

# No Quick Fix for Building Loyalty

by Bill Carmody



Ask yourself this question: “For whom do I work?”

Seems simple enough. Initially, you might answer, “Myself,” or you might name a person in your company who is higher up on the corporate food chain. But then, you might think about the question a little bit more and answer, “My customers.”

Though your paycheck may come from the company for which you work, the people who truly pay your salary are the people who buy your products and services. So what happens when you discover that few of these people have any loyalty to, or preference for, your company?

In today’s “hurry-up-and-inflate-my numbers-for-Wall-Street” mentality, many companies have traded their long-term plans for short-term gains. These short-term gains include everything from inflated Web traffic and overstated membership numbers to sales figures based on price discounts so deep that they result in a loss for the company.

It’s not difficult to create a free-for-all when you give away your products or pay off your target audience to become members of your site. But then what? Smart marketers know that artificially jacking up these measurement criteria in the short term will only cause more problems down the road – yet they do it anyway. Why?

Much of today’s online marketing is a direct reflection of the internal chaos that many companies endure. Brainstorming concepts developed in a Monday morning meeting are expected to be ready to introduce by the following week’s meeting – if not sooner.

Marketers reacting to this kind of demand for immediate results are rarely given the chance to take a step back and build their long-term strategies. There’s a huge difference between flexibility and chaos. Reacting to demand without a well-planned strategy is like rolling the dice and hoping for the best.

The irony of all the internal chaos is that much of it is self-imposed. By not taking the time to build a long-term plan (even for the next 12 to 18 months), you are forced to react to what the competition is doing and to what other people within the company tell you.

As my handyman grandfather used to tell me, “Measure twice. Cut once.” Those four little words are extremely powerful. They boil down all the issues related to not taking the time to plan.

Marketing – online or offline – is no different. If you don’t take time to plan, you end up wasting a lot of time and money doing things that probably will not work. Without proper plans in place, you might as well be shooting at a moving target. It is extremely difficult to tell what works, because satisfying your immediate objective may actually move you farther from your long-term goals.

Creating a 12-month to 18-month plan forces you and your colleagues to agree upon long-term goals and the best course to accomplish those goals. Moreover, these goals may conflict with your short-term strategies.

At a recent conference I attended, one of the speakers showed a slide that featured three different customer acquisition strategies:

- Reaching any customer at any price.
- Getting the right customer at any price.
- Getting the right customer at the right price.

Short-term gains usually fall under the first and second categories of getting customers at any price. But to get the right customer at the right price, you must develop a plan that will create awareness, interest, desire and action – all for the right cost of acquisition.

Once a plan has been developed, it is OK to be flexible – especially when information has been added or discovered. Building the plan will provide a road map to which everyone can come back.

Well-planned marketing and promotions not only capture the attention of the target audience, but they also stay rooted in the minds of consumers. They have the best referrals because people actually think about the promotion and tell their friends about it.

The bottom line is, when you take time to plan, it shows. When immediate action is needed, the plan provides a well-constructed starting point. But the biggest benefit of planning is the avoidance of costly mistakes and the elimination of counterproductive marketing efforts.

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