



Building emotional bonds for global consumer brands

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As life starts to go back to semi-normality, I continued to observe small businesses, how some of them continued to evolve, adopted new ways and sadly how some of them couldn't resist against the pressure that came with the pandemic.

Regardless of whether I was a customer, I felt heartbroken every time I see a closed small business and caught myself having a big smile when I see the ones who managed to stay in the game. Observing this strong emotional reaction, I realised there is something that small businesses do right without even trying that moves consumers' emotions.

There are powerful emotional bonds small businesses create with the consumer, something

large global consumer brands can learn from. Here are my four lessons:

Created by humans for humans

“It wasn’t just a business; it was where Emily and Mark used to work!” In local businesses we see the human factor and effort involved much more than in large companies. I cannot forget the day of my Virgin flight from New York to San Francisco. I was on a mission to surprise my friend for her 40th birthday and the entire flight was sent to the American Airlines counter to get a new flight through them.

Despite all the craziness at the airport, being surrounded with fighting customers and full flights, an American Airlines employee realized how critical the flight time was for me and she put me in business class with an economy ticket so I was able to fly and meet my friend. I was very aware that it was not the airlines’ decision but Amy’s personal choice. That’s why I ended up giving her the birthday present I had bought for my friend at the counter.

The lesson for large brands is to be more human, approachable and transparent; Provide more incentives to employees who are interacting with customers. Bring the human factor front and center, positioning the brand as a place where a group of humans put their mind, soul and effort into their service.

Everyone loves a love story

In a world where most of us have big unfulfilled dreams about our jobs, local shops represent the fairy tale of being brave and pursuing your dreams. Have you ever seen a local vintage shop owner who hates fashion? Or, a baker who doesn’t care about good bread? Local shops represent the idea of “do what you love”.

Large consumer brands need to remind consumers about the love story that drove the creation of the brand – like the Patagonia brand emerging out of love for outdoor sports and remaining true to this.

For long-term impact, considering new hiring and talent development strategies to support this enthusiasm. Hiring based on a person's passion for the category rather than the pure experience can create love from inside, a warm glow that can be recognized from outside.

We are social creatures

When we shop at local stores, we are not just buying for necessity but also to be around and meet likeminded people. The hot sauce store close to my apartment brings this to life. A hot sauce lover can talk to the owner of the store or other customers on how they have used specific sauces for a long time and exchange recipes while they are shopping. It's an immediate connection and local shops create a community feeling based on what their customers love.

Big brands must find a way to connect consumers who are passionate about their brand or the category. I personally know some entrepreneurs who consistently fly with certain airlines in business class because the connections that they make in the business lounge justifies the additional money they spend. If the brand can create a real and intimate community experience, it will carry the brand love for a long time.

Blend into the micro culture

Every neighbourhood has unspoken rules defined by the people who live there. Local shops pick neighbourhoods that define who they are and what they love. For that reason, they fit into those micro-urban cultures perfectly. However, large consumer brands that are servicing mass audiences typically build a consistent image and offering for every location and consumer profile. As much as consistency is a selling a point, it's also an obstacle to creating an emotional bond.

The lesson for large brands is to try to identify which micro-cultures exist locally, understand their needs and explore ways to tailor the offering and/or products that they carry, based on those micro cultural needs.

Shop local is not just a movement to support small businesses, it's a response to our natural desire to have human values, love and connection behind every transaction. Big brands need to follow the same path to create an emotional connection with their consumers and look to partner with small businesses who can open the door for them to a small but loving group of consumers.