

Change Perception to Change Behavior

By W. Lee Steele

There are many definitions of marketing. My favorite definition is: Marketing is the function of *catching* and *keeping* customers. This simple, but profound, definition clearly identifies marketing's true goals - to both capture new customers while at the same time ensuring that current customers continue to buy.

Both goals require changing, or reinforcing, consumer behavior. Marketing is about getting prospects to change their behavior - to buy from you instead of a competitor. There are many marketing strategies, or tools, available to entice customers to "temporarily" buy from you - coupons, price discounts, sales events, and direct mail for example. However, these are only temporary solutions to changing consumer buying habits. Once the sales event, or coupon has expired, the customer is free to change his/her buying behavior in the future. And then, the battle for customer loyalty begins all over again.

To truly, and permanently, change (ingrain) a customer's buying behavior, you first need to change their perception of your company, products and services. A change in perception leads directly to a permanent change in behavior.

This truth is no different from raising a small child. Once a child understands (perceives) that negative actions swiftly result in negative consequences, the child will change his or her behavior. And, once a child understands (perceives) that positive actions earn positive rewards, it will want to continue to behave appropriately in order to continue to be rewarded.

The same concept applies to consumer perception and behavior. For those of you who are old enough to remember, any product labeled "Made in Japan" in the 1950's and '60's was perceived by Americans as inferior in quality and performance. But, slowly, Japan improved the quality of its products while keeping the prices affordable. The low prices encouraged consumers to purchase the products and once they experienced the improved quality and performance, their perceptions of what "Made in Japan" meant changed forever. Once consumers' perceptions changed, the Japanese manufacturers were able to raise their prices to be more in line with their quality. Now, Japan is the acknowledged quality leader in premium-priced electronics, automobiles, and many other industries.

What marketing strategies and tools help to change consumer perception? There are many to choose from - advertising, product/company brochures, warranties, packaging, customer testimonials, positive press coverage, endorsements, professional-looking web sites, marketing alliances with other well respected companies and organizations, and more. The specific marketing strategies you select will be determined by your budget, available resources and by how much (and how quickly) you need to change your customers' perception of your company, products and services.

So, focus your marketing efforts on improving your consumers' perception of your company and the positive change in consumer buying behavior will follow.
