

Customer first thinking.



Brand Advocacy

An Interview with Jay Baer, President of Convince and Convert

Jay Baer:

Jay Baer is the President of the marketing consultancy Convince and Convert and a popular speaker and author on the subject of customer experience and digital transformation.



Marketing as a discipline is going through an identity crisis.

Every marketer has been programmed to shout at passing traffic. But people's buying behaviour has changed so radically – due to price transparency, instant access to information, brand distrust, countless distractions, shrunken attention spans, ad avoidance and more - that even CEOs realize their marketing methods have expired. This past year some notable global brands have actually jettisoned the CMO title in favour of Chief Growth Officer or Chief Experience Officer, leading to speculation that marketing is on a fast path to extinction.

There is no doubt the marketing battleground has shifted from winning “share of mind” to “share of heart”, not by pandering to people, but by creating a distinctive, friction-free, “sharable” customer experience that makes them go “Wow!”. But often businesses struggle to satisfy even the minimal expectations of

customers. To fix what's wrong takes a willingness to invest in the future, with payback measured in years. And as long as the CMO position remains a revolving door, there is never any continuity. Taking time to climb the loyalty ladder – by making life easier, convenient and more enjoyable for customers - will never soothe impatient investors. That's why maximizing growth is still the top corporate priority, making customer experience a secondary concern.

Jay Baer has a way out of this predicament, something he calls “talk triggers”. In fact, he's written a book about it, full of case studies of how companies achieved fame by taking simple steps to generate “word of mouth” through the design of novel experiences. Another book he wrote called “Youtility” argues that companies can only win attention these days by asking: “How can we help?”. And his latest book “Hug Your Haters” shows how to turn customer complaints into opportunity. The main theme running through all his books: the need to create signature experiences that lift brands above the “sea of sameness”.

SS

Stephen Shaw (SS): Is “brand advocacy” the surest path to growth?

JB

Jay Baer (JB): We're at a unique inflection point where we now trust each other much more than we trust businesses and organizations. So, if you can convince your customers to go out of their way to tell other people about you, that truly is the best form of marketing.

SS

What's an example of a company that's won fame through word of mouth?

JB

The example I like best is DoubleTree hotels which has been giving out a warm chocolate chip cookie upon check-in to every guest in every hotel worldwide now, and they've been doing it for 30 years. That's 75,000 cookies a day, every day. We found that 34% of them have told a story to somebody else about that cookie. So, if you do the math on that, 22,500 stories a day are told about this chocolate chip cookie. Now, the companion question is, when is the last time you saw a DoubleTree ad? Not very much, right? They really don't advertise much at all because the cookie is the ad.

SS

Don't they also have to get the guest experience right?

JB

Somewhere along the line, business convinced itself that competency creates conversation. It's this misguided idea that if you're operationally sound, it will automatically lead to word of mouth. But that's not really the way people behave. We prefer to tell stories about things we never expected.

SS

Is word of mouth about awareness-building, or differentiating the customer experience?

JB

Awareness for sure. You think about the hundreds of billions of dollars that get spent globally on creating awareness. So, if I say to you, "What if you could create awareness for free?", that's certainly worth considering, right?

SS

What exactly is a "talk trigger"? Is it something unique about the value proposition?

JB

Usually something other than that because a unique value proposition is "We are faster, we are cheaper, we are nicer, we are kinder, whatever". It's about how we are incrementally better than the competition at something. But a talk trigger, by contrast, is a story. A talk trigger is an experience. In fact, the data shows that 81% of word of mouth is triggered by some sort of an experience. And so, when you get a cookie that you didn't expect, it becomes a story that you feel compelled to tell somebody else about. A talk trigger is an operational choice that's designed to create conversation. It's not a price, a promotion, a contest, a coupon, or a campaign. It's something you do differently that your customers will talk about.

SS

Does that mean inventing something new or spotlighting a current "sharable" experience?

JB

Both. We do a ton of research. We interview lots of customers and then we look at external chatter about the company. What do people notice today, if anything? In some cases, the answer is zero, but our responsibility is to take what's in their DNA and craft an experience that is repeatable. And being repeatable is one of the key principles of "talk triggers".

SS

Do you occasionally come up empty?

JB

In terms of what they have today, sure. But we never come up empty in terms of what's possible. The way it works is we have a detailed customer journey map, so we know all the different interaction points between the company and its customers. Once we interview a bunch of customers, we get a sense for what they expect at each touchpoint. And when you take a customer journey map and overlay it with customer expectations, you end up with an "expectation map". We use that expectation map to come up with potential experiences we know will be unexpected. Once you know what people expect, by definition you know what they don't expect. The "talk trigger" always lies in the unexpected.

SS

You make the point in your book that an exclusive focus on customer experience makes it more difficult to be different. Is the end game now to create a novel experience?

JB

I would say an experience that is identifiable with your organization. What we want is an experience that becomes part of how you do business. If it becomes something competitors can mimic, it loses staying power. Enterprise Rent-A-Car had a talk trigger for many years which was, "We'll pick you up". Avis won't pick you up, Hertz won't pick you up, Budget won't pick you up, nobody will pick you up. That was a great talk trigger - an experience they owned. Until Uber came along. Now I can get anybody to pick me up at any time. So their claim is no longer noteworthy. Customer expectations change.

SS

Today we live in this world of infinite choice. It seems the tiebreaker is who do I really trust.

JB

It's a heck of a lot easier to give your customers a story to tell than to make your company trusted. Customers trust each other a lot more. Everybody knows that word of

mouth is important, but nobody has an actual strategy for it. Fewer than 1% of all companies have actually defined a word of mouth strategy, which is crazy, right? It's really hard to fathom. It's too important to leave to chance.

SS

In your book "Youtility," you say there's only two ways companies can break through the clutter: be amazing or be useful. Should the goal really be to become "amazingly useful"?

JB

Yeah, sure. I would say "talkably useful": useful enough that people actually take notice. As competition gets even more intense, the idea of usefulness is more relevant than ever. Utility as a marketing model requires a measure of patience for those initiatives to pay off. Most marketers are forced to operate with a short time horizon. They want results now, as opposed to hoping some percentage of their customers will reward them down the road.

SS

Digital marketing has moved from the perimeter of planning to the very epicenter. Now we live in a post-digital world, as they say. But has marketing really changed very much?

JB

The end game is obviously the same: get people to buy more stuff - there's no question about that. But how you get there is definitely different. Just look at how much money has shifted from offline to online. And there's a significant percentage of CMOs now in charge of CX inside the organization. CX is marketing now. More and more businesses, of all sizes, are starting to think about customer relationships holistically instead of just campaigns. But I think it's still early days - people are trying to get their arms around that idea.

SS

But if growth is still the name of the game, how does a brand think "holistically"?

JB

So, go back to the DoubleTree cookie example. Hilton's brand, according to their CMO, is the warm welcome. That's their thing. They want to own that seven or eight minutes from the moment you enter the hotel till you set foot in your room. They want to be really good at that, and consequently, they put more time, money, and effort into lobby design and front desk training than most hotels at that price point. The cookie ceremony is a big part of that. The brand positioning is the warm welcome - ergo, you get a warm chocolate chip cookie - it's all perfectly congruent.

SS

Let's talk about where marketing is headed. Should we draw lessons from China, a mobile-first society, reliant on a few massive e-commerce platforms?

JB

I think it's absolutely the future, and Facebook, for their part, is headed in that direction. The one company that Facebook wishes it was is WeChat because it controls everything in China - they do it all. All the things that Facebook does, plus Amazon, plus Twitter, all in one app, one mobile-based system for really everything in your life, which from a consumer standpoint is pretty damn convenient. I just don't know if people here are ready to do everything on their phone.

SS

Another disruptive trend is the meteoric rise of the direct-to-consumer industry.

JB

Oh, my God, I can't tell you how much s*** I bought on Instagram I didn't even know existed. Instagram is costing me \$1,000 a month in unnecessary purchases. It's the greatest. The targeting on that thing is so good. But let me tell you about my son who started his own fashion label. He does three collections a year, makes a series of shirts, hoodies, pants, has a website, has Instagram ads. So, anybody can do it in theory. You can be a 17-year-old kid in Bloomington, Indiana and be pretty good at Photoshop, and now all of a sudden you have a brand, and you're selling it directly to consumers.

SS

Another game-changer, of course, is the growing ubiquity of voice technology. What impact will that have on marketing?

JB

Adoption of smart speakers and voice-activated technology is really accelerating, even more than I thought it would. My experience after doing this for thirty years is that convenience always wins. When you ask Alexa for a recommendation, you get one answer. You don't get a list of 10 answers, you get one answer. So, brands should start voice-enabling their content now!

SS

The web turned thirty last year and Tim Berners-Lee has warned "A backlash is coming." Here we have the inventor of the web saying the child he produced has turned out to be a juvenile delinquent. And recently former Unilever CMO, Keith Weed, said we're in a trust or bust moment today. What's your perspective on the state of the web?

Interview

JB

I think we're definitely seeing some signs of fatigue. Facebook usage is actually going down in the U.S., especially amongst young people. But, again, convenience always wins. So, sure, you may have a backlash. But I'm not certain what the alternative is. In the research we've done with millennials and Gen Z, they don't feel everything should be free. They'll pay for quality. And so, that's probably good news.



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