For a full list of related titles,
and for other reviews which
we do not have space to print,
visit our website
www.theidm.com or phone
the IDM on 020 8614 0274

Book Reviews

Building Great Customer Experiences

Colin Shaw and John Ivens

Palgrave Macmillan, 2002; hardback; 214pp; £19.99;
ISBN: 0-323-99013-7

Customer-led culture at Eurostar ...?

... and in several other companies ...

... redeemed at Pret A Manger

It is Brussels Eurostar station, late afternoon in mid-March. My train is shown as cancelled; never mind, there is a later one. Check in — no reasons given for the cancellation, no apology offered. Boarding for the next service is after departure time — no reason given; late departure. Well, what would you expect, after all this is the company that left several hundred passengers stranded for five hours just outside Waterloo a few weeks before. Expectations therefore relatively low, will feel relieved to get back to London. So, I finally settle into my seat and open this book ... within minutes my expectations of Eurostar change gear as I read on page 6 a quotation from Gordon Bye, the MD of Eurostar, about customer experiences. I then see that Bye is quoted again in two other places about the customer-led culture at Eurostar — what seemed ‘as expected’ a few minutes previously has now turned to a feeling of grievance — where was the customer focus at Brussels? Perhaps good intentions and strategies do not always lead to the hoped-for customer experience ... perhaps it is best not to know the customer experience vision of organisations you come into contact with ...

So, I started to look up other quotations from people interviewed by the authors. Here I found a further managing director quoted at several points about their customer-led culture and how the brand comes first and must not be compromised. But this same organisation has faced two accusations in the national press in the past year, most recently about a sales commission system that apparently can lead to the mis-selling of high-ticket items to customers, and an earlier case about an apparent lack of objectivity that threatened to compromise the core values of a trusted brand. The book also features quotations about the customer service culture within an airline which might seem from another planet for some passengers of the rail services run under the same brand ... And the computer company featured in the book that marred a great buying experience for me by a subsequent abysmal after-sales service experience. ... Then, I buy my lunch from another organisation featured in the book — the choice is good, the service is fast and friendly, the sandwich is fresh and very tasty.

What conclusions do I draw from these experiences? Well, first, that any author tempted into the territory of customer experiences will be swimming in shark-infested waters — examples of best practice organisations need to be very carefully selected. Secondly, all organisations can have ‘bad hair’ days, however good the vision, the culture and the commitment of all staff. Thirdly, are those at the top of

What divides the good from the bad and the ugly?

organisations the best people to interview? Sure, they are supposed to hold the vision, be responsible for the strategy, but they are generally very remote from the coalface — what about asking those nearer the daily interactions, either as employees or customers, to balance the views of top management? Then, I get deeper into the book and read about the way Pret A Manger works and a chink of sunlight shines through the clouds. Here is an organisation where the same staff prepare the food and serve the customers within each store, an organisation that refuses to operate in situations where this tight-knit supply chain could get broken, or the brand image could become compromised or tainted by the actions of others — such as might happen with airline or on-train catering. And on a larger scale, this is how First Direct operates — a tightly controlled and centralised operation, where, as with Pret, the business model precedes the formation of the company — ‘this is how we do things around here’ can be defined and applied from day one. It seems to me that the other examples may suffer perhaps from the legacies of pre-existing business and cultural models, outdated and internalised remuneration systems, inward-facing operational processes and a less controllable operation — large, extended, liable to fray easily round the edges, especially when under stress.

The customer experience — both vital and personal

But the customer experience can be a very personal thing. The book describes the new emphasis within one leading holiday company where the reps are now trained to ‘deliver theatrical performances at their welcome party’ — make an impact, make it an experience. Fine, but I just mainly want the reassurance that they provide a professional service that minimises any likelihood of problems spoiling my hard-earned break. Maybe this is about segmentation, but I was left wondering where the drive for this change originated.

I do believe that the authors are right, however, to proclaim loudly that the customer experience will be the key differentiating factor in the future — and should be today, never mind tomorrow! But I am not sure ‘it is the answer to life, the universe and everything’, as the authors claim. Organisations need to remember that it is people who buy and create wealth for an organisation — products and services are simply what they buy and have no intrinsic value on their own without customers. And I do like the comment that one airline (unnamed) treats passengers as ‘self-loading freight’! Well, you get the customers you deserve.

How do we get from vision to reality?

Having been rather cynical about the black hole between vision and reality where the customer experience is concerned, does the book have anything to teach us about getting it right? Well, on that score the authors provide a number of useful tools, such as the customer experience pyramid, moment mapping and the DICE model (driving improved customer experience), the latter being very close to the best practice framework for CRM . . . but is not the customer experience what good CRM should be all about?

I am pleased to see that measuring your customer experience has a full chapter, and leans heavily on the excellent book on this topic by Nigel Hill. Yes, measuring customer satisfaction is very worthwhile — as long as it is a totally objective process, is designed as the authors call it from

Measuring
satisfaction ...

... and emotions

Exceeding
expectations?

Much good advice —
if it is delivered upon

‘outside in’ (ie based on the customers’ needs and language) and not ‘inside out’ (measuring what the business thinks is important), has the commitment of the whole organisation, leads to action rather than raising expectations that are unfulfilled and that the organisation does not tie itself in knots trying statistically to match the results to customer retention levels. Measuring customer satisfaction in the hands of enlightened and committed management can play a key role in changing the culture within an organisation. And, as the authors state, it must measure the emotions in addition to the physical performance.

There is no doubt that the ‘seven philosophies for building great customer experiences’ which are the cornerstone of the book generally make sense, and that the emotional aspect of the customer experience is often overlooked — but I question the wisdom of attempting consistently to *exceed* customers’ physical and emotional expectations, a potentially impossible upward spiral, and I am not sure I like the sound of having my emotional response planned for me — do not tell me how I should feel. For many organisations simply meeting the expectations of customers is a tough enough challenge.

So, while this is a book that contains a wealth of wisdom and practical concepts to improve the lot of your customers (and your profit line) and create differentiation, I think many readers will agree that having a vision is not the same thing as delivering it — day in, day out, at all points of contact. Perhaps the authors should have taken a more rounded view of the organisations featured in the book, and tested out whether the statements of intent made by those at the top, or their vision, are reflected in reality — particularly from the customer perspective. Putting in place the principles and common sense detailed in the book will not be achieved overnight — it will take time, and require much hard work, but it is worth the effort. There is a bonus: you also get a useful selection of pithy classical quotations liberally scattered within the text.

Peter Mouncey F IDM

Customize the Brand

Torsten H. Nilson

Wiley, 2003; hardback; 179pp; £29.95; ISBN 0-470-84822-7

Seductive title

Those who could tell us most about a subject often say the least. Bill Bernbach turned advertising into an art form without ever compromising its effectiveness. But he never wrote a book about advertising. Lester Wunderman, who invented the term ‘direct marketing’ and many other things, has never devoted a book to his revolutionary thoughts.

Torsten Nilson is less reticent. His fourth book bears the seductive title of *Customize the Brand*. Here is promise indeed. Can digital technology now enable the long-awaited convergence of direct marketing and brand building? Will Lester Wunderman’s utopian vision of the completely personalised brand be realised at last?

Nilson defines the customised brand as ‘a brand with a proposition that

Individuality vs conformity

is customised to the individual's particular circumstances, requirements, needs and desires'. Therefore, 'to customize a brand is to adapt the brand's proposition and the brand platform to each individual in the target market without losing the identity and profile of the brand'.

But is that what customers really want? Does the spotty adolescent who aspires to own genuine Nike footwear really want his trainers to reflect his individuality? Are they not a badge, a membership card permitting entry to a peer group? Is he not buying conformity? If so, is it not essential that his Nike brand is plain Nike, not Spotty Nike?

Perhaps we are not all so confident of our identity, our taste or our judgment that we want to proclaim our individuality with each purchase we make or each brand we wear, drive or consume. We may seek peer approval through conformity, whether we are buying the latest computer game, an expensive fashion accessory or a sporty car.

Is customisation for B2B rather than B2C?

Our desire to own or use the customised brand will depend on who we are and, more significantly, what mode we are in. Wearing our business clothes, we may have the confidence, the competence and the time to specify our next computer. But we may be less confident and demanding when it comes to replacing our washing machine. Could the added value of the fully customised brand be easier to appreciate in a B2B context than in a B2C context?

How about Dell?

Inevitably the name Dell crops up. Allowing the customer to specify exactly how his or her computer is to be configured may appear to qualify Dell as a customised brand. The additional corporate customer services provided by Dell could certainly lead the brand to be perceived in this way by its larger customers with extranet access. But does the small business user or the private owner really perceive Dell to be his own personal brand?

Whatever the perceptions, Dell has enjoyed great success. But can its formula be exported with equal success to products purchased by the less technologically orientated? Do we really want 'the appliance of science' to become 'my appliance of science'? The production and communications technologies to permit the fully customised brand already exist and many cars are built to order. But the incentive for buyers to specify their cars on the net is not individuality; it is a massive saving on the price. So can we predict that the facility to customise will be what determines your choice of brand in the future? It is a big question.

Customisation implies customer understanding

The concept of the customised brand implies customer understanding, such as the understanding a small retailer has of his customers. But is it ever possible to simulate this understanding on an industrial scale? Surely no brand has provided the customer with self-tailoring options more successfully than Microsoft Windows. But how grateful are you for the genius of Mr Gates when your computer software suddenly fails to comprehend the simplest query? When understanding depends on software, not humans, occasional misunderstandings are doubly frustrating.

Is there not a huge risk that the customised brand will create unrealistic expectations? For example, will our exasperation finally cause us to close

**Does customisation
raise unreal
expectations?**

our customised bank account when it dawns on us that we are explaining our problem to a powerless call centre agent in Bombay?

Presume/guess/ask

Dell matches the product to the customer's needs by asking the customer what he wants. But that is not always practicable. So, even if the product-service package can be configured in umpteen different ways, it may be necessary to rely on behavioural segmentation and profiling to *guess* what the customer will want next. Does assuming, rather than asking, what the customer wants qualify as brand customisation? The answer will surely depend on whether the customer thinks it does.

An example of customisation through segmentation is Tesco, also quoted in the book. Is the use Tesco makes of its customer data so powerful that each Clubcard shopper perceives Tesco to be *their* brand? Or does the shared experience of shopping in crowded aisles and waiting at the checkout outweigh any effect of tailoring? If so, does the online shopper have a different, more personal perception of Tesco?

**What do we expect
of customisation?**

Direct Line and its competitors supply a completely customised quote to every prospect. But is this enough to qualify Direct Line as a customised brand? If not, how would Direct Line go about becoming a customised brand? What would it cost and what would the company gain from it?

**And what do we
want of it?**

What are the likely customer expectations of customisation in, say, business services, travel, banking and FMCG? Can the customised brand innovate or must it wait for the customer's stated preferences or data from past purchases before it can change? How does it cope with customer migrations from one segment to another?

A disappointing book

Finally, is the customised brand what we really seek? Or would we just like to be recognised and appreciated as a customer, as a real person, not as a number?

These are interesting and important questions. Your reviewer would like to say they are all answered in the book. Unfortunately few are even addressed. At 179 pages, *Customize the Brand* is a slim volume, but no slimmer than the author's treatment of his subject merits. It is a book to leave on the bookseller's shelf, not put on yours.

Graeme McCorkell F IDM

The Committed Enterprise

Hugh Davidson

Butterworth Heinemann, 2002; 328pp; hardback; £19.99;
ISBN: 0-7056-5540-2

The vision thing ...

The vision thing, you have one, right? No, not the mission statement — that mantra that usually resembles someone else's company rather than yours — but the vision behind it. Let us face it, visions are strange things, often explicit in the personalities of micro companies, yet lost in the noise of anything greater.

Hugh Davidson challenges us to think again about visions: what they are, what they mean, how they change us, why we need them. You may,

like many senior managers, feel they are unnecessary, a corporate self-indulgence that simply detracts from a mountainous in-tray. Or you may like the idea but simply never get round to tackling it. You may simply feel disenfranchised, too small a cog in a vast machine. Or you may just be comfortable the way things are and be looking forward to your pension. If you are in that last group skip the rest of these notes and relax, it will soon be home time and the journal can go back on the no-doubt impressive bookshelf.

Personally I am a fan of visions. Thanks to Davidson I now know why. Visions galvanise us together. They give a clarity and sense of purpose. They ignite passion in our work, breathe life into our enterprise and give us personal drive. When handled well in our fiercely competitive landscapes even the long-term success of our enterprises is reliant on visions.

... is needed at every level

But if you are not a CEO why bother? This is just one short chapter from those business school texts that is as irrelevant now as it was intangible then. Not so: my stance would be that it is not just companies which need them. Departments need visions, teams need visions, projects need visions and individuals shine when they can share visions.

And as marketers this should start to feel familiar. Marketing is the stuff that visions are made of. We are the eyes and ears of our organisations. We listen, think, strategise and instigate change. Marketers can be the very spark that ignites the corporate vision.

Forget about celebrity CEOs

What does Hugh Davidson bring? Simplicity, clarity and some 'how to'. Refreshingly this is not another shrine in the temple of celebrity CEOs, the place you might normally look to learn about visions. That 1990s' cult that witnessed share prices leaping on the signing of a big name became more reminiscent of the Premier League's transfer wars than a roadmap for corporate success. Instead Davidson gently draws on the experiences of more than a hundred leaders from industry, the services and the less fashionable NGOs to craft a users' manual for developing, executing and supporting visions.

A simple, clear and fast read

He also achieves it with remarkable simplicity, and a clarity that weightier titles should aspire to. The arguments are clear, the points fast, the evidence numerous and the style unpretentious. And it is a fast read for skipping through on the commute.

Maybe you already have the vision thing sorted. Maybe your organisation is one of these very case studies. Maybe you are a natural leader and this is all instinctive. But if you need a little prompt then speed read your way through a few chapters and then try closing the covers. It is surprising how much we all have to learn.

*Danny Meadows-Klue
Chief Executive, Digital Strategy Consulting*