

The Road To Success Isn't Paved With Free Pancakes  
Consumers Seek Comfort And Security In Brands. Offer Them A Hug, And They'll  
Return The Love.

Whatever business you're in - whatever products or services you offer - success boils down to your brand's ability to bond with consumers. The current economic climate creates unique opportunities – even responsibilities – for businesses to connect with consumers in more meaningful ways. According to Reinier Evers, founder of Trendwatching.com, "There has never been a better time to show you truly care about your customers." Consumers seek security and comfort in brands. Show people you understand, empathize, and sympathize with what's happening in their lives and the result can be an indelible bond that creates powerful brand loyalty.

Sincere consumer bonding requires an innovative mix of creativity, imagination, and strategy. Gimmicky publicity stunts may attract fleeting attention, but thoughtfully conceived and intelligently executed branding builds bonds that resonate with lasting effect. Two recent high-profile attempts at consumer bonding illustrate the difference:

Grand-Slam-Flash-In-The-Pan?

Denny's Corporation took a gimmicky stab at empathizing with consumers during Super Bowl XLVIII. In its first ever big game spot the restaurant chain announced that it would give away its signature Grand Slam breakfast from 6 a.m. until 2 p.m. the following Tuesday at all locations in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico. Bright and early Tuesday morning eager eaters began waiting an average of 60 minutes for their free eggs, bacon, pancakes, and sausage.

Denny's won't reveal specifics, but including the cost of the estimated 1,560,000 free meals, the 30 second spot itself, fees for San Francisco based advertising demigods Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, as well as production overhead, the promotion's price tag totaled roughly \$5 million.

"We had an extraordinary day," Denny's CEO Nelson Marchioli beamed when the promotion was over. "We were hoping to reconnect with millions of Americans today, and we did." Ironically, millions of Americans trying to connect with Denny's.com immediately after the spot aired were greeted with an error message because the company's web servers were not prepared to handle the overwhelming increase in internet traffic. \$5 million must not buy the comprehensive strategy it used to.

By Wednesday, the promotion was finished and it's equity already waning. While public opinion numbers for Denny's jumped in the short term, it remains to be seen if the publicity generates lasting consumer loyalty.

Driver's Safety

As Detroit's "Big Three" automakers spin their wheels trying to regain traction, South Korean upstart Hyundai has launched a bold initiative to show consumers that a car company can care. Hyundai recently announced the "Buyer's Assurance Program" which offers to buy back your new Hyundai, at the original price, if you are laid off, lose your job, or otherwise fall upon financial hard times within a year of purchase.

There are of course strings attached, and paragraphs of small print, but the offer is nonetheless striking in its innovative consumer bonding approach. Hyundai acutely realized that what's keeping people from buying cars now is fear of what might happen later if that new car debt becomes a burden. Rather than offer

employee pricing incentives or standard discounts that merely minimize the purchase price, Hyundai is road testing a whole new buyer/seller relationship that radically reduces the risk of ownership. Television commercials promoting the program even end with the comforting tagline, "We're all in this together". It's a bold grab for market share by offering consumers genuine security in a time of uncertainty.

Denny's and Hyundai demonstrate contrasting and compelling consumer bonding case studies, but for each the long-term results remain to be seen. Fully appreciating the power and potency of consumer bonding requires looking back a little further...

### The Gum Bubble

During World War II, the bubble nearly burst for the Wrigley Chewing Gum Company. Wartime rationing resulted in shortages of essential ingredients that threatened to jeopardize the quality of the company's products. President Philip Wrigley (inventor of the Philip's-Head screwdriver, for my fellow trivia geeks out there) made a bold move to protect the reputation of his brands. Rather than compromise the quality consumers had come to expect, the company took Wrigley's Spearmint, Doublemint and Juicy Fruit gums off the civilian market and output smaller quantities exclusively for the U.S. Armed Forces.

To ensure the brands stayed top-of-mind with civilian consumers Wrigley launched the "Remember this Wrapper" ad campaign. Even as the gum wasn't available the company maintained a strong advertising presence. Colorful print ads promised that the products would return to stores once the G.I.'s returned home – a subtle, but critically hopeful message that the war would indeed end. The campaign communicated that Wrigley was doing it's part to support the war effort, and in particular, the troops. Profound emotional connections resulted between consumers and, of all things, gum.

After the war, Wrigley was again able to purchase the ingredients used in their recipes, and return their products to market. Though these brands had not been available to consumers for years, they quickly regained and then exceeded their pre-war popularity.

### Chew Gum And Succeed At The Same Time

Philip Wrigley faced uncertainties not unlike those confronting modern business owners; scarcity of resources, rising costs, diminishing returns, and uncertain global events. Rather than quit or founder, Wrigley adapted - and succeeded with creativity and imagination. He took innovative steps to keep his company vital during difficult circumstances - without compromising the integrity of its brands. Most of all, he maintained consumer mindshare by keeping those brands ever present through an ingenious advertising and marketing strategy. At a time when Americans were indeed "all in it together", the Wrigley Chewing Gum Company proved it was right there with them – and created indelible bonds with an entire generation.

### Long Lasting Flavor

The Wrigley case study takes a personal twist for me that poignantly illustrates the power of consumer bonding. An enduring childhood memory of mine is that my grandfather loved Wrigley's Doublemint Gum. His devotion grew from his experience as a combat infantryman in the Pacific during World War II - where for a scared soldier in a far off fetid jungle, each piece of gum was a small, comforting piece of home. Three decades after the war he remained loyal to the brand. He was never without a pack - and he always had a piece for me.

He's gone now, and it's been another 30 odd years since I heard him say, "Hey little buddy, want some gum?" Yet every time I see those Wrigley wrappers in the grocery check out line that phrase rings in my head like the words were just spoken, and the memories of those moments with my grandfather echo in my heart as if they've just occurred. And, wouldn't you know it, it always makes me want a piece of Doublemint gum.

### Sincerity, Not Syrup

Free pancakes are a tasty gimmick, but genuine empathy builds relevant, enduring bonds. When your brand is dyed into the fabric of people's lives it will make meaningful emotional connections that foster fierce loyalty - today, through the years, and across generations. That is the power of authentic consumer bonding. It doesn't matter what business you're in, or how big you are. All you need is creativity, imagination, and sincerity.

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