalty, and respect from a company to its customers and the lack of friendship, loyalty, and respect given in return (Fournier *et al.*, 1998). This has created distrust of and cynicism towards pseudo-relationship marketing techniques and has resulted in many customers feeling overwhelmed by these marketing attempts.

O'Malley and Prothero (2004) found that customers are wary of relationship marketing, believing that marketers are simply following the latest trend or fad rather than making a concerted effort to change the nature of company-customer relations. Companies must realize that they cannot sell relationships; rather, they must earn them. Many customers view loyalty programs as an attempt to up-sell or lock them into specific exchange relationships (O'Malley and Prothero, 2004). In fact, O'Malley and Prothero suggest that relationship marketing "has had the unintended consequence of increasing consumer distrust of organizations' activities and motives" (p. 1293). Fournier *et al.* (1998, p. 49) hoped to "prevent the premature death of relationship marketing", suggesting:

> If a company routinely asks its customers for sensitive information but doesn't put that information to use, it should stop asking those questions. We must force ourselves out of that safe place where information may someday prove useful for an as-yet-to-be-articulated question and recognize the cumulative price of eroded consumer confidence along the way. We pay for those invasions, so let's make sure the cost is worth it.

As previously discussed, the trust a customer places in a company when a communal relationship is formed is integral to brand loyalty and should be treated with respect.

One customer, disillusioned with pseudo-relationship marketing, said that, "the flood of advances from companies undermines any one overture so that it doesn't matter which company you end up doing business with" (Fournier *et al.*, 1998, p. 44). Rather than distinguishing themselves in customers' minds with these blanket overtures, companies are losing any distinction they might have had. Fournier *et al.* also suggest that although companies are trying to create product/service offerings in response to customers' desires, customers end up feeling overwhelmed and confused. In a response to Fournier *et al.* (1998), John Williams, UK Export Promoter for the United Arab Emirates wrote:

> The sooner companies begin to realize relationship management is less about "getting as much information as we can so we know what consumers will buy" and more about "giving them as much information as they need so they'll know what to buy", the sooner both the customer and the company will be better off (Williams, 1998, p. 178).

As with any relationship, parties on each side must be conscious of and careful with one another.

Difficulties facing QSRs

QSRs are facing many potential difficulties, particularly in light of the renewal of the obesity suit against McDonald's and an increasingly health-conscious customer base. For the most part, QSRs have responded well by adding low-carb and low-fat items to their menus; however, additional challenges face today's QSRs. The TNS Intersearch Fast Food Consumer Commitment Study found that approximately half of fast food customers "either choose a brand over and over again by auto-pilot or spread their fast food spending over several brands they like equally" (Anonymous, 2003, p. 5).

Overall, customers have a low level of commitment to fast food brands. Surprisingly, the same study found that of the QSR brands, "McDonald's and Burger King have fewer committed customers and a high proportion of consumers at risk of defecting," while "Subway and Wendy's have the highest consumer commitment" (Anonymous, 2003, p. 5). Despite the increased market share McDonald's and Burger King have as compared to Subway and Wendy's, they still face customers with very low commitment levels. This may be due in part to the lack of a recognizable and central advertising figurehead that people can relate to. Subway's icon is Jared Fogle and Wendy's was owner/founder Dave Thompson, both of whom people felt they could relate to on a personal and social level. McDonald's and Burger King fail to have readily identifiable central figures that promote the formation of a relationship with their consumers (excepting, of course, Ronald McDonald, who is rarely used in advertising campaigns and thus cannot be considered a current symbol/figurehead for the McDonald's brand).

Additionally, QSRs are no longer competing only with other QSRs, but also with many quick casual and casual dining restaurants. As Sullivan (2003, p. 16) points out, "Burger King competes with Wendy's and also with Chili's, Applebee's, and Outback". QSRs also compete with the increasingly present "ready-to-eat" meals available in most grocery stores today. Kim and Kim (2004) suggest that despite the interest QSRs have in building strong brands with high brand equity, the lack of differentiation of QSR products and services and the lack of distinction of channels of distribution cause customers to have only price and brand as points of differentiation. Without points of differentiation, it becomes difficult for brands to build brand equity. The combination of an increased competitive set coupled with the increasing difficulty of building brand equity could cause problems for QSRs in the future.

Difficulties facing international QSRs

Large QSR corporations know that global branding is the key to winning and maintaining a large share of international customers. However, creating brands that transcend the differences among and between nationalities, languages, and cultures can be very difficult. Barron and Hollingshead (2004) suggest that firms attempting to craft global brands need to analyze their customers from a global perspective before analyzing their brand from a global perspective. In order to fully understand who these global customers are, companies must also examine the local markets. Etienne Aussedat, Director of Public Affairs for McDonald's, recognizes that "McDonald's may be a global brand but we work hard every day to be more local in every aspect of the business" (as cited in Jones, 2004, p. 29). McDonald's does this in part by tailoring their menus to specific regional appetites and dietary restrictions. For example, they offer vegetarian selections in countries with large vegetarian populations and substitute lamb for beef in India.

Recommendations for QSRs

What can QSRs do with this information? How can restaurants that are designed to get customers in, out, and on their way in under five-minutes hope to form relationships with their customers? QSRs have the same opportunities to form an emotional bond with their customers as other companies. Think about the Jared advertisements run by Subway Restaurants, especially in the beginning of that advertising campaign, when Jared discussed his former obesity and held up an old and very large pair of pants. In Subway's most recent advertising campaign, Jared states, "The other guys don't have me". This statement illustrates that Subway understands and intends to capitalize on their customers' emotional bond with Jared.

Or the more humorous Chick-fil-A "Eat Mor Chikin®" campaign, where the cows ran as the "Preservation Party" in the 2004 US elections with campaign slogans such as: "Our Healthcare Polisee: Eat Chikin" and "Conserv Us. Eat Chikin Liberully". These advertisements were designed to trigger an emotional response in the viewer. In the case of the Subway marketing campaign, viewers feel sympathy for Jared's weight problems, are happy that he has lost weight, and, as is the case with the majority of Americans, want to lose weight themselves. So they visit Subway. With the Chick-fil-A cows, people feel empathy for them and recognize the cows' desire to remain alive (while laughing). So they visit Chick-fil-A.

However, getting the customers into the restaurants are only the first step. QSRs must then focus on customer satisfaction and fulfilling their brand promises once the customers are inside of their restaurants. For example, Chick-fil-A restaurants strive to always have a manager tour the floor while guests are dining inside. During these tours, the manager offer to refill the customers' drinks and ensures that the food and service experience is satisfying. At Subway, the customer works with the employee to create their sandwich. Both of these situations create an even higher involvement service setting than is traditionally found in QSRs. As previously discussed, satisfaction is more likely to be translated into loyalty in high involvement service settings.

Finally, effectively using relationship marketing techniques means understanding the personal element involved in customer-company transactions. This is particularly true in the hospitality environment. In the examples presented above, customers connect with a person or character in the advertisements that they can identify with and then connect again with the manager or employee that is serving them. These personal touches and relationships assist the customer in differentiating these restaurants from the competition and can assist QSRs in developing and maintaining communal relationships with their customers.

Conclusion

Overall, QSRs face not-insurmountable difficulties. In order to successfully overcome these difficulties, companies must truly recognize the value of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and equity. Relationship marketing has proven to be an invaluable resource for gaining this level of trust from customers. However, companies should be aware that trust can be withdrawn, and with it, the resulting benefits that are associated with that trust. In the end, companies need to understand that relationships with customers are as valuable, and as tenuous, as personal relationships. Until companies properly respect these relationships, they cannot fully profit from the benefits of customer satisfaction, brand equity, and loyalty.

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