

Where Fortune Favors the Different

Companies can generate extraordinary value by diverging from their competitors and elevating what makes them distinct. And there's no better mechanism for delivering distinctiveness than experience. By understanding how it fuels customer relationships, companies can begin to make it their competitive advantage.

As the most complete, most honest expression of a brand, experience forms the heart of any relationship between company and customer. This relationship provides a way to contextualize and understand an experience. In turn, a well-designed experience has the power to develop the relationship further, by bringing to life the values a company expresses in its brand communications.

It is these values, when shared by the customer, that define the potential of the relationship. That's because they enable a common understanding of what a great experience should be.

Great experiences always offer something different, in a way that is authentic to the brand—they bring otherwise abstract sets of principles and guidelines to life, expressing them holistically through customer touchpoints, from products to services to environments. As they do so they facilitate a deeper understanding and connection between company and customer.

To realize the maximum return from this connection, a company should design everything it does as a direct expression of its purpose and values. As Tom Morton of R/GA says: "If experience is the new high ground for brands, experience strategists are the new brand guardians."

There is a common misconception that following best practice works as well for branded experiences as it does for improving operational efficiency. It doesn't—and the danger

of focusing on optimization is that it leads to commoditization. By playing 'follow the leader,' companies put themselves on the fast-track to parity. Simply looking to replicate what your peers have done is a good indication you'll make similar decisions, leading to a non-differentiated experience for customers.

Instead, to differentiate, you must create something new. When Ford Motor Company introduced Lincoln to the Chinese market, it took the opportunity to transform people's expectations of the car-buying experience. Ford managed to shift the customer's paradigm because it did not think about car sales in isolation, but instead focused on designing an experience rooted in luxury, which is at the heart of the Lincoln brand. The attention they focused on transforming the experience in China paid off, increasing sales and making 2017 Lincoln's best year in almost two decades.

Similarly, Apple's Genius Bar gave customers a key talking point by helping to drive the core Apple experience—accessible, incredible technology—to a new level.

When you design a great experience rooted in your brand, you create a thread that goes beyond purely logical motives to resonate at an emotional level, giving customers a reason to become 'members'. A reason to buy into the ecosystem, not just an isolated experience.

And from there, a deeper relationship can take hold, generating the kind of loyalty and passion for the company that, in turn, creates the strongest and most enduring platform for business growth.