

Invite Your Audience To Build Loyalty

By Jaffer Ali

Have you noticed relationships aren't what they used to be? How often do neighbors get together on a porch to share a cup of coffee? In today's world, people generally do not make or have the time to nurture relationships.

You may be asking what this has to do with marketing. The short answer is *everything*. Experts have been warning of the decline of brand loyalty for some time, yet few have really offered a way out. The reason is a misunderstanding of the nature of relationships.

In the film "An Officer and a Gentleman," Lou Gossett Jr. outlined the problem when he bucked heads with Richard Gere's character, Lt. Mayo. "Mayo doesn't have friends, he only has customuhs...", he said. Today's agencies and brand stewards apply the same transactional mentality to relationships.

A new generation of marketers and agencies are littered with people who have lost the ability to communicate in meaningful ways beyond IM, texting and e-mail. Both relationships and marketing campaigns have become "thin." Agencies and marketers are under the spell of direct marketing metrics and methodologies.

The art of marketing seduction has given way to the transactional mentality of "hooking up." Too often, direct marketing devolves into immediate gratification. It is no wonder brand relationships and therefore brand loyalty are waning. We speak of targeting our audience over and over. But agencies and marketers are loathe to give value to the audience outside of the product and pricing breaks.

Mutual of Omaha understood this when they became synonymous with "Wild Kingdom." They gave value to an audience and we still associate the brand with that show to this day. Some companies really do get it. Retailer Target doesn't even call their audience "customers", they call them "guests". Guests are invited and thus treated differently than just customers.

The real kicker is that online media has the ability to let your audience target you!

Wouldn't you rather have your audience reach for you, instead of only you reaching to them? Pull them toward you by inviting them to watch a video clip, play a game or be entertained instead of just asking for the sale with every communication. Relationships are about give and take. Brands can give and routinely used to do this with content. Hallmark created a cable channel to give their audience quality content. Geritol gave us "The \$64,000 Question."

P&G created the television genre of soap operas. Talk about giving. How much soap do you think P&G sold over time by giving this content to its audience? Coca Cola is "giving" online and having their audience reach for them by hosting dozens of [games for kids to play](#). Just For Men understood this with their product launch of Touch of Gray when they offered classic [video clips to view on a micro site](#).

Tom Cunniff, vice president, director of interactive communications for Combe Incorporated said it best: "Interactive marketers have always faced the same false choice -- build your brand, or steer by strict direct marketing metrics. The fact is, you must do both in order to win."

Brand loyalty can once again become king if marketers and agencies remember the golden age of brand building. Give your audience something special. Invite them to spend time with your brand. Invite them to "Set a spell. Take your shoes off. Y'all come back now, y'hear?"

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