

Excerpt from *Branded Customer Service*  
by Janelle Barlow and Paul Stewart

## **Introduction**

### **On-Brand or Off-Brand**

#### **What is a brand?**

At its most basic level, a brand is a unique identity. It is a shorthand way the public thinks about what you do, produce, serve, and sell. When well conceived and developed, a brand is a vibrant picture held in consumers' minds. Well-executed brands are worth millions, even billions of dollars, in sales and shareholder value. Brands stand out like beacons of light in a sea awash with high-quality products and services offered to meet consumer-expression needs, as consumers choose brands in great part to tell the world and themselves who they are. Branding is a central element of marketing strategies. The consumer in effect believes, "The only way I can be who I am is to have specific products or services." A powerful brand, therefore, creates a must-have quasi monopoly for itself.

#### **So, what is branded customer service?**

It's an additional and huge way to further distinguish a brand's unique identity. Branded customer service goes way beyond generic service. It even is more than excellent service. It is a strategic and organized way to deliver on-brand customer experiences that magnify brand promises. It adds value to target markets by driving home the essence of a brand. In so doing, branded customer service can become so valuable that it takes on the power of a brand unto itself. When service experiences are aligned with brand promises, a multiplying effect occurs that is significantly more engaging than just a well-recognized brand name. When service experiences do not match brand promises, as so frequently happens, trust is undermined and brand erosion occurs. This gap is costly and can ruin or seriously diminish a good advertising campaign. For all these reasons, branded customer service is the new competitive edge in the service economy. Some time ago, an Australian bank made a promise that customers would be given \$5 if they had to wait longer than five minutes for a teller. The promise (with its well-crafted subtext message that the bank valued its customers' time so much that they would never waste more than five minutes of it) attracted customers. Unfortunately, the bank failed in its delivery. Employees got so hassled trying to deliver on the unrealistic, maximum-five-minute promise that the bank had to retract its promise. The result? Immediate, widely publicized, and significant brand erosion.

On the other hand, another bank has successfully integrated its brand advertising into its service culture. The bank recently measured the impact of its advertising, comparing reactions of customers with noncustomers. The research concluded that customers, *who had both seen the bank's advertisements and experienced its service* had the strongest positive associations with the brand's attributes, which are listed on the following chart.

Customers who had merely experienced the bank's service without seeing the ads had a lower association with the bank's brand attributes. And for noncustomers who saw the ads

but did not receive any reinforcement through service of the brand promise, the associations with the attributes were still lower. Conclusion: *a combination of strong advertising* to let customers know what they should expect *and then consistently delivering* the advertised service results in the most positive brand associations.

This research, based on 780 interviews conducted between January and March 2002, demonstrates that there is a real market opportunity for companies to forge stronger relationships with customers. Such relationships take advantage of the multiplying effect of actually delivering *unique* service experiences that have been promised in advertising, via public relations, or on the Web. When service is branded and combined with a solid product offering, you have a winning combination that can reduce the impact of your competitors. It will be difficult, in fact, for others to copy you if you continually reinforce and magnify your unique brand position through parallel service delivery. Brand promises meet customers' psychological needs beyond the simple and functional. Even though brands speak to large population groups, customers experience them as personal connections to products and services. This personal connection is what creates brand engagement and commitment. As actor and film producer Robert Redford says, "If it's not personal, then there won't be any passion or commitment."

We predict that in a few years, businesses will make a clear distinction between generic customer service and branded customer service. The distinction between old-fashioned, good generic service and branded customer service will be understood in the same way that the marketplace today understands the distinction between generic products and branded products—such as with generic prescription drugs versus brand-name drugs. We further predict that *on-brand service*, a term we use to describe customer service that is aligned with brand promises, will become the standard that twenty-first-century businesses use to judge service. Once people are introduced to the terms *on-brand* and *off-brand*, they immediately grasp the concept and understand how on- and off-brand service is not identical to good and bad service. This book outlines ways to reinforce both the logical and emotional aspects of your brand through service delivery. We consider *brands when they are seen through the focus of customer service*. We also reverse the proposition and consider *customer service when it is seen through the focus of branding*. Whichever way you look at it, our ultimate goal is to help you build equity for your brand (increased name recognition, more loyal customers, increased market share, and higher margins) by offering you a standard by which to craft the human part of your customer service so it stays on-brand. You can then take advantage of what branding experts have long known: a strong brand is indeed a very valuable asset.

Finally, as customers raise the bar on the service they expect, organizations that do not brand their service offerings will be at a distinct disadvantage. We will show you how to align the dynamics of your customer service in Redford's "passionate and committed" way with the promises and *persona* of your carefully defined brand. This book will show you what is necessary to avoid being left behind.

**Why this book now?**

Despite all the money invested in branding, most brands under-perform. The major reason for this is that most branding strategies today still rely heavily on advertisements, marketing, endorsements, and other media-based approaches in an economy that has become predominantly service based. We contend that organizations can gain the maximum return from brand expenditures when everyone—rather than just the marketing department—reinforces the brand.

Service organizations continue to use, without much questioning, branding models that are more appropriate to fast-moving consumer goods, or FMCG. The key element in the chain, the actual service experience, is often overlooked because either advertising agencies and traditional marketers typically do not have core competencies in this area or they do not have the mandate to shape and influence it. The service component of the brand experience is therefore a powerful competitive weapon, waiting to be unleashed. As one hotelier recently remarked to us, “Our marketing collateral is very good. But do we deliver? If we really delivered what we imply, our customer-return rate would be much higher.”

For this reason, this book focuses on the two main organizational audiences that need more than image-based strategies to gain maximum market share: those that are exclusively service based and those that are product based but with a large component of service. When a large part of what you have to offer consumers is delivered through people, customer experiences that reinforce your brand messages are perhaps the most enduring means of keeping and even getting customers. James Gilmore and Joe Pine, authors of *The Experience Economy*, express a viewpoint that has become widely accepted: “People have become relatively immune to messages targeted at them. The way to reach your customers is to create an experience within them.”

We were inspired to write *Branded Customer Service* after surveying the market and exchanging ideas with a number of our consulting clients and other experts in the field of branding. We came to the conclusion that if advertising dollars and marketing efforts communicate one brand message and staff deliver something different, an organization is wasting money and probably has an image problem! We read countless pages of literature on branding and discovered a marketplace filled with books and articles written predominantly by branding experts—not customer service experts. Many recently released books do discuss the importance of customer service in brand development, but they are extremely broad in their coverage and primarily address how organizational culture supports delivery of the brand. While addressing important topics, these books give little mention to what we see is one of the most important and yet overlooked topics in this field: how employees can actually deliver their organizational brands when they are engaged in activity that directly or indirectly affects customers.

It is very useful for a retail chain of stores, for example, that makes a brand promise to “always be there to help customers” to align its material service (processes, product availability and range, opening hours, and locations) to deliver that promise. However, the brand promise will still fall short if the store employees do not understand the importance of their own behavior in supporting this brand promise. For example, if employees stand in rapt conversation with each other—in full view of a long line of customers waiting to be

served— that will be experienced as off-brand by customers. Staff may miss the point that their “innocent” behavior, however justified it may be, erodes confidence in the retail chain’s brand position as much as an ineffective advertisement can turn off customers. A brand statement can be made with off-brand nonverbal staff behavior: “We say we are, but, in fact, we aren’t always there to help you.” The brand effort is hijacked—or at best, is not taken advantage of—unless employees are aware of and understand the consequences of *all* their brand-related behaviors.

### **What flocking birds can teach us about branded service**

As customer service consultants, we know it is possible, though not easy, to align personal service behaviors with brand promises in a memorable way that is not scripted. A metaphor we find inspiring is the rapid, darting, swirling patterns that large flocks of flying birds produce without colliding into each other. The red-billed quelea, the most common wild bird on this planet, is known to swarm in flocks a million strong and at the same time display eye-popping swirling patterns. While the physics that explains this remarkable phenomenon is complex, basically the birds follow three simple self-organizing principles that enable this complex group activity—even though each single bird’s pattern is individual. Using their keen eyesight and rapid turning ability, the birds follow three simple rules: (1) avoid bumping into each other, (2) fly at the same speed, and (3) head towards the center of their group.

We believe the way flocking birds do this can bring understanding to how service can both be branded and yet also utilize the potentiality that unique human-to-human contact enjoys. While marketers can fairly easily present one consistent external face of the brand, delivering consistent customer service that enhances the brand is another matter altogether. Customer service is offered by humans, who are highly individualistic. As a result, the temptation is strong to script service in order to control its variation. We argue that this is not a good idea—even to honor the brand.

The historical bias toward the tightly managed approach for fast-moving consumer goods no doubt explains why the same tight controls are frequently applied to customer service exchanges. Most marketing professionals cut their teeth managing FMCG using rigid mandates that work well with products that are relatively inexpensive and purchased in high quantities. All too often, they extend this practice by scripting what service providers say to customers and by defining precise service behaviors. Many marketing professionals really believe that if you print “thank you” on a sales slip it deftly handles the issue of gratitude for a customer’s business. Unfortunately, this rule-driven scripting can lead to inauthentic exchanges that leave customers either feeling ambivalent or scratching their heads in wonderment about the service they have received. It can also lead to bored, underutilized, and frustrated staff.

We believe that it is possible to use brand promises, which are generally presented in easy-to-understand and uncluttered concepts, as the self-organizing “flocking” guidelines to focus on-brand customer service delivered by thousands of employees in large organizations. In this way, branded customer service can be presented in a patterned way, an on-brand way

that still takes advantage of individual input. It is possible, in fact, to get so good at delivering branded customer service that your staff-customer interactions can cover a multitude of material deficits in your product offering. Even when this happens, brand-congruent service interactions enable customers to walk away with crystal clarity and trust that they received the promises of your advertising and marketing efforts. However, simply delivering good service, or as we refer to it, generic customer service, no longer is enough to distinguish a business's products and services. Advertising agencies focus carefully on all the nuances of ads they create for clients and their brands. They pay attention to precise color hues, every single word, voice tonality, music, images, spokespeople.

They do this to enhance and manage unique images. The cover of this book, as a case in point, was designed by a brand image consultant. While someone who picks up this book may not understand all the dynamics that have been elegantly designed into the words, word placement, typesetting, and colors, the designer had a clear sense of creating a cover that enhances the content of this book. Branded customer service is also about subtlety of emphasis, the subtlety of staff behavior that reinforces an image and brand in every way possible.

Mercedes-Benz, for example, is concerned with luxury and solid engineering and focuses heavily on the passenger's experience. BMW, by contrast, is focused on performance and the driver's experience. Because each company delivers on its product promises and large population niches like what each offers, both brands command price premiums. When you walk into a BMW dealership you will more than likely be treated to a service experience that is also about performance. Someone will normally be at your side in thirty seconds, focused, and fast in both behavior and speech. Chris Howe, with the UK company Change Maker, labels the BMW process as "engineered."<sup>5</sup> He describes the Mercedes experience as more relaxed, smoother, unobtrusive, and professional, in a way so you know you have "just spoken to Mercedes Benz." BMW and Mercedes staff have to understand branding messages very well to be able to deliver consistent experiences like this.

Many times customers are not able to describe exactly what happens in branded service exchanges. For example, most people cannot articulate the difference between a BMW and a Mercedes sales pitch. But customers walk away from these dealerships with their perceptions of these auto brands intensified in the same way as actually test-driving a BMW or Mercedes reinforces brand promises. Using the simple, elegantly designed, organizing principles that describe their brands, BMW and Mercedes are both good at inspiring their sales teams and service departments to deliver their brand pledges.

As generic copies of brand-name products are slowly chipping away at the name-recognition advantage that well-known brands enjoy, many companies have learned that the impact of advertising and marketing alone is not enough to push revenue growth. Because generic brands can cleverly cash in on a branded product's cachet by imitating packaging and lowering prices, brands today have to be bigger than the label, bigger than the box, bigger than the product.

*Branded Customer Service* provides hands-on, tested processes and ideas that can be adapted to make unique brands bigger. Some of these are simple and easy to implement. Others require extensive integration of brand values within your organizational culture.

A number of companies have branded their service. Some of them are mentioned in this book. Others are making the attempt. But most are mired in their efforts to offer good, generic customer service that is frankly insufficiently related to the brand they represent. Most brand and marketing experts do not understand how to brand service. On the other hand, while most customer service experts are able to delineate components of good customer service, they rarely take this concept a step further to focus on brand-specific customer service. They are, therefore, neglecting a key part of business strategy. This book was written to bridge this large gap and make a unique contribution to the fields of branding and customer service.

### **How to go use this book**

This book walks you through a wide array of ideas, research, strategies, and techniques to facilitate your understanding and delivery of your brand through service. It is divided into three parts:

- Part I: Linking the Big World of Branding to Customer Service
- Part II: Embedding On-Brand Service Into Your Organizational DNA
- Part III: The Branded Customer Service Toolbox

While each of the three parts of this book can stand alone, we encourage you to at least skim the contents even if you find yourself concentrating on one part more than another. We have organized the material in a way that makes logical sense to us. However, your own expertise may inspire you to explore it in a different order.

*Part I: Linking the Big World of Branding to Customer Service* covers the evolution and power of brands and argues that generic customer service does not take advantage of the uniqueness of each brand's values and promises. We contend that generic customer service is minimally competitive in today's service economy and look at what is necessary for you to develop a strategy that integrates your brand into the heart of your customer service delivery. This part of the book links branding concepts to the idea of branded customer service. Challenges to branding your customer service are highlighted, and a road map is presented to start you on your way. Examples of on-brand service and off-brand service are sprinkled throughout this section.

Most research journals are filled with articles that are detailed, complex, and often incomprehensible to anyone who is not a marketing or brand expert or someone not well versed in statistical methods. Therefore, we have summarized branding literature to make it more accessible to those primarily interested in customer service or management. For those who are well versed in the literature, we have linked branding with customer service concepts to provide a new view for brand experts.

*Part II: Embedding On-Brand Service Into Your Organizational DNA* explores ways to support and promote your branded customer service through initiatives involving culture change, leadership communication, the manager's role, and brand champions. In this part, we also place special emphasis on the importance of human resources (HR) strategies and functions in ensuring brand alignment. We endorse the groundswell to house the function of brand building in both marketing and HR departments. In fact, we firmly believe that HR has the potential to play a make-or-break role in successful branded service initiatives. Managers, human resource professionals, and trainers will find this section of the book particularly valuable.

We begin the second part of this book with a full explanation of the model that TMI, our training and consulting company, uses. The chapter called "Defining Your Brand DNA" describes our philosophy and explains how we work at staying on-brand ourselves.

*Part III: The Branded Customer Service Toolbox* is designed as a toolbox of methodologies and practical ideas that will guide you in delivering service that is aligned to your brand. Just as branding techniques need to be adapted for each product or service, there is no one best way to brand your customer service. We offer many exercises in part III, which are all most effective when adapted to your unique brand offering. The dozens of exercises and ideas we share, tested for more than two decades, are representative of the types we use with our own clients and should be seen as prototypes. We always adapt these ideas to the unique brand promises of the organizations with which we work, and you must do the same for your own organization. Think of these exercises as engines that gain power as they are customized to your specific brand.

We also cover the imperative of sales, service, and brand linkage in part III. We look at what happens when salespeople focus on delivering their brand to customers instead of focusing on whether they have met their quotas. Service staff also better deliver the brand to customers when they understand that they, too, directly influence sales. If you read part III first to get to the Toolbox section, we encourage you to then read parts I and II. The context for these exercises is provided in parts I and II, and context is important to fully understand and implement them.

Who this book is for This book is written for those who want to unleash the full potential of their brands and make their customer service so distinct that it has as much value as their brand idea possesses. It is also for those who understand that making customer service central to brand identity is not a one-time or simple task but a strategic decision. It entails a transformational process for your entire organization. We are enamored with Jim Collins's statement in *Good to Great*, in which he describes companies that undergo transformation as having "no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, no miracle moment. Rather the process resemble[s] relentlessly pushing a giant heavy flywheel in one direction, turn upon turn, building momentum until a point of breakthrough, and beyond."

Brand experts Bob Tyrell and Tim Westall make the same point with a slightly different caution. "Branding customer service requires something much more complex than the bolt-

on activities currently parading as ‘relationship’ building. It implies developing a recognizable style and personality, and that has important implications for brand marketing.”

Because of this complexity, we address four audiences, each with a different role to play when service experiences are branded. *1. Executives in top-level positions.* Executives who read this book will gain an overview of how the focus of branded customer service can help integrate *all* the elements of their business. Once made, this decision is not one to be taken lightly and changed every time there is a shift in leadership. Executives also need to recognize the impact they themselves have as representatives and champions of the brand to both customers and employees.

*2. Those with responsibility for shaping the environment in which onbrand service is delivered.* This second audience includes marketing specialists, human resource professionals, and customer service trainers. All three groups need to understand what is possible with branded service, what is required to make it happen, and how they must cooperate in this venture.

*3. Those who supervise and manage others who have direct contact with customers.* Branding is such an essential topic in today’s business world that everyone who represents your business needs a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

*4. Those who have direct contact with customers.* All service delivery will benefit from a deeper understand of branding.

Whether you are a service provider—and most of us have some aspect of service provision in our work—a manager of service providers, or a builder of brands, *Branded Customer Service* offers you a context to think about your own behavior in relationship to your organization’s brand promises. It will guide you through the demanding task of lining up behaviors until you know in your bones that you are doing more than just meeting a payroll—or earning a paycheck. We know from experience that it is possible to educate large percentages of the workforce to deliver a service style that is uniquely defined for the organization they represent. At the same time, we do not believe that this happens by accident or as a flight of fancy. And once achieved, the work to keep your brand alive within your organization is ongoing and just as demanding and critical as the effort to get it there in the first place.

Click here to buy this book or go back to the Berrett-Koehler website:

<http://www.bkconnection.com/ProdDetails.asp?ID=1576752984&PG=1&Type=BL&PCS=BKP>

Visit us today at [www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

Copyright ©2004 Berrett-Koehler Publishers. All Rights Reserved