

Before & After

Abstract:

The proof is in the Brand Experience. Have you ever compared the image you had about a brand, a company or a person Before and After dealing with them, believing their promises and buying their products? – Will they keep their positive aura?

Brand Experience

When it comes to the core promise of any brand, Experience is the only real test. By core promise we mean the positive contribution to your life and my life that a brand will be promising to bring to the table when we accept to buy its products and services. This personal brand experience will determine the difference between the perceived image we have formed in our minds based on the brand's communication and other marketing activities compared to the real value and real delivery of this same brand. The outcome of real-life interaction with the brand can vary from a very disappointing experience to a very delighting and positive outcome.

"Experience" is the reality check that sets the limit between what the Brand is saying (Brand Communication), who the brand is (Brand Identity), and what the brand is really delivering (Brand Contribution). At this level, we do not really differentiate between tangible and intangible brand contributions; rational or emotional; what really matters at the end is whether this brand is keeping its promise throughout the experience and making customers' lives better in any form or shape – Ideally fulfilling the core Brand Promise based on which you have decided to deal with it.

What we are referring to as the **Brand** here can be anything; from a new restaurant, to a new house, a bank, a hospital, a car or a candy bar. It also can be the city you aspire to live in, the party you adhere to or the company you were convinced to work with.

Before & After in Everyday's Life

The Before & After comparison is a prominent part of our everyday's life and we have an endless list of examples. At different occasions and with different levels of importance we are receiving messages, building a certain perception, interacting with a certain brand and then going away with the results and conclusions of our experience. In many cases, this interaction is not a one-off event but could be repeated for a number of times.

A Restaurant

Before – A new restaurant opens in town and it is announced with big viral and advertising campaigns trying to build an attractive and distinguished image. **After** – May be at the first impression you liked the location and the decoration; but food was very average, the service poor and the bill can go under the "robberies" column. **Result** – You feel 3 times disappointed, first for believing the communication, second for wasting your time and money to come and eat at this restaurant and third, and most important, for feeling that this brand has offended your intelligence and sense of judgment as a consumer.

A Service Company

Before – You meet the boss of this well known service company to explore possible cooperation, and despite your natural pessimism, you are very much impressed by the way he presents himself as an intellectual, passionate, refined and successful person. **After** – Within a very short time of joining the company you get this alerting negative feeling, Mr. “Intellectual-Polite-Boss” is just another caramel-coated-crook like the competitors he likes to criticize, and you are already looking for the right timing and occasion to leave this company. **Result** – You feel cheated by these people and their brand and regret the wasted time and energy; most importantly, this brand goes down deep in your own personal ranking of the most attractive brands.

A Car Dealer

Before – You have moved to a new city and you want to buy a car, but instead of going for that “exciting” German brand you usually like, you decide to go for a “good deal” from an American brand which did not look that exciting to you at the beginning. **After** – You discover a fairly good car that is reliable and enjoyable and most important, you experience an amazing service quality from this brand that goes out of the way at all times to make your ownership experience an enjoyable one. **Result** – You are positively surprised and cannot but spread the good word about this experience all around you. The image of the brand has totally changed in your mind and you have much more respect to it and you can possibly become an advocate of this brand and influence other people in your circle.

Before & After and Brand Switching

The Before & After mechanism is at the heart of what we usually refer to as “Brand Switching”.

Why consumers switch to another brand of mobile phone or laptop computer, why they stop dealing with certain banks, or coming to certain restaurants, why companies keep moving their advertising budget from one agency to another almost every 2 to 3 years (with few exceptions..). This is the “Before & After” in action.

Consumer satisfaction research and CRM programs (when available beyond just the name...) can tell us more about the exact reasons and get us more details about brand switching; but as long as the customer-brand relationship is concerned, brand switching means that the customer was disappointed by the brand experience and his final perception and appreciation of the brand is much lower than the initial image he has in mind “before” dealing with it.

Before & After and Connection: The Importance of Consistency

Connection, more specifically “Emotional Connection” with a brand or with a human being is one of those mysterious concepts like the human nature itself. It can make wonders and change lives but at the same time it is very vulnerable and can be lost overnight especially when deception enters the equation. Brand connection can make or break businesses with tens of billions of dollars and at the same time can be lost very quickly if customers/consumers discover that the brand they are dealing with is different than the picture it has always tried to depict about itself through advertising and other means of communication. When the “After” is disappointing or not at the same level of the “Before” brand-consumer connection is lost and usually with a “sour” taste.

This is where “consistency” in delivering positive brand experiences is a very important policy for any brand. Powerful Brands are always trying to deliver on their promises, and consistently trying their best to satisfy their customers. They are always there for them, always reliable, always offering the same quality of products and services. Powerful brands always deliver, and always the experience is good. Even if for once, there was certain problem and a customer was somehow disappointed, the long relationship and long track record and history of consistency will cover-up and most probably the mistake will be forgiven.

“Bad Brands”, or Brands, Businesses and Companies with hidden intentions are also consistent but in being what they are: bad brands. They might try to cover-up, by faking good service, winning awards and getting fancy coverage in the media, but this will only fool some people for some time. When you hear about a company with a bad culture, and or sick mentality it is never from an isolated source, it is always from a large number of people who were fooled by the “Before” but were very disappointed by the reality they discovered “After”. These rotten brands are the marks of evil business cultures.

Applying the **Before & After** check consistently and over time will create tremendous positive talk value about the brand; and this is not limited to customers, but to all relevant stakeholders starting by employees and collaborators who are also supposed to have a positive **Before & After** experience; first, because these are the people who are supposed to deliver the brand promise at different touch points and occasions; and second because employees and collaborators cannot be fooled as they know the full story and from the inside.

Before & After as Performance Measurement

We all know that brand building is a long term effort, made of big and small moments in the relationship between the brand and its target group and there are elaborate and complex tools to measure the strength of this relationship in both qualitative and quantitative areas. However, the **Before & After** concept could be used as an instant performance measurement tool for both small encounters and important relationships. For every positive **Before & After** experience you can know for sure that your brand is growing in connection, in market share and in financial value; measuring that growth will need a more elaborate approach.

The Golden Rules for “Before & After”

The One most important golden rule for brand experience is to always make the necessary to get a positive outcome from **Before & After** scenarios. All the rest will follow.

Some additional ideas that can help and add to the above golden rule:

- 1 – The immediate result of brand experience is the effect it has on brand reputation – Before & After is a good and immediate “PRM” (Positive Reputation Meter, for those who like acronyms)
- 2 – Respect your promises and “walk the talk” – Deliver on your brand promise and your Before & After indicator will be just fine. So far we have not encountered brands with bad promises, but we always discover promises that are very badly delivered.

3 – People can be very emotional about brand experiences. They start by being over-enthusiastic about a brand and consequently will be over-disappointed when something goes wrong.

4 – Brand Experience Disappointments are a constant fact of life and to be expected, how to deal with them is the issue. This is where good faith and genuine efforts will merit understanding from the brand stakeholders. Can you think of a president or a prime minister who kept the same positive image **Before & After** leaving office? – Almost never – Despite the very high hopes, try to imagine the image of president Obama after the next 4 years.

5 – Always make your best to make the **Before & After** outcome positive. Consistency will cumulate positive credits and win the battle over time.

Conclusion

A simple concept like this is easy to understand and apply by all members of any organization and across all touch-points with customers and other important stakeholders. It can become a company motto, a battle cry, a motivational quote in each and every cubicle and office in the company. Always make sure that customers walk away with a better experience **After** they have dealt with the company compared to the image or the perception they had **Before** – Obviously cost effectiveness watch-outs need to be applied to avoid excessive measures for certain situations.

Always do everything possible so that the **"After"** is consistently better than the **"Before"**. This is how connections are built and value is created over time.

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