
Lessons from a Teddy Bear Shop

*How to Create Competitive
Advantage Through The Branded
Service Experience*

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In a copycat world, where news travels at the speed of nanoseconds, achieving sustainable competitive advantage has become a real challenge in business today. Branding has therefore become a hot topic in business. The aim of branding is to create a unique space for your company, enclosed by a strong fortress. A fortress that is difficult for competitors to penetrate.

Branding has traditionally been associated with visual image, advertising and slogans. In this article, I will discuss how you can build an even stronger brand fortress. You can do so by creating your company's unique branded service experience.

Employees at Build a Bear know that their role is to bring a teddy bear to life.

I was in Las Vegas recently, and my TMI colleagues told me, "You must visit Build-a-Bear Workshop (they call their shops Workshops)." I was not sure what all the fuss was about, but, based on the strong recommendations, I *just had to* visit the Build-a-Bear Workshop. Build-a-Bear is based on the idea of your child (or, in this case, my wife and I) creating your own teddy bear. The Mission of Build-A-Bear Workshop is to *bring the Teddy Bear to life*. Staff at Build-a-Bear know that their role is to create a memorable experience that brings a teddy bear to life for the customer. You begin the process by choosing your bear (which at this stage is an empty shell that has not been stuffed), you fill it with stuffing to give it shape, you give it a heart (and whisper special blessings into it before you insert it), you give your bear a sound, you choose its clothes, you give it a name, you give it a birth certificate and then you take it home in its own cardboard bear home. The shops are colourful and vibrant. They are staffed by relatively young people. And it is the staff that makes the difference to the fabulous Build-a-Bear experience. I went to three Build-a-Bear shops in the US and in each case, the employees were having fun, helping their customers create a cuddly, furry friend to take home. It was totally authentic. There was nothing scripted. And it has created huge success for Build-a-Bear.

Build-a-Bear is a highly successful, growing international business that turns over USD\$304m a year. Yes, that's 304 million dollars in teddy bears and teddy bear outfits! It has achieved this by designing a brand, then designing a brand experience around that brand. I will tell thousands of people about my Build-a-Bear experience. I'm doing so in writing about it in this article. It was not of the quality of their graphic design, or the quality of their bears that grabbed me. Rather, it was the quality of the brand experience that I was given from the time that I entered the shop, that turned a teddy bear purchase into an emotional experience!

From Teddy Bears to Your Business

So what has this got to do with you? No matter what business you are in – whether you are in industries including hospitality, banking, insurance, telecommunications, hospitals or retail – you can strengthen your differentiation by delivering on the branded service experience.

**Differentiate
by delivering
your branded
service
experience.**

The process starts with your company clearly defining the brand experience that you wish your customers to have. We need to go beyond traditional “give good service” models. This is important, but it’s no longer a differentiator. We need to move to the next level – to give your customers the experience *that you have defined*.

South West Airlines is another great example. It is by far the most successful airline in the United States. It offers a brand experience that is defined by low fares, fun and love, where love refers to care and respect. Employees deliver on the promise – fun and love. Customers are known to have fun on South West Airlines flights. There have even been occasions where a passenger coming on board opened his overhead storage to find a flight attendant inside. Now that’s a funny surprise! And customers vote with their dollars by growing this airline’s passenger traffic. South West realizes that it goes beyond being polite and giving good service. It is about delivering on the South West Airlines experience.

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You can strengthen your brand fortress from attacks by competitors by defining your unique brand experience. The challenge is then to shape your culture and to align your systems to enable delivery of your brand promise. A TMI study showed that the impact of your brand advertising is magnified when your people deliver the brand experience. Your HR Department can magnify the return on investment from your branding efforts by creating a branded service culture.

Business is indeed tough these days. Success requires different thinking. Developing an “on-brand” culture that delivers branded service experience represents an opportunity for your company to develop a competitive advantage that will be difficult to copy. Build your brand fortress. Reinforce it with the brand experience. The result will be market share and sustainable growth. If you want solid proof, just ask companies like Build-a-Bear and South West Airlines.

And one last point...for you to build your brand fortress may require that you take down the invisible walls between marketing and HR so that they work closely together for the same brand objectives.

This article was first published in BUSINESS TODAY™ magazine, August 2006

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