

Continuous Partial Attention and the Myth of the Brand Experience

How an ADD culture is reshaping
the concept of brand experience
into a service model

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Interbrand

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One of today's common misconceptions is that a brand's success is directly linked to the amount of time a customer spends with a brand – the more the better. Marketers and agencies are clamoring to take advantage of their newfound ability to pull in potential customers and engage them through micro sites, social networking, and online games to build brand relationships and set the stage for brand loyalty.

At first glance, the strategy seems to make sense. After all, in the developed world, we live in an age of oversupply. And let's be realistic – how many different brands and types of computers, breads, or pasta sauces do we really need? How many boats can we water-ski behind? Naturally, amidst all of these choices, the winner will be the brand that consumers and customers spend the most time with, right? It makes perfect sense: immersive brand experiences are the way to build your brand. Share of mind rules!

Not necessarily.

Let's look at the market another way. If you are reading this from your PC or handheld device – a highly likely scenario (shame on you if you actually printed it out first) – then tell me, how many other windows or applications do you have open? What else are you also doing? Are you bored on a conference call? Driving? Are you at home, "spending time with your family"? Do I actually have your attention? Chances are the answer is "Yes, a bit."

The truth is that more and more of us have a mild form of ADD – let's call it Continuous Partial Attention. We're engaged, but we're also doing something else, maybe even a few other things. One definition of Continuous Partial Attention may be multitasking, although it's multitasking as a way of life. Some people think this is bad. They cite the fact that it puts our bodies in a constant state of alertness, making it difficult to focus on just one thing during those rare occasions when we actually have the time to do so.

Have you tried sitting down in your armchair and reading an actual book lately? Tough, isn't it? We've become so used to scanning information on the web and skimming through emails on our BlackBerry that it can feel strangely difficult to get our minds to work that way again.

In any case, bad or not, CPA appears to be a fact of many of our lives. Certainly, it's the trend of our time, and our response as marketers and brand owners tend to be to find ways to fight it. We believe that we can combat CPA with a deeper, more immersive brand

experience: look into my eyes, focus on me, spend time with me, and block out the world.

Well, that's fine if you're a video game or an IMAX theater, but for most other brands, the very idea of trying to fight the rising tide is at best overly optimistic – and, at worst, arrogant. Most consumers simply don't have the time to focus just on you, watching your embedded video, being enveloped by your store, or being wowed by your flashy flash intro. In fact, humans are evolving to match our time strapped world; neuroscientists are now finding that our brains have grown up. A recent study of teens in Long Island, New York suggests that their brains have adapted extraordinarily well to multitasking. We've always been able to process information at high, medium and low intensity, and that's just how TV ads work. What's new is that, now, we can do all three at once. Hell, we have to. We're just too busy to do anything else!

So, if human nature is adapting to our need to process a constant stream of information through Continuous Partial Attention, then the idea of building an immersive brand experience is anathema. You might get some of my attention, but I'll never really be immersed – so why bother?

The good news is that there is a better solution: service. If McDonald's and Starbucks have taught us anything, it's that service is valuable. And online brands have underscored this point – as Google, Amazon, and Orbitz demonstrate, the new maxim of the internet is that the axis of content and functionality is where we need to get creative, not just on content on its own. While our brains are in the process of adapting to a continual influx of inputs from the various pieces of technology we rely upon to keep us connected to all people at all times, the brands that create value tend to be the ones that help us cope with our time starved lives in an enjoyable way. They serve us by solving our problems.

So what does this mean for your brand? If the evolution of brands is to a service model, then that means that we have to begin to direct our focus not just to what your brand says; we also have to carefully consider what its message is and why we should choose it. We must consider a brand's behavior. And since successful brands solve important customer problems, we need to consider what role your brand plays, what problems it solves, and how it can behave to that problem in increasingly better ways. Does that mean a faster service or a more comprehensive service offering?

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What about one click ordering, or one call resolution? Would an aggregation of complementary products to deliver a better solution?

However you define service in your particular case, these questions demand a deeper understanding of who our customers are and what they are trying to accomplish. We need to picture their contextual framework, not just the universe as we present it to them (with our brand at its center). If we don’t do this, we won’t really get to the heart of their problem.

The irony is that the most successful brands are not competing for their customers’ time. They are competing to solve their customers’ problem better and faster than their competitors. Want proof? Go try to stand in line at your Apple store and see how long it takes the mobile assistant to check you out remotely. And take note, that store is raking in an incredible \$4,000 average per square foot. So the question your customers are asking really isn’t so much, “How long should I spend with you,” but “What have you done for me lately?”

J. Crew is an example of a brand that has evolved to answer this question. In the past few years, the company rolled out significantly improved products, establishing itself as a high quality, well-designed clothing and accessories brand that gives its customers luxury for less. It also focused on building the J. Crew lifestyle: its catalog, always the company’s best form of advertising, began to feature spreads of wedding parties and children sporting J. Crew designs (extend the J. Crew experience to every part of your life!). It could have continued along that “immersive experience” path even further, eventually developing into a caricature of itself. Luckily, it didn’t.

Instead, it’s moving towards service innovation. If you shop at jcrew.com or through their catalog, each package you receive is accompanied by a “How can I help you?” card that lists solutions to a variety of problems. Time challenged? Get one of our personal shoppers (free) to style you in a fraction of the time it would take you to do it yourself. Size challenged? Come to us for an extended size range (at no additional cost) – don’t waste time hunting for a tailor or special store with clothes and shoes to fit you.

J. Crew also makes it just as quick and easy to shop in their stores as shopping online or via catalog. You get the sense that it behaves not just as a fashion brand, but also as a hospitality brand. Can’t

find the size or color you want? Simply pick up a phone in the store and we’ll ship it to your door, free of charge. Thirsty? Here, have a bottle of water. J. Crew doesn’t try to pin you down and immerse you in its “lifestyle experience”; it invites you to choose that experience (in bite-sized pieces) as it suits you, and inserts itself into different parts of your life by making things a little bit easier and more pleasant.

It’s a good thing J. Crew is making these efforts. Along with those product improvements have come higher price tags (one can’t get fabrics from the best mills in the world that cheap, you know). But customers’ willingness to pay will go up, and stay up, if they feel that a company is making special efforts to cater to them. J. Crew’s proof? Its operating margins and sales per square foot are far ahead of its competitors’, indicating that it is possible to provide great service at a reasonable cost, and that consumers will pay for it.

The American Express Card is another brand that has evolved to focus more specifically on service. While the brand has a history of offering cards that appeal to certain customer groups, much of its expression surrounded the experience of Membership (card-holding). The American Express Card was, from its first appearance, a sign of status, and Membership was promoted as something to be experienced by an exclusive set of people. While Membership was presented as a personal privilege, it was not so much about providing better, faster service that solved specific problems – it was more about delivering unique experiences.

The brand’s more overt focus on service started with the Black Centurion Card, which gave its busy (and, in most cases, rich and famous) cardholders 24/7 access to expert service providers in such areas as travel and entertainment. But as the rest of the world also became time-starved, AmEx rolled out cards that solved many of their problems, too. Want to grow your savings without even having to think about it? Get One. Would you rather get that cash in your pocket (and again, not have to think about it)? Get Blue Cash. American Express does a terrific job of identifying the needs its customers might have, and adding card services accordingly. Like J. Crew, American Express enjoys the ability to charge its customers slightly higher fees in return for simplifying their lives with superior service.

And then, of course, there’s Apple. Apple is, perhaps, one of the

“In a Continuous Partial Attention ridden world, service is an investment.”

best examples of a brand that has grown up a step ahead of consumers and their needs, from its development of a unique product (who knew you could fall in love with a computer?) to an experience (iPods, iPhone, and iTunes created an Apple lifestyle that surprising numbers of devotees embraced with fervor), and now, to service, with Apple Stores as the perfect embodiment of the brand. Instead of “greeters,” the Apple Store has “concierges” who proactively ask what they can do for you. Instead of a lone, surly tech expert whose only incentive is to sell you a new product instead of fixing the one you brought in, the Apple Store has a Genius Bar stocked with cheery, passionate, endearingly geeky experts who seem to absolutely live for solving your problems. The Apple Store is excellent not only because of the service it provides, but also the way in which that service is dispensed: Apple is a brand that clearly recognizes the importance of its employees, carefully examining the brand’s promise through the lens of service, then hiring the right people and teaching them how to deliver accordingly.

So, if the solution to the brand experience problem is service, as a marketer, how do you deliver it in a way that makes sense economically? After all, while solving your customer’s problem and providing great service can generate considerable loyalty, it can, at times, come at an exorbitant cost. Here are some ways to consider approaching service without breaking the balance sheet:

1. Think about changing the way you look at your customers. Don’t start by slicing them into minute demographic and psychographic segments too soon, or you might miss the actual problem, which is often beautifully simple. Approaching segmentation more broadly at the outset allows you to provide innovative service in a relevant manner for more people. Orbitz first defined its customers as people who wanted to find a flight, then drilled down into the actual problem they had to solve and, in turn, what particular types of people faced that problem.

2. As you figure out how to solve your customers’ problem, think about giving them something that’s truly hard to find in order to build loyalty. This could mean maintaining a maniacal focus on a particular part of the problem’s solution that your competitors aren’t willing to invest in. For instance, Zappos.com separated itself from other shoe retailers by offering an easy and stress free purchase experience that features a wide and easily searchable product assortment, cheerful customer service (including no-hassle returns), and free delivery to your doorstep.

But as you do this, you have to remember:

3. Don’t overserve your customers. Focus on offering only what the customer will pay for, and don’t give into the temptation to keep up with the Joneses - let yourself off the hook with other elements. Zappos.com’s prices aren’t the lowest, and its discounts

aren’t exceptional, but the particular value that the retailer offers is entirely worth it to consumers who are fed up with inefficient and unpleasant shoe buying experiences (how many of us have finally found a pair of shoes in the right style and color after poking around in three different stores, only to be disappointed when the salesperson returns from a lengthy search in the back room and announces that your size isn’t available?). You can help yourself in this effort by being specific about what your brand stands for. Target stands for great design, not rock-bottom prices. McDonald’s stands for simple, easy, enjoyable meals that are consistent at every location, not a gourmet dining experience. Avoiding the temptation to overserve will help you avoid dealing with customers who demand the things that you haven’t focused on, which can cost you dearly.

Given that it’s the key to bringing customers into your brand and getting them to happily stick with you in a Continuous Partial Attention-ridden world, service is an investment that managers shouldn’t minimize in their budgets, even during times of economic anxiety (like our current moment). And, in case you need one more reason to fully convince you to spend your dollars on service, consider this: When belt-tightening consumers are deciding how to prioritize their spending, what do you think they pick – innovation, better-quality product, or better-quality service? Surprisingly, or perhaps not surprisingly, they pick service over everything else. They don’t necessarily want a fancier website or a different color on their touchtone pad. Rather, they want to pay for you to make their lives a little bit simpler, so that they can spend more time updating their iTunes playlists, chatting on their cell phones, and watching a program that they’ve recorded on TiVo, all at the same time.



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