



Shoppers to Activists: Five Steps To Re-invigorate Retail Consumers

Perspectives from MS&L Retail

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For decades, retail marketing has passively been putting the cart before the horse. Hoping our customers will regularly and routinely fill up their shopping baskets – or maybe even their eco-friendly satchels – with an array of our wares is now prompting blank stares. It's high time that we as retail marketers take leadership in driving a new communications paradigm marked by two-way communication and a call to activism.

With consumer confidence at record lows and wary shoppers clinging tightly to their purse strings, it is more imperative than ever that major retailers offer programs and craft accompanying communications that close the gap between “us” and “them,” and bring people together and rally them to make a difference. For years, it's been all about positioning: On which aisle and shelf will the product live? How will we keep our stores top of mind with key demographic groups? In the new landscape of consumer engagement marketing, we need to step beyond the 30-second spots, circular and POP. We need to encourage a new form of brand activism by getting customers involved at every step along a parallel journey.

Reaching retail consumers these days takes more than off-the-shelf thinking. There are five steps you can take to advance the relationship with the people who pay you to stay in business; and the results will deliver rewards for both you and your customers. Many companies are succeeding with products, protocols and processes that showcase a participatory exchange between the traditional “seller” and “buyer.” Today's customers crave and expect this seat at the table. These initiatives, properly sequenced and accurately communicated within an integrated marketing program, will transform modern customers from shoppers to activists and your relationship to a lasting one. So get prepared to sample, show value, stimulate conversations, provide engagement and present a call to activism.

1. Offer your customers a sample of what's to come.

Retailers accustomed to measuring the missed margin after product discounts or weighing the food and paper costs of any restaurant promotion may shudder at the thought of offering something for free, but the public relations rewards in the current economic climate are undeniable. A mindset of upselling and supersizing has given way to “sample sizing” in hopes of increasing traffic or guest counts and exposing new people to your brand. Of course, sampling is an age-old tactic, but the PR value of sampling on a large scale is as irresistible as Free Cone Day at Ben & Jerry's.

Gone is the ambush effectiveness of the perfume lady spraying you while you are walking down the department store aisle or the veritable buffet that can be

consumed while shopping in bulk at the local wholesale club. Now it's about cultivating the right kinds of brand ambassadors at the right place for your offering.

It's not just the product sampling so associated with retailers such as Costco and Trader Joe's. The sampling trend is manifesting in new and exciting ways such as Safeway grocery stores offering free prescription antibiotics in select locations throughout flu season. This giveaway is a true deposit into brand trust with the consumer.

Sampling doesn't have to be in store. For instance, Hershey's launched its Bliss chocolate line with 10,000 in-home viral marketing parties targeted to 24- to 49-year-old women seeking a bit of "indulgence" amidst busy lives. Harlequin Books sampled its Intrigue mystery series at 100 bed and breakfasts. Reaching folks at their "point of need" has been an effective approach for the marketers of Tums Cool Relief tablets, who distributed 2.2 million sample packs on Carnival Cruise ships where some vacationers may have overindulged and were glad to have the tablets handy.

It seems the only decent type of product placement for foods these days is right into a customer's mouth. Despite a sizable marketing spend and the gargantuan task of operationally pulling it off, Denny's scored off a PR coup with two million consumers sampling its free Grand Slam Breakfast and millions more reading and hearing about the massive nationwide giveaway in every form of traditional and online media. Every operating group of the restaurant chain had to work in tandem to pull off this integrated moment of zeitgeist.

Clothing retailer Justice – formerly Limited Too – has harnessed the power of a Passion for Fashion tour. Through the 15-city program introducing its back to school line-up at Simon Malls, the retailer cleverly camouflaged sampling within a youth-centric event experience including a fashion show, dance contest, music concert and a chance to try on the new clothes. Many of the events drew crowds averaging 600. Imagine the possibilities in a new cyber and smart phone-connected society when you can harness the text collective of Twitter and the search engine optimization of thousands of side conversations akin to, "OMG! I just had the best time at this event." The dividends of sampling live on far beyond the event.

The best kind of sampling is experiential. When it is spontaneous, engages the senses and is one of a kind, it provides a talking point and a chance to build loyalty. Sampling also gives retailers an easy way to measure success by keeping track of how many samples are distributed, increased awareness of the product, customer feedback, and repeat purchases. So give a little – it's a nominal sacrifice and the first step toward a new long-term view.

2. Provide your customers something of value.

Whether reaching weekend do-it-yourselfers, busy multitasking parents or niche hobby enthusiasts, demonstrating ways your retail business is helping customers achieve value above and beyond obvious goods and services is one of the quickest ways to their heart. For some, extra value can be in the form of a coupon, a free music download or a courtesy call. For many, the greatest value is time. Showing customers

you respect their time has manifested over the years in better customer service kiosks and even optimized express lanes, but the online universe allows your passion for saving customers time to become virtually limitless.

Check any search for business in any local community, and the blogs will be abuzz with this topic. Gyms that offer free daycare while the parent exercises have now given way to grocery stores that do the same. One blog posting about a supermarket: “I admit that if I had to list the top three reasons why I shop at this Big Y, it would look like this: 1. Free childcare 2. Free childcare 3. Free childcare.”

So if you're a shopping mall encouraging the early-morning mall walkers to stick around a little longer or a clothing store with a free oxygen bar or book club area, your ability to keep customers happy in more than one way will be critical to making the brick and mortar experience as beneficial as the multi-serving world consumers are experiencing online. Pre-packaging dinners, baby-sitting services, spa treatments, wi-fi, housecleaning, delivery or any other functions that could plus-up the experience of shopping will both delight customers and provide great fodder for publicity. For me, Borders' offer of free hand gift-wrapping with my choice of paper and ribbons was one of the single biggest drivers of my purchases there this past holiday season. It was gifts I knew my family would enjoy – and time saved from arduous wrapping that I knew would have normally taken me forever.

We're living in a world of Web sites such as DoMyStuff.com – an aggregator that allows you to post a chore that needs doing, such as walking the dog, and then have individuals or businesses in your area bid on your proposal – and even Amazon Grocery, an extension of the e-retailer through which you can have an ongoing order of non-perishable groceries regularly delivered for free and for a discount on a monthly basis.

Many sites and tools are assisting shoppers in their time-saving quest. The Thunderbird Grocery List Generator (<https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/thunderbird/addon/1327>), for instance, is a helpful tool to store the ingredients associated with your favorite recipes and the groceries you need regularly. It creates a well-organized grocery list to help make your grocery shopping as easy as possible. This technology and functionality can be easily added to any site in the Web 2.0 world and touted as a benefit to your customers.

Whether it's Cracker Barrel's buzzed-about books-on-audio program that helps travelers enjoy entertainment on the road or many supermarkets with a handy recycling center or charity donation bins, retailers win points when they're more than a one-stop shop.

Educating customers both off and online is a great way to save customers time. Dick's Sporting Goods offers in-depth how-tos on topics ranging from how to buy sports memorabilia to tips for cycling safety. The Home Depot runs a dedicated channel of videos on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/user/HomeDepot>) which is a veritable paradise for DIY'ers interested in finishing projects around the house. Walgreen's Health Corner is another example of a content-rich site on a variety of healthy lifestyle issues, often narrated by celebrities.

Online tools can make sharing photos easier and can do so with your branding. Through RSS, integrating product reviews into sites can help guide consumers to products they may buy online or in your store. And you can seed additional applications for a product as the purveyors of Swarovski do for their stores with a “Magazine” and “Crystal Society” section on their Web site – devoted to collectors and tie-ins to popular culture events.

Health fairs, craft fairs, book fairs and more can grace your parking lot and attract customers for a visit with multiple intentions. Lately, product companies have designed high-impact events to both showcase their wares and bring traffic to retailers. For instance, to raise awareness and promote prevention of fraud and identity theft, Shred-it organizes highly visible, highly visual “Community Shred” events in the cities where it has a presence.

If consumers ask, “Can I get this done while I have fun?” and can accomplish multiple tasks beyond just filling their cart, they will have many happy returns.

3. Give your customers something to talk about.

Conversations can turn into conversions when you become a successful storyteller and deputize key influencers to trumpet your brand. The old school approach was to urge third parties to parrot your key messages, but now getting others to share critical anecdotes or even “social objects” such as digital photos, music files or online videos will underscore your brand’s authenticity. Ultimately, do you have a product or service worth talking about? Or somewhere in your organization, is there a story that resonates with a community of interest? Word of mouth is the most authentic and powerful marketing tool one can deploy.

One brand that harvested its customer stories nicely was Best Buy in its publicity up to and during Black Friday, one of the busiest shopping days of the year. The company sponsored a Black Friday VIP contest via its askablueshirt.net blog. Through the contest, consumers submitted brief written submissions about their Black Friday traditions and why they should be treated to “VIP for the day” status in their local community. Winners of the program were treated to cash prizes, an early-morning limo ride, front-of-the-line access complete with pampering and foot-warmers and first opportunity to enjoy “doorbuster” savings. Each winner also chronicled his or her VIP stories on video cameras provided by the company. Loyalty and amazing publicity ensued. One on-air marriage proposal even resulted and made national news!

Other retailers are playful in pushing lines of niche products they carry in stores. PetSmart, for example, routinely hosts costume contests on blogs in which consumers submit photos of their dogs and cats in festive holiday attire. Others tackle serious seasonal issues, such as Office Depot’s contest to promote hurricane preparedness among small businesses in Florida during a particularly vulnerable season.

Sometimes it’s your genuine news that can dominate the news cycle or generate interest from reporters in roundup stories. The “service concierges” of Apple stores blur the line between service and marketing and the company’s Genius Bar appears frequently in examples of customer service. Publix Super Markets received recognition

for opening up its Publix Sabor stores, which almost exclusively feature Hispanic ethnic products. The community and media hunger for such a story was palpable.

Retailers continue to receive accolades for being bold in communicating through social networks. Retail chain Fresh & Easy has signed on to social networking Web site Twitter to communicate with its customers. The convenience store's Twitter profile has more than 900 customers signed on to receive regular updates. The company's management is using the Web site to announce new store openings or seasonal offers, while answering customer queries and solving issues with a human response. Apparel retailer H&M is using mobile marketing campaigns to promote its latest collections. The campaign includes SMS coupons and a mobile site with click-through slideshows and animated "fast fashion" images of the retailer's latest garments.

Target's first foray into Facebook was targeted at the back to school time period. It was successful because it spoke with authenticity and authority to users who were already interacting with each other, turning down the volume on heavy marketing messages. Even Target's iPhone "Gift Finder" application allowing users to shake their device to simulate a snow globe full of gift ideas was a word-of-mouth hit.

Sometimes retailers strike gold in the viral marketing world when they hit on a time-honored notion to which many folks can relate. Such was the case with J.C. Penney and its online ad called The Doghouse. The nearly five minute video fictionalizes the predicament of men who purchase the wrong gifts for their partners. In the ad, a well-intentioned man buys his wife a new dual bag vacuum for the holidays, only to find himself dropped into an underworld prison where men go when they buy bad presents for the women in their lives. The ad has been viewed more than 1.7 million times since J.C. Penney uploaded it to BewareOfTheDoghouse.com and YouTube, according to Visible Measures, a video analytics firm. Since then, the video has received 56 placements across nine different video sites. More than 90 percent of those have been community driven. Suffice it to say that this marketing campaign got a whole lot of people taking about J.C. Penney.

Those unprepared to start their own blogs can now create a simple "lens" on Squidoo to share the occasional how-tos. And those who may have believed they didn't have a story to tell are discovering there are many traditional and unconventional pathways to share that story with key audiences.

4. Engage your customers with something fun or meaningful to do.

Consumers are relying less on the traditional retail calendar to dictate what's hot in a particular season and are instead looking for experiences that will stimulate their state of mind any time. From in-store workshops to full-fledged co-creation campaigns online, customers are enjoying being a part of it all. And traditional media are still taking note of retailers' latest forays into taking experiences people enjoy and making them more meaningful together.

Co-creation has tremendous upsides both in marketing campaigns and actual product development. One initiative comes to mind that hit at the heart of participatory PR and target a generation of doers: Starbuck's MyStarbucksIdea.com contest. It

invites consumers to come up with the next big idea for the coffee retailer, has served up ideas as profound as “coffee cubicles” for those who use the stores as a virtual office to “oatmeal cookies without raisins” for the fruit-impaired snack seeker.

After all the ebbs and flows of gas prices and as shoppers cocoon at home, folks increasingly turn to online shopping for entertainment and discretionary spending. But in the case of virtual worlds, brick-and-mortar retailers have discovered their true merits lie in whether they can send users back into stores. Build-a-Bear touts an online initiative called Build-a-Bearville that monetizes a virtual world where bear buyers can interact with friends and spend money on virtual items. The retail stores sell \$10 Bear Build game cards, which provide players with 10,000 "Bear Builds" to spend on virtual items and virtual transportation such as propeller hats and hoverboards. In addition to virtual goods, Build-A-Bear expects to generate more revenue from add-on experiences and spaces in Build-A-Bearville, as well as other value options per retail purchase.

Some brands have developed full-fledged in-store events that create an excellent vessel for their brand messaging. Viking Cooking Schools, associated with Viking Stores, give visitors a chance to express their love of cooking while using – and often buying - Viking appliances, cookware and cutlery. Additionally, The Home Depot hosts Do-It-Herself Workshops to teach female home renovation and improvement enthusiasts the latest techniques.

Tutorials and contests come in all shapes and sizes, from the Pier 1 Imports contest to design artwork for the 2009 UNICEF card to the Sherwin-Williams Color Visualizer (<http://www.sherwin.com/visualizer/>), in which you can virtually paint rooms in hues from the company’s palette. Some promotions can build your brand, such as AMC Theatres’ Best Picture Showcase. This event offers moviegoers a special day-long screening of all five Academy Award-nominated films. The accompanying bottomless popcorn bucket offered as part of the package deal was a particularly enticing component.

We’ve grown accustomed to in-store video game tournaments, but what about at unexpected stores where the games aren’t even sold? The convenience store amp, owned by BP, spotlighted its tagline “Too Much Good Stuff” with a rocking tournament surrounding the popular video game Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock. To recognize the fun-loving, free-spirited “living room” rock stars in various cities, the retailer hosted a month of play-off events, culminating in a riveting championship play-off and exclusive rock concert event. It was the halo effect of the video game, not the game itself, which brought value to the retailer and connection with its targets.

Customers enjoy visiting a marketplace of learning, receiving new education or insight by visiting your space. Examples include “Barnes & Noble Studio” with downloadable video and RSS podcasts, author interviews, book trailers and other features on the bookseller’s Web site and Bloomingdale’s San Francisco celebrations of Black History Month with a series of culinary demonstrations with local African-American chefs featuring their favorite family recipes and more.

GPS and other technologies are finally allowing some of the most exciting marketing ideas, previously considered and dismissed as too complicated in

brainstorms, to come to fruition. When you collaborate with the consumer, you end up opening up a world of possibilities.

5. Present your customers with a reason to take a stand.

Everything until now has been mere warm-up. Giving customers a reason to believe and, ultimately, to take a stand is the true mark of a successful retailer with eyes on the sustainability of a loyal customer base.

Getting folks active -- a veritable calisthenics for consumers -- means tying your charitable and community acts to the core of your mission. It's the reason folks affected by natural disasters have become so loyal to The Home Depot: the company was there to help before, during and after the calamities and worked harder, opened longer to be there in a time of trial.

Clothing company Gap received a halo effect and new streams of traffic to its stores when it took part in the Product Red campaign (www.joinred.org) starting just three years ago. The company released a special RED collection, including a t-shirt manufactured in Lesotho from African cotton. Fifty to 100 percent of the profits went to the Global Fund; depending on the item. Gap continued with Gap Product Red items into 2007, especially in the lead up to Valentine's Day, using slogans such as "Admi(RED)" and "Desi(RED)." Product Red has now contributed more than \$45 million to the Global Fund, more than any other private donation received to date.

Other companies have been trailblazers in advocating for key issues and rallying their customers to become activists in the campaign. On Earth Day, April 22, 2008, Whole Foods Market eliminated the use of disposable plastic grocery bags company-wide. Customers can now choose between paper bags made from 100 percent recycled paper or from a selection of reusable bags. The move from the traditional paper/plastic system to environmentally friendly and reusable bags has been packaged as an initiative the company calls "BYOB – Bring Your Own Bag." The campaign is aimed at reducing pollution by eliminating plastic bags and reducing waste by encouraging bag reuse with "bag refunds" of five to 10 cents, depending on the store.

Sometimes a strong sense of purpose can rally your organization into developing a whole new product line and can provide new touch-points for offering meaning to consumers. Hallmark Journeys are new lines of cards for inspiration, hope and support beyond the traditional card-giving occasions including more than 170 encouragement cards. Journeys cards are available at Hallmark Gold Crown stores nationwide.

Campaigns can rally people to issues – from American Girl's current 2009 Girl of the Year Chrissa Maxwell on a mission to "stop the bullying," complete with resources, pledges and tie-ins, to The Target/Salvation Army Angel Giving Tree, which is an online version of the charity's program to help needy families with holiday presents.

Most retailers are for-profit and cannot withstand the business model that best friends Jessica Moment and Sally Fowler – both ex-Gappers – have cultivated in their San Francisco based store, The Philanthropist Boutique. There, patrons can splurge on Zac Posen dresses, Jill Stuart blouses, jewelry, handbags, even a champagne bar and

mini cupcakes, with 100 percent of donations going to Bay Area charities. The charity of choice changes with each season and has included organizations such as the Raphael House, which benefits families in need by assisting them in achieving financial stability and independence. The Presidio Heights shop will stock collections from Rachel Roy, Richard Chai, Allegra Hicks, Gryphon, Loeffler Randall and Rag & Bone, to name a few.

This strong activism tradition at retail has its very roots in “charity shops,” a type of social enterprise generally associated with second-hand goods and staffed by volunteers. OxFam and Red Cross shops started in the 1940s in London. In fact, to this day, Oxfam is the largest retailer of second-hand books in Britain. In the U.S., Goodwill Industries, Salvation Army, St. Vincent de Paul and ReStore – the store of Habitat for Humanity International – carry on this tradition as the core function of their retail outlets. Habitat ReStores, for instance, resell new and used building and household materials donated by large companies, job sites and individuals. Proceeds from ReStores help local affiliates fund the construction of Habitat houses within the community. Many affiliates across the United States and Canada operate successful ReStores – some of which raise enough funds to build an additional 10 or more houses per year.

Retailers can get involved in many online communities that kick back some of the funds to charities of the users’ choice, ultimately prompting loyalty and repeat visits. This growing trend of charitable giving communities online includes uPromise.com, iGive.com, ethicalshopper.com and onecause.com, to name a few.

The importance of corporate social responsibility cannot be stressed enough. If corporate retailers do not get involved, they will be trumped by independent movements that can build faster than any of us can construct more stores.

Freecycle.org is one such fascinating movement. Its mission is to build a worldwide gifting movement that reduces waste, saves precious resources and eases the burden on landfills while enabling members to benefit from the strength of a larger community. The Freecycle network now exists in every state in the U.S. and more than 75 countries, keeping more than 400 tons of trash out of landfills each day. Items available for pickup can include anything from computers, furniture and bicycles, to phone adapters and partially eaten boxes of chocolate. If the concept of wearing someone else's clothes is not your bag, it may be better for you to give than to receive. But if you think nobody's interested in those old knickknacks or Atari joysticks, you may be surprised to find that most of the goods posted on Freecycle find a home.

You don't have to connect the dots all that much to imagine a world that could one day transform from a place where people visit businesses to buy things to a world where people simply go to each other to trade things. That's why staying engaged in innovations, finding new ways to engage your customers and looking for ways to bring meaning to transactions is so critical.

The future lies in everything you do: from your mission statement to the day-to-day operations of how you choose your products, where you opt to locate, what your product mix is and who is on the front line of customer service. Other issues are more nuanced: Are you successfully telling your story? Are you connecting with people on their terms? Are you offering an experience that brings joy and meaning? These are

questions we as retailers and marketers will continue to explore as we survey and shape the changing landscape of shoppers and how and why they buy.

About the author



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