

Four rules for achieving brand success in the digital age

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Offers four rules to help your brand become associated with a category or need state and succeed in an age when machines, such as Alexa, are making purchase decisions.

- It is explained why a brand should aim to associate itself with a need state and how it can achieve this by studying neuroscience.
- The second rule advises brands not to scrimp on the ownership experience, using Nike as an example.
- It is further detailed how building a product ecosystem, in the way that Apple has, can also be powerful in creating customer loyalty, along with improving customer service.

Brand Loyalty in the Digital Age

This article is part of a series of articles on building brand loyalty in the digital age. [Read more.](#)

It's 1997 and I'm sitting in a small financial publisher's premises out in the sticks, watching a colleague tinker with printing plates for the lithographic press in the basement. We produce a magazine once a month for banks and building societies that allows them to see their competitors' rates on products such as mortgages, savings and loans. I nip upstairs into the founder's office and suggest to him that this information would also be extremely useful to consumers, and shortly afterwards, the first UK price-comparison site is born. I celebrate at the £5k bonus I receive during the subsequent acquisition. Oh, the folly of youth!

Meanwhile, in other much better-equipped offices in different parts of the world, similar conversations are happening. People are sitting around trying to work out how else the internet can be used to enrich people's lives. Wikipedia becomes a source for satisfying our thirst for knowledge. The first sites spring up that allow us to foster our relationships. Anyone remember Friends Reunited, which launched four years before Facebook? Amazon and eBay are already well in motion, allowing us to find anything we want to buy and to get it with the click of a button.

And so the titans of the internet begin to rise, all with one thing in common: that the biggest, and most enduring,

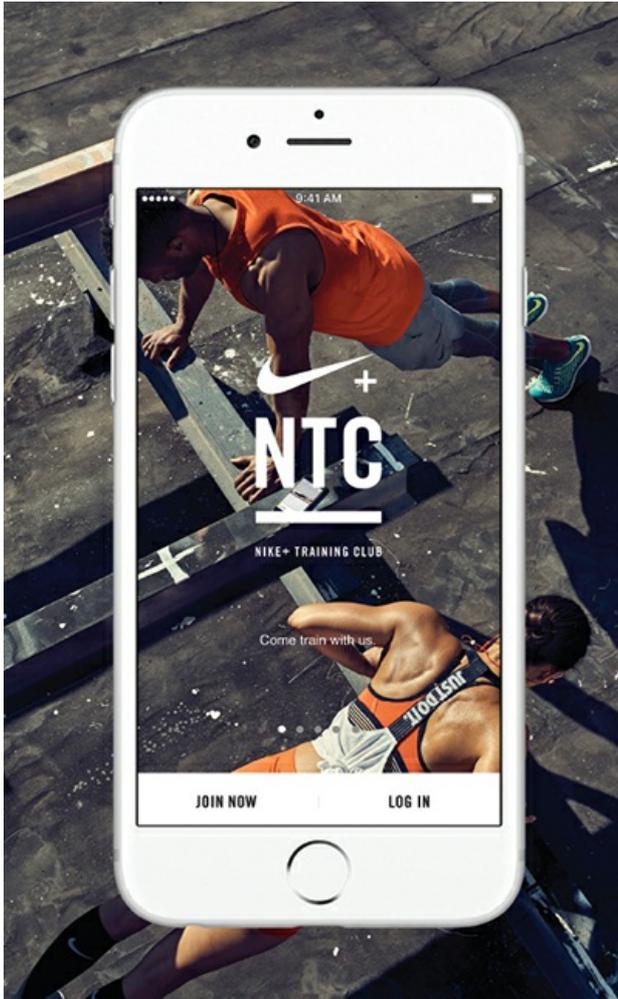
of them are focused on satisfying human needs. And it's the latter of these needs on which this article focuses. In a world where convenience is king, where new technologies are being released into the market that hand over the discovery and purchase of brands to machines, how can brands still be successful? How can brands create loyal customers who keep buying them, when machines are increasingly making the decisions?

I sense there may be a few raised eyebrows; I mean, after all, there are hardly Terminators running around intent on dominating the planet, but there is Alexa and other voice-based technologies, which are on the rise. These voice-based technologies are great, right? When fully developed, they will allow us to speak simple commands, which we can do a lot quicker than typing and have a machine do all the grunt work for us.

But think about this for a moment. If I ask Alexa for batteries, which ones will I get? Amazon Basics, right? How about every other category for which Amazon produces a product? And if I ask Google to find me some batteries, what will I get? Whichever brand is willing to pay the most to appear first on the list. Put simply, by taking search away from the screen, we will no longer be presented with a page of options and sponsored results, but most likely one option, unless we ask otherwise.

This could be devastating for brands, who will be pushed out of the market by Amazon Basic products, or by not having the money to appear first on the list with Google. Of course, we may immediately assume that consumers are not going to stand for this. That we want choice. That monopolies commissions will get involved and ensure that the market remains competitive; but let's not forget that unquenchable thirst that humans have for ease and convenience. Amazon has become one of the most valuable brands in the world, primarily for this reason, meaning it is very possible that our desire for convenience will trump our desire for choice.

So what is a brand to do? Panic? Run for the hills? No. The simple answer is that brands need to be front of mind so a consumer asks for them by name. Not: "Alexa, can you order me some batteries" but rather, "Alexa, can you order me some Duracell". To become associated with a category or need state is no mean feat. Here are four rules you need to consider if your brand is to succeed in this way.



A compelling brand and communication strategy

It's more important than ever to have a compelling brand and communication strategy. An obvious point, but an important one. There are countless pieces of research and even Nobel Prize-winning authors (yes, I'm thinking of Daniel Kahneman here) who will explain to you in a vastly superior way to me about how humans make choices, and especially the emotional shortcuts we use in decision-making. Put simply, if we want someone to think of our brand when they are in a need state – they're hungry, they want a refreshing drink, they want fresh-smelling clothes – then we need to work out how to associate our brand with these feelings. Build your brand strategy around this. Delve into the world of neuroscience and see if you can understand the cues that light up people's brains when they want something in your category and associate your brand with these cues in every way possible – from the stories you tell in advertising, to the way you design your packaging. And be brutal in sticking to the associations you are trying to build. As Byron Sharp says in *How Brands Grow*, "A large part of the art of advertising is telling the same story, over and over, but in new and entertaining ways." If you have created a powerful association, so that when someone is hungry, thirsty, or perhaps needs a taxi, they ask for you ("Alexa..."), then keep reinforcing it. Remember, as new competitors enter the market, they will naturally create a peak in interest, so defend your share by ensuring you are the brand that is on the tip of the consumer's tongue, by knowing what you offer and reinforcing this at every opportunity.

Don't scrimp on the ownership experience

We spend so much time focused on acquiring customers that we forget that the time they spend most with the brand is when they are using it. Post-purchase experiences have been dominated for a long time by smart CRM programmes designed to increase share of wallet and an obsession with creating frictionless experiences that encourage people to keep using the brand in the future. And all this is good. And should not be ignored. But what should also not be ignored is when it's good to have a bit of 'friction'. Being frictionless, by nature, means that the brand is less intrusive. And if you're Nike, then perhaps sticking sensors in shoes that tell the wearer when the soles are worn and they should order a new pair is a good and useful thing. Maybe the shoes can even do the ordering for you with the click of a heel as the Internet of Things progresses. This is being frictionless.

But, if you truly want your brand to be front of mind, how about creating a fully intrusive service like Nike Training Club, an app that brings friction to a new level as it barks drills at you and you gasp and sweat. In our obsession to make people's lives easier and apply technology and intelligence to the task, let's not forget that we can apply the same technology and intelligence to helping people get the most out of the brands they have purchased. And it is perhaps the friction, rather than the frictionless, which will be the most potent reminder of the brand in that moment when someone comes to order their next product. "Yes Alexa, get me the brand that is trying its best to kill me!"

Learn from Apple

Apple is talked about way too much in articles, but I'm not going to talk about the power of their brand or the innovation of their products; rather, I'm going to talk about a less popular but incredibly smart way to drive customer loyalty which Apple practically invented, namely the product ecosystem. Feel free to laugh at me by Googling Mac SE20, but yes, this was the computer I took away to university, vastly superior to my Commodore 64, which had fewer kilobytes in the whole machine than the image you accidentally snapped in your pocket last night.

And why did I buy this Mac? Well, simple really. First, I was into music and Macs were the product for such things; and second, I loved the fact that you plugged something into the back of it and it just appeared on the screen, versus all those patches you had to download on a PC, for anyone else who is old enough to remember.

And so my love-hate relationship with Apple began. One minute I would love my products for the way they combined beauty with simplicity and the next I was shouting at them for not allowing me to use Microsoft Office, or play music not bought through iTunes (things they changed at a later date). And, yet, through all these moments of frustration, I never left the brand. Was this because I was an Apple fanboy? Well no, actually. It was because I had too much invested in their ecosystem to switch to a PC or another competing device. Yes, I may have got Microsoft Office, but in getting this I would also need to switch my phone. And rebuy my music. And rebuy my games. Assuming I didn't want to run two computers alongside one another. And even when the biggest fly in the ointment came, when my old iMac, without an Intel Inside, couldn't even use the latest version of Safari that required an Intel-based machine, what did I do? Buy a new Mac!

So, as counterintuitive as it may seem to frustrate consumers, ecosystems can be powerful things in creating customer loyalty, as one product strengthens the other, and so on.

And remember, this doesn't just have to be in the world of tech. I would argue that Aperol is part of an ecosystem and it's called the dining on summer evenings ecosystem. I mean, what good is having a nice meal on a warm summer evening if you don't start with an Aperol Spritz?

Think about your product and the other products that strengthen it and create physical compatibility if you can, as in the case of Apple, or just associations that tie you into an ecosystem broader than your brand. And you may find that people can't do without you and, again, will remember you in that purchase moment of truth.

Remember the power of resolution

I want to talk now about remembering that old adage that an unhappy customer can become your best advocate if you resolve their problems effectively. One of my friends once said to me that call centres are the scourge of modern society. Slightly dramatic, perhaps, but something most of us can relate to, especially in the days before callbacks when we were stuck listening to *Club Tropicana* on loop, before being fobbed off to another department. However, even in these moments, when our blood was boiling and we were ready to quit the company and trash them on every social platform we could get our hands on, if someone came along and resolved our problems, our mood quickly changed.

Think about your customer service. The way you resolve issues. Perhaps route first-time calls to a specialist team; after all, first impressions count. Or better still, let people resolve their own problems online. We've all had a package not arrive, or been left an illegible calling card that does not enable us to easily reschedule our delivery. Consider this: send that text message to people in the way DPD do, which with a couple of clicks allows you to reschedule your slot without the need to decipher hieroglyphic-style writing or speak to someone who can't help you. In this case, think frictionless and apply it to resolving customer pain points and you may well find that you are once again front of mind when your customers come to renew their products or services, regardless of what Alexa recommends, or Google suggests.

About the author

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Ben has over 20 years' experience in creating commercial success for brands by helping them understand how to create meaningful connections, through all of their marketing channels and services.

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