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## Promises, Promises

Empty slogans won't build brand loyalty. What happens when companies start telling the truth?

by William J. McEwen

A recent radio commercial for BMW automobiles does something unusual. It takes competing car companies to task, but not because of allegedly imitative styling, poor reliability ratings, or inadequate on-road performance. Instead, BMW contends that other car companies employ advertising slogans that aren't memorably linked to their brand names and aren't true.

In essence, BMW is contending that truth should become the standard by which car buyers evaluate manufacturers' brand promises. A novel idea! And this idea has considerable merit, not just for automobile marketers.

Companies often want to refine or even reposition their brand promise. As companies undertake these efforts, they are obviously concerned about whether the new promise is memorable, intriguing, or persuasive. However, they appear far less concerned with whether they can actually *deliver* on this new promise.

Of course, almost any auto brand can promise consumers that it is "different" or "exciting." Any automaker can promise that its cars will "quicken your pulse" with "athletic" performance or "elegant" styling. Auto manufacturers have, in fact, made each of these promises. But, to follow up on BMW's challenge, how many of these promises have actually been *kept*?

Making big promises -- or over-promises -- isn't restricted to auto manufacturers. Vacation marketers promise travelers that they will "exceed your expectations." Retailers announce, "Your satisfaction is our No. 1 concern." Promises are everywhere: "Breathtaking." "Easy to install." "A great price." "At our store, the customer is king." "Built to last." "Your call is important to us. Please stay on the line." George Carlin recently termed these over-used litanies an "advertising lullaby," contending that repetition has reduced them to sleep aids. Sleep aids don't stimulate action.

### **You can fool the customer some of the time . . .**

What evidence do companies provide to support their brand promises? Too often, promises are based on fluff rather than substance, communicating claims about the brand experience that have little basis in reality.

Got a staff friendliness problem? Show a sea of smiling faces. Brand yourself as the "friendly" store or as the bank with the smiling loan officers standing ready to approve your customers' loan requests immediately. Got a product quality problem? Tell consumers that you stand, and have always stood, foursquare for quality. Got a category

problem? Simply redefine the category.

One such effort in category redefinition was critically appraised in one of Bob Garfield's columns in *Advertising Age* (July 30, 2001). KFC has embarked on a new ad campaign to help it distance itself from "fast food." In its advertising, KFC claims that its food is "hand prepared" and "slow cooked." Garfield's review, however, questions the wisdom of "pursuing an advertising strategy that will be instantly impeached by the consumer experience."

Why promise what you can't, or won't, deliver? Why make promises that will probably be inconsistent with the product experience? Why tell people that "this is not your father's Oldsmobile," if people still think it is?

Maybe because it is enticingly easy to do, and it seems like a simple solution to a difficult problem. Politicians call it "spin." Advertisers call it "puffery." Consumers, however, have a different word for it -- and theirs is the final word.

Why is over-promising so prevalent? Maybe it's simply contagious: "Everybody does it." It's just harmless puffery that imitates the competition. At its worst, however, it reflects less scrupulous marketers' belief that you can, indeed, "fool all of the people all the time." No one will be the wiser. Or will they?

### **... but you can't fool the customer all of the time**

David Ogilvy, who monitored movie-going audiences' attitudes toward films and performers with Dr. George Gallup before founding the advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather, challenged his agency's creative teams by pointing out the dangers in promises that can't or won't be kept. As Ogilvy stated it, "The consumer isn't a moron. She is your wife. You insult her intelligence if you assume that a mere slogan and a few vapid adjectives will persuade her to buy anything." This statement points out the importance of a well crafted and compelling advertising argument to attracting buyers. However, his message applies even more powerfully to companies that want to persuade consumers to buy anything *more than once*.

"Respect the customer." "Keep the promises you make." Wouldn't most marketers agree with these marketing mantras?

Recent customer data collected by The Gallup Organization suggest that many customers don't believe the promises made by advertisers -- including the promises made by some of the brands they use most. In a Gallup research and development survey of more than 3,100 customers, only a minority of current customers agreed that the brands they use keep the promises they make.

For example, only about a third (38%) of bank customers in the United States feel that their bank always keeps its promises. An even smaller number (31%) of auto owners feel that their car's manufacturer always keeps the promises it makes. And only about one in five (22%) of past-year airline customers feel that the airline they fly most always keeps its promises.

There are also large differences between competing brands within each of these categories. For example, while only 20% of one auto manufacturer's customers feel their car company keeps its promises, almost half (44%) of one of its major competitors' customers feels that way.

If eight of 10 current car owners doubt their vehicle maker's word, making a compelling promise probably isn't this manufacturer's key problem. Rather, *keeping* that promise is what needs attention.

Airlines, in spite of the seeming similarity of their products and prices, also show a

surprisingly broad range in the extent to which their customers believe that they keep their promises. While over a third (37%) of one airline's fliers are firmly convinced that the airline they fly most always keeps its promises, a rather dismal 5% of another airline's customers feel that way about the carrier they rely on most. Is it time to change the promise? Or is it time to start *keeping* it?

### **Reaping what you sow**

What's the impact of an unkept promise? Gallup research has shown that if customers don't have a firm foundation of confidence and trust in a brand, customer loyalty erodes. In fact, across an array of brands in six different product categories, Gallup found that customer loyalty plummets an average of 29% if customers do not have a strong belief in the company's ability and commitment to keep its promises. Loyalty suffers when promises aren't kept.

In short: A marketer may well attract a new buyer with an intriguing -- or even outlandish -- promise. That marketer will not keep the customer coming back, however, unless the promise is kept. And it must be kept, not just once, but always.

There are important lessons here for every marketer who makes a promise to a customer. This is not simply a caution presented to those unscrupulous few companies that set out to deliberately cheat or mislead consumers. Rather, although some brands clearly outperform others, almost all brands have room for improvement when it comes to keeping the promises they make to their customers.

Those who know best -- customers -- are frequently unenthusiastic about the promise-keeping performance of the companies that provide the products and services they buy and use. And customers don't keep their doubts and disappointments secret. As any number of observers and analysts can attest, customers who feel that a company has renege on its promises are likely to spread the word to neighbors, friends, and coworkers.

### **Keeping promises and keeping customers**

Some companies' failure to keep promises may be so pervasive that promise-keeping may well represent a competitive superiority to their competitors. Why? Because a skeptical consumer audience that is wary of the over-promises made by aggressive marketers could see a competitive advantage in a company that keeps its promises.

A recent advertisement from Amica Insurance illustrates the point. Amica attempts to separate itself from other insurance providers not by the range, scope, or pricing of its services, but by virtue of the fact that -- at least according to the company -- Amica keeps its promises. Amica states in its ad that its commitment may be "the most amazing thing in the world: a company that actually keeps its promises to you."

Is there a competitive advantage, as Amica claims, in keeping your promises -- and not merely in making them? Seemingly so, as companies pay a real price when their promises aren't kept. Promises not kept are not simply ignored, forgiven, or forgotten by customers. By jeopardizing the company's customer relationships, unkept promises also jeopardize the future health of the company.

So what should companies do?

Should marketers stop making promises? That's certainly not a solution, since a company's brand is nothing more and nothing less than the promise that it makes. No brand promise means no brand *differentiation*.

Should marketers focus instead on making easy-to-keep promises? Companies that stop making compelling promises will soon stop attracting customers.

Or should marketers start restructuring and redirecting their resources to focus on *keeping* their promises instead? Not just once in a while, but always, and at each point of customer contact? It's a novel idea, according to both BMW and Amica. And it's an idea that's difficult to execute. Yet it's a powerful idea. It can differentiate a brand from its competitors and, most importantly, it can forge a customer bond that will prove both enduring and profitable. And that's a promise.

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