

Retail as Sacred Devotion: From Customer Loyalty to Customer Devotion

Loyalty is the focal point of many, if not most, brands. Understandably, getting repeat customers who will also serve as advocates is a smart move in a world where, due to the ease of online transactions, volume simply isn't enough. But is loyalty enough or should we strive for something more? Should we strive for developing a shopping experience or brand that is largely impervious to economic conditions and the small mistakes and hiccups that all brands have to deal with during their lifetimes, no matter how good they may be at avoiding missteps? Of course. The question is how. The answer lies not just in how we execute the experience, but in how we conceive of the shopping experience. Shopping is a practice that has ritual structure and involves the creation of value and relationships. Loyalty stems from the development of these relationships but loyalty, though a strong influence on the power of a brand, has limitations and is subject to cultural shifts, a weak economy, etc. The goal is to move shoppers and consumers to the level of the truly devoted. In other words, we need to think of shopping in the context of sacred devotion.

Devotion is an ardent, often selfless dedication to a person or belief, but it can be extended to a brand and retail setting. Loyalty, in this sense, goes from feelings of strong but limited dedication to a state that borders on the divine. Like religious experience, it might even begin to manifest elements of cosmology. From my point of view, this is a far more powerful position for a brand to be in, but it requires more work. And to those who would question whether or not it's worth the effort I would point to the growth of Apple stock in the last five years and the near fanatical nature of its devotees.

Devotion in the religious sense means paying homage and this carries over to brands and retail in that the devotee-shopper ritualizes the experience and treats the brand and retail space with a higher degree of engagement and devotion. In this case the nature of devotion is consumerism and the forging of identity through shopping. There is a public expression of respect to someone or something to whom or to which one feels indebted, as through an honor, tribute or reference. In the case of a brand, the devotee makes "pilgrimages" to its retail outlets and uses both logo and products as badges to signal inclusion for fellow believers, to recruit new believers and to keep non-believers away. After all, the goal is not in bring the half-hearted into the fold, but to draw in those who will embrace brand with the same degree of devotion and come to see the retail space as a manifestation of identity. When a consumer/shopper transitions from loyalty to devotion justifications of function and costs are set aside because they lose meaning to the devoted. All that really matters is the object of the devotion and the losing of one's sense of self in the shared experience.

But it is not as if the devotee doesn't get something in return. The devotee gets something back – a sense of fulfillment, a sense of greater meaning, a sense of belonging to a "special" group of people, a sense of ownership in the belief system. This



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leads to a sense of love that goes beyond romanticism and takes on an element of duty and personal involvement – and devotion. Rational interest becomes an expression of love which is not just an externally-focused love, but one that is co-authored. It is not the love of *eros* (passionate love, or the love of sensual desire) but the love of *agape*, or the notion that love is based on adulation, which being transcendent is not based on appraisal but rather the totalizing of otherness. It is not love subject to reason or explanation and is therefore unqualified. The aim of this sort of love is the loss of self through the merging with the beloved other. It is a creative act.

Devotional space leads to long-term repeat behavior on the part of the shopper. Even if they don't make a purchase every time, they come to see the retail environment as a place of worship and the brand as a focal point in their own sense of identity. This leads to two centrally important points. First, when they do make a purchase cost is of minimal issue, though they may say otherwise. New product releases will garner immediate attention and devotees will wait an almost unimaginable amount of time to buy the product in the retail space. It is not enough to buy it online or at another venue – communion with the retail space is a rite. Second, devotees will bring others with them or advocate wherever they can, going from advocates to apostles.

So how does a brand achieve this level of devotion? There are several key points that lead to transforming the retail space to devotional space, all of which work together. It is an all-or-nothing proposition, but the payoff is worth the effort.

1. The Products

While it may seem obvious, retailers often forget about the power their products have on deep, social and cultural levels. The products must be of good quality, but they needn't be the pinnacle of the industry. Retailers tend to spend a great deal of time talking about features and not enough time talking to shoppers and consumers about what the products do for them in terms of creating an image, a feeling, or a sense of well-being. It can be extremely difficult for us to remember that our products may be the best in the world, but if we do not articulate how they fit into the daily lives of our consumers they lose their relevance.

2. The Environment

The retail space is an extension of the brand, not simply a place to display merchandise. This means that in addition to the consideration put into the initial design of the space, a retailer must think about the space as a destination, a place of pilgrimage. Human perceptions of space, although derived from sensory tools that all humans share, are shaped and patterned by culture. This means that differing cultural frameworks for defining and organizing space are internalized by all people at an unconscious, usually shared level, and can lead to serious failures of communication. At the macro-level, these sensibilities shape cultural expectations about how every environment we interact with should be properly organized. This also means that settings can and do take on a "personality" depending on how they relate to cultural archetypes we possess about a given spatial frame. The surrounding stores and



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neighborhood need to be a reflection of or antithetical to your brand, the goal being to produce strong emotional responses. Products need to be displayed in such a way as to make them visually reverential (e.g. on a pedestal and under directed lighting). Touch needs to be elevated to tactile play and experimentation. Events must be incorporated into the retail space, allowing people to ritualize their visits and feel as if they are part of an ongoing, transformational experience. It isn't enough to make the store look inviting and to reflect the brand standards of the company. The retail space needs to become a destination and take on a sense of "place."

3. The Re-creation of Self

From an anthropological perspective, the individual is less of a coherent whole and more of a collection of various cultural identifiers. Culture, as a social practice, is not something that individuals possess. It is a process in which individuals participate. As such, culture is an important factor in shaping identity. In a retail setting this means that identity is developed as part of a shared system and that the retail space becomes a focal point around which people gather to find unity and shared understanding. As with religious communities, devotional space produces a heightened sense of belonging and a sense of being part of something "bigger" than the individual. Staff must appear to be part of the elect and use language and non-verbal communication to signal that the shopper has left the mundane world and has joined a special group, embodied in the retail setting. Architecturally, the gateway into the store must signal a transitional zone. Every element of the entry process must let the shopper know that he or she is now part of something pure and experiential.

Increasingly, retailers are getting the point that loyalty stems from a more intricate retail experience. But it isn't enough to cultivate simple loyalty. Understanding the retail experience as devotional space means thinking about the retail experience and the brand in general in a more holistic sense and thinking about how it can be used to cultivate a sense of shared identity among consumers. Again, shopping is a practice that has ritual structure and involves the creation of value and relationships. It is, or should be, a practice that goes beyond transaction to a sense of transcendence. Make your retail space a point of sacred devotion and you become inseparable from the lives of your consumers.

