



The Living Brand®

by Dale Smith

Great customer service is at the forefront of most reputable brands and with the winds of economic change affecting most marketing and training departments it is more important than ever to ensure that our frontline people are best equipped to retain our existing customers. Over the years I have heard the term 'first time resolution' commands emanate from Team Leaders and Contact Centre Managers, see it appear in mission statements and even have board members the world over boast that it is their company's way forward. First time resolution is a dream that all companies may wish for, however few are coming close to reaching this desired state.

However, let's look at the organisations that are reaching their goals and understand what clear guidance can be learned from them and how to best achieve exceptional customer and staff satisfaction levels. Firstly, many front line customer service people have their induction training, welcome pack to their new organisation, get dropped into the basic skills requirement training and then left to brand manage customer's day in day out. All this until the dreaded burnout takes effect and the treadmill moves them on to the next of many brands. We must address the sheer importance of great front line customer service people and truly look at the role, not only from service, but from a brand management perspective. This movement from immediate service to proactive brand champions will allow organisations to truly make a difference in the delivery channel to customers.

Building the bridge between your marketing department and your Living Brand ambassadors is a must if you are to succeed in the increased expectation lines of our customers. Customers are demanding better service, increased compensation and a service delivery team that matches their promise of brand at time of purchase. In the competitive race of marketing we are offering more by way of sensory stimulation, more hits from media and more desire to have our brands 'do what they say on the tin'. However, if we can begin to separate and clearly understand the power that brands have over our society, and learn from this power when making our own living brand, then real success is waiting around the corner. The supply chain of brand delivery begins in the creative minds of our advertising, marketing and brand teams and from there, passed to the customers in a neatly packaged promise. The true delivery of this brand is alive – it is breathing, it feels and it thinks and more importantly it needs to be connected to the end-to-end process.

In today's busy brand environment what separates the winners from the mediocre is a question that needs addressing if we are going to use this status in building key relationships between your organisation and your people. It is with this information that we can begin to develop front line customer management training that will deliver the service that can be enjoyed by both the delivery team and the customer. Wikipedia defines brands as labels of ownership: name, term, design, and symbol. To me that sounds like your own personal business card and somewhat too simplistic for such a huge unconscious environment. It is this missing link that needs to be explored with our people at point of first meet, recruitment, induction and all the way through to the promotion and advancement process.

It is what brands do for people that matters much more, how they reflect and engage them, how they define their aspiration and enable them to do more. Powerful brands can drive success in competitive markets, and indeed become the organisation's most valuable assets. Harnessing this unconscious power, applying and incorporating it to our customer service people training and development will allow them the simple pleasure of understanding that brands are alive. They are created to exist in the hearts and minds of their users and in so have penetrated the two most valuable assets needed to assist in their growth. For brands to grow and remain successful they must have a team that understands and believes that 'The Living Brand' holds more power than ever before.

It is easy to play it safe and happily glide under the radar with skills training but for many years we have experienced that if the attitude and motivation of the person is not correct then all the skills in the world will never manifest a continuous brand loyal experience. In my experience the contact centre and customer service management industry houses some of the brightest most talented people in business. I have often stated that if I was to organise a back to work programme I would put participants into a contact centre for one year – in order that they could obtain the experience in communication, managing emotions, positive and negative people, problem solving and remaining engaged during repetitive tasks. I fully support training that enables delegates with the opportunity to engage in best practice in the required skills, however, it cannot continue to be delivered in a way that says 'this is what you must do'. The retention of this style of training is low, the delegate engagement level is poor and the ROI received from organisations is not a valued investment. People need to be engaged, they need to understand human behaviour and above all allow the respect and opportunity to play their role in brand management.



The B to C marketplace is constantly being put under the microscope to ensure that they are living up to their brand expectation. Great brands, like successful leaders, are playing to win. They have a clearly defined plan of words and actions required to achieve their goal. Their success lies in their delivery and ensuring that you as a consumer are getting what you have come to expect. If you have ever been disappointed, dismayed or even disgusted with one of your respected brands then you may have found yourself saying 'I would have expected more from brand x'. This is the dangerous side of brand development, as if you set the expectation line too high then the further you may fall if you are unable to maintain it. The loss of respect can far outweigh any gains that the success of the brand may have

accomplished. This is the testament to why your Living Brand people must be truly connected to all media and linked to the true expectation line created by or marketing and media departments.

The Living Brand concept takes delegates through the journey of brand development and personal growth to create an intricate web of Belief, Attitudes and Skills. Developing a Living Brand culture starts with stage one: 'Building your brand'. Like every great brand development, if you want to grow your living brand, you must first decide the 'key defining words' that you would want to have attributed to your organisation and the ones to be delivered through your people. Many organisations will start with professional, innovative, intelligent, talented, humorous, unique, and motivated etc. In this stage try to be creative, engage the experience of your in-house marketing and advertising team and ensure that all the words can be manifested to life. This list will be the foundation for your Living Brand – remember it is just a list and it must be in line with your current or developing brand. I can never repeat this enough – 'words and actions are two very different things and company mission statements are just words'.

As your people development moves forward, you can now move ahead to stage two: 'becoming the brand'. It is in this area of training that an organisations team learns how to move words into actions. We are an action-based species and so if you want something you must do something, and more importantly if you want something different, then you will need to do something differently. It is important at this stage of your Living Brand culture that you put manageable and achievable actions against the words that you have established as your Living Brand guidelines. Motivation, behavioural science and sensory stimulation are a must at this stage to allow delegates the experience of bringing brands alive. Training must be challenging, different, stimulating and fun and without this combination your risk of misalignment between your brand and your Living Brand will start here. It is also a great opportunity to start incorporating some basic skills training for individual pockets of people that require development in specific areas.

Remember that all our great and good, our local and global, our best of the best brands have not been built overnight. They take time to cultivate their environment; they market research and test their ideas, look and feel before moving full steam ahead. More importantly they ensure that once they have set the expectation lines of its customers they will deliver time and time again. In the development of your Living Brand training programme your customers are your front line customer service teams and therefore it is important to ask them what they want. The pulse of great brands moves with the times and they ensure that their core values are consistent and true to the brand. The great thing about building your Living Brand programme is that it can start today and with a little work you can leave some of the negative past behind you.

Stage three: 'own the brand' - ensures true commitment from your team whilst cementing the learning and creating a unified people culture. Following adequate assessment of your soon to be Living Brands – it is at this stage that tailor made skills programmes are developed. This does not need to be a costly exercise and the time spent grouping your people into skill set requirements and internal coaches identified will be a huge cost saving later on. True Living Brands respond to training that will enable them to deliver their in-brand style of great customer service. Break the curse of off-the-shelf, conveyer belt training programmes and truly invest in the future of your people and your customers. All customers come to an organisation with an expectation of service and by giving your team the Living Brand skills and autonomy to deliver them will guarantee your brand promise is met. Your living brand training does not need to be complex, however, it must be able to give your team the motivation and satisfaction required to continue to the final stage.

Once you have your clear living brand values, your achievable plan of how those words will be manifested through your team's actions and more importantly their commitment to deliver the Living Brand you must ensure that it is defined over all tiers within the organisation.

This people development process must be tailored to match the learning styles and particular action outcome for each of the following levels:

- Induction training
- Key customer contact (touch point) staff
- Middle managers and brand coaches
- Leadership team and brand ambassadors

One final question and the thread that will hold your Living Brand culture together in a competitive business is: 'What makes our organisation different and what is at the real core of how we want to be remembered by our customers? With this final question answered you are now ready to launch your Living Brand into the market. You have now reached the final stage: 'The Living Brand'. As with all brands, never lose sight of your core values and the actions that your people must manifest in order to show your Living Brand. Just saying the words without deliverable actions is the main difference separating the winners from the mediocre. Saying it and living it are two very different sides of your Living Brand and the service that you offer your customers.

The final stage is 'Keeping the Living Brand Alive' and this key stage is all about implementation and how to ensure that your Living Brands are equipped and motivated to maintain the brand management status that they have reached. People development is about growth, nurturing, caring, respect and engagement and most of all it needs to be maintained, monitored and managed. So often organisations will run training programmes as a reaction to the latest negative customer service results or with a change of management comes a change of direction. Your Living Brands need consistence, commitment and connection from all levels of the organisation and feel that their involvement of brand development is as, if not the most, important part of the process. In the true nature of brands it is a must to market your Living Brand programme from day one – give it a name – logo and identity. This will allow you the opportunity to better manage the Living Brand experience in the final stage.

Creating a Living Brand culture is an organisation's opportunity to be more creative in their incentive and rewards for staff, linking them to brand delivery, great customer experience and not just stats, numbers and call ratios. The 'Keeping the Living Brand Alive' stage needs to involve, take ideas from and encourage your Living Brands to keep the momentum alive and growing internally. If managed correctly through a detailed plan, continuous inspiration and future development then your living brand experience will last far beyond the training room and develop a culture and identity all of its own. The words may look great on paper however the actions and the desire to deliver the brand promise is what makes truly exceptional customer service and organisations one step closer the first time resolution. Brands have great attitude and this attitude will only be delivered through the actions of your Living Brands.

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