

How to Create Customer Evangelists



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Your top 1 percent of customers are your most engaged and valuable customers. They are the ones who spread your word-of-mouth, singing your praises to other potential customers.

Last month, we talked about identifying these 1 percenters, and three ways you can engage, reward and encourage this group.

This month, we're addressing three more ways to recognize these clients, sharing research from Jackie Huba, author of "Creating Customer Evangelists," "Citizen Marketers" and "Monster Loyalty."

"Creating a business that engenders monster loyalty ... takes a relentless focus on creating services that stand out and are worth talking about," Huba shares. "It also requires a methodical cultivation of a company's 1 percenters, the most passionate segment of the customer base."

Here are the next three steps on Huba's list for harnessing the power of the 1 percent:

1. Embrace Shared Symbols. Visual symbols have an instant, shared meaning, and can be powerful for a brand. Huba isn't talking about a brand image, but rather a symbol that connects a brand's customers.

For instance, "sports teams and symbolism go together like hot dogs and beer," Huba says. "You've got team logos, uniforms, mascots and even hand signals."

The best-known sports symbol, as deemed by ESPN, is the Terrible Towel, a gold rally towel used by the National Football League's Pittsburgh Steelers. "We'll call it the Terrible Towel and it will wreak its powers terribly on the opposition," said legendary radio announcer Myron Cope.

The Terrible Towel made its first appearance on Dec. 27, 1975. The Steelers beat the Colts that game 28 to 10 and then beat the Oakland Raiders and Dallas Cowboys soon after, capturing the franchise's second consecutive Super Bowl victory. And so the legend of the Terrible Towel was written, Huba says.

"The key to the shared symbol is not the symbol itself. What is important is how the meaning of the symbols binds a community together," she explains. "People who are part of the community truly understand its meaning and are moved by it. For Steelers fans, we wave the towel to rally our players when they need our help to accomplish a crucial first down. It doesn't matter if the players are on TV and they can't hear or see us; we know they can feel us."

Some symbols will resonate and some won't, says Huba. And sometimes your customers will create their own symbols; be open to adopting these, she advises.

2. Generate Talk. Standing out by doing something a little different than similar companies in your area gives your customers something to talk about. Stories that spread by word-of-mouth are more powerful than typical marketing ... and they are free.

How can you do something worth talking about with your customer base? First, understand your customer recommendability. Use surveys like Net Promoter Score (a methodology developed by Fred Reichheld and Bain & Company) to find out what sort of comments your clients make about you, and then use similar phrasing in your marketing efforts, Huba suggests.

Look at all of your customer touch points (website, sales and service representatives, employees, invoices, social media channels, proposals, email signatures, brochures, etc.) and ask yourself if they are word-of-mouth worthy. "Is the interaction with the customer so remarkable that he or she would make a comment about it to a friend, family member or colleague?" she challenges.



Make Clients Feel Like Rock Stars. Today, consumers are content-creating machines, empowered with smartphones in their pockets ready to take photos, videos or post their thoughts at a moment's notice. This is a huge shift from brands having been the stars of the marketing and advertising show in the past.

To make customers feel special in today's world, shine a spotlight on them, and they won't be able to stop talking about it with their friends and family members, Huba says.

One example of a company who made their best customers feel like stars is eBay. The company knows its clients – the sellers of merchandise on their site – are the heart of its business. So, in 2002, they launched eBay Live! in Anaheim, Calif. This three-day, annual event's purpose was to gather eBay users together to talk about how to best leverage eBay as a business tool. The first event exceeded eBay's expectations with more than 5,600 attendees

from 19 countries.

The company gave clients the red carpet treatment, making them feel like celebrities as they arrived for the event, Huba explains.

“When someone makes you feel special, it singles you out for recognition, fostering an emotional connection,” she explains. “It’s a feeling we will tell others about for a long time.”

How can you do this in your business? Feature your best customers in service brochures or highlight a customer’s success story to the rest of the customer base, Huba recommends, using the example that, for years, Jones Soda has featured a customer photo, submitted via their website, on each bottle of the company’s soda.

You can also invite select customers to unique VIP events that give them access to something special – for example, a performance by a musician or group, Huba says.

With incredibly loyal customers, Huba says, “new clients are made because a friend wouldn’t stop talking about a service, especially how it changed their life. They purchase your services as gifts because they want their friends to experience what they love. Organically growing a grassroots base of passionate customers who stay loyal and help you build your business will pay dividends over the long term.”

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