

Business Idea Zone



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The "What Were They Thinking?" Syndrome

As we travel about visiting stores, we like to inquire about the things retailers are doing to attract and keep customers. No, not just to make a sale, we want to learn what they do to build a long-term customer base. This is so important in our "me, too" world where you have to fight to stand out.

We always hope we'll hear exciting stories about in-store events, programs, customer partnerships, and the cool things associates did to help a customer. But what we usually hear are tales about last week's ad versus this week's ad, followed by what's going to happen next week.

Don't get us wrong: ad campaigns are important, critical in fact. But there's a lot of advertising clutter and confusion out there. So much, in fact, that customers can become disinterested even bored with advertising messages. Some have even built up a resistance to marketing messages..

According to a study done by Yankelovich Partners, when people were asked what needed more government regulation, "advertising" ranked 4th, just behind "nuclear safety." "Advertising" was followed by "water pollution," "toxic waste," and "air pollution." When we read that, the Sesame Street game "One of These Things is Not Like the Others", quickly came to mind.

Yet, we'd NEVER, EVER suggest that you stop advertising. If you consistently work to make strong emotional connections with your customers, then the likelihood of your message being read and accepted is good, and the word-of-mouth – now World-of-Mouth thanks to social medias – even better.

Unfortunately, we've seen even the greatest efforts derailed by the "**What Were They Thinking?**" Syndrome; an increasingly common malady that occurs when we neglect to connect emotionally with customers. That emotional connection causes a customer reaction: they actually look for your advertising messages and react. You may read this and think that connection isn't really important, or perhaps just a waste of time, but you would be wrong. In fact, if you think that way then we only have one word for you: retirement. We all stumble at one time or another, but if you have that mindset, your customers may not be there to help you get back up..

Consider this::

- We received an e-mail from a consumer who had to jump through so many hoops to return a \$9 item that she exploded in anger. The transaction took almost 10 minutes as the cashier questioned the customer about the return. This wasn't a "serial returner" abusing store policy, the customer had paid cash, had her receipt in hand, and was well within in the time frame the store's return policy dictated for a return, yet she was quizzed about the reason for the return until she was pushed to her limit. What was the point and ... What Were They Thinking

- Many customers have complained about a retailer's corporate policy that requires customers to divulge personal information, including home telephone number, before the transaction can be completed, even when paying in cash. A policy no doubt written by someone who has never worked in a store. It actually got so bad that, rather than offend customers, store associates would use telephone numbers picked randomly from the local telephone book so they could complete the sale.

We remember stopping in one of these stores to pick up an item and paying by check. We happened to notice that the cashier was inputting Rich's entire driver's license into the computer. When we asked what she was doing she said, "I have to type in everything on the front of your driver's license. It's corporate policy." What did Rich's height and weight have to do with anything? Guess what? No sale! We voided the transaction and went to their competitor ... What Were They Thinking?

- Two employees at the Evansville, Indiana, Wal-Mart were just following a manager's orders when they shot and killed a stray cat that had been living in a storage trailer behind the store. Both were charged with federal animal cruelty. As you would expect, the folks in Bentonville, Arkansas, were outraged. Why didn't the manager simply call animal control? An almost inconceivable case of What Were They Thinking?

Perhaps you've had a shaky moment or two in your own business. There will always be people working in stores and companies who do things that make us shake our heads in wonder. Fortunately, when you are willing to spend time with customers building those important emotional connections, no matter what consumers think about advertising in general, your customers will be back to shop in your store. And if you do happen to come upon a "What Were They Thinking?" moment occurring on your sales floor, don't worry. That emotional connection you worked so hard to achieve will ensure that your customers will be there to help you recover.

Ed Hoys thoughts – Recently we had a customer that was not pleased with our procedures – never our goal. He was kind enough to call me and explain his position and share his thoughts. Those comments have been invaluable to our internal workings. I could not thank him enough for taking the time to communicate his disappointment with us vs. never returning to our store. Lesson learned – be open; really open - to suggestions and comments both positive and negative. Thank those that share their insight with you. While you may not always agree on the specifics, their feedback is a gift to your business and should be treated with much value. Time is money and they just



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spent some of their valuable time with you.

Continued Success,

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