



Disraeli, the consequential 19th Century British Prime Minister, identified the “three kinds of lies” in the subject line. Mark Twain said, “Facts are stubborn things, but statistics are pliable.” Relying too much on statistics can lead us to making inaccurate generalizations based on inadequate facts.

Of course, living in the marketing world where research is so important, we recognize the value of “the numbers.” But being in the customer relationship space, we must beware of the siren song of averages, and focus on the individual customer.

That’s why well-designed loyalty programs rely on individual behaviors and self-reported preferences, rather than aggregated third-party data. And the power of direct customer relationships will only continue to increase as tracking data from third-party cookies becomes unavailable. Direct customer relationships and the valuable zero-party data they yield, will be the lifeline for brands seeking to deliver targeted and personalized offers and experiences – and their defense against the Amazons and Googles, with their walled gardens of proprietary customer data.

I was thinking about statistics because of the stark contradictions in some reports I was reading. Early in the pandemic (June 2020), a Ketchum survey of 4,000 U.S. consumers found that 45% had changed brands during the pandemic, of whom 62% said they expected the changes to be permanent. In July 2020, McKinsey reported that over 60% of U.S. customers who tried new shopping behaviors during the crisis planned to stick with their new habits. Additional research suggests that Millennials and Gen Z consumers are especially open to changing brands based on factors including the quality of online experience and the brand’s values and corporate behavior.

Yet just a few weeks ago Robert Klara, writing in ADWEEK, proclaimed, “Americans are emerging from the pandemic as more brand-loyal than perhaps any time in history.” He cites a Savings.com survey showing U.S. consumers’ self-reported

loyalty to brands has increased from 90% to 97% since 2019. And Klara points to a U.S. Chamber of Commerce report stating that when it comes to brands, “in an uncertain world, shoppers gravitate toward the familiar.”

So, as Twain said, statistics are pliable; anyone out to prove a point can find some stats to support it. But is the truth really “out there” in the numbers? The only real way to measure loyalty is in actual customer behavior: repeat visits and purchases, brand advocacy and referrals, positive reviews and social posts, engagement with brand initiatives, and the role a brand plays in a consumer’s life. That’s why early in my marketing career I switched from the broad media world – ruled at the time by nebulous stats like impressions and recall – to direct marketing and ultimately, to customer relationship management and loyalty.

What has your own journey taught you about the delta between statistics and behavior? [Your thoughts?](#)

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