Your Brand Ally, The Consumer

By Martinlindstrom.com, author of Brand Child and BRAND sense

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The Internet has turned everyone into a broadcaster. But how will this affect brands?
The answer is simple: brands cannot afford to upset the consumer any longer.

Chances are that you're most likely upsetting your customers more than ever. If you don't believe me, read on.
Ten years ago I wrote the world's first book on how to build brands online. In the back of Brand Building on the Internet, I listed ten essential rules for brands to follow online. Rule number one was to reply to customers. Very simple, yes, and essential for anyone with a serious online presence. I decided to test the rule by sending out a simple
consumer inquiry to the one-hundred largest brands in the world. Using the 'contact us' feature on the corporate website of each brand concerned, I asked each company a simple question about their brand. Questions you'd be able to answer in seconds. What do you think the re-sponse rate was?
First the good news. Thirty percent of the brands replied back within the first 24 hours. Great, thought I, merrily assuming a similar response rate on day two. The reality was, however, that I had to wait a very long time to get replies back from all the companies I'd written to. In fact, I'm still waiting. More than fifty percent of the companies never replied back at all. Now, I'm not talking about mom-and-pop brands, but brands which are valued in the billions; companies that also talk about customer satisfaction and in most cases even include their professed commitment to consumers in their vision statements.
Of course, this lack of care for the individuals that make your business a success and secure a living for all your employees wouldn't apply to you, would it. Or does it?
Ask five friends to send your company a simple customer inquiry. Be prepared for disap-pointment. Your brand, going on common performance, may fail the test. But you have to know. If you're in doubt, you'd better act quickly because tomorrow's brands simply can't afford to fail on such simple customer-care test.

If you're not sure what you should wish for your brand in 2008, I might have a suggestion for you to consider.

The good news is that, by entering this simple experiment, you can keep the bad news , if it turns out to be bad, in camera. But don't forget. You won't simply be testing speed of replies, but quality of replies.
Some years, ago a Jonah Peretti turned Nike and its marketing machine upside down by submitting a rather unusual naming request via its Nike ID feature. If you're not familiar with Nike ID, check it out. It enables customers to submit a name request and have this printed on the shoes of your choice. Peretti requested that

Nike print the name: ‘Sweatshop’ on his shoes. His request was rejected (take a look at http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0107,jockbeat,22274,3.html). Ten years ago, this may not have been a big deal. But in today’s world, Peretti’s one-man offensive and Nike’s so-called response would be damaging to the Nike marketing machine and the brand it’s responsible for. More than 80,000 sites cover Peretti’s story online retracing the rather naïve dialog that ensued between Nike’s legal team and the lone fighter, Peretti. The problem was not only Nike’s rejection, but also the way they rejected this pointed request. They threw their giant legal department into action and employed legal jargon as a weapon to silence Peretti. Of course, the weapon was ineffective and the opposite happened. The fact that you’re reading about him right now is evidence to this fact.

Meaningful and genuine dialogue, i.e., just a friendly phone call from the company, could have turned this situation around. Yet most companies forget the power today’s
consumer has through that most potent of all communication channels: word of mouth.

If you dare, send a nasty request or complaint to your own company. Ask one of those irri-tating questions, which speak of a true weakness in your product or service, just as ‘sweatshop’ pierced the heart of Nike’s reputation. First of all, you better hope that you
receive a reply. And, assuming you do, hope that the reply is a thoughtful, respectful and salient one. Will you receive a call from a friendly and intelligent person, or an anonymous impersonal form email, or a defensive response from the legal department?

If, like me, you’re convinced that you and I and every other consumer are powerful marketing machines, you’d better move quickly. The good news is that I didn’t mention your company in this article. The bad news is that someone is likely to do so soon.

For more, visit MartinLindstrom.com. Martin Lindstrom’s books “Brand Sense” and “Brand Child” are available at BT Store; tel: (011) 255 5871, 077 768 5200