Violating Consumer Expectations: A Key Component of Brand Differentiation

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Introduction

Our culture is constantly preaching mantras like "stick to the status quo," "don't make waves," "play by the book," and "go with the flow." These sayings derive from the prevalent social emphasis on conformity. Because humans have a drive to think critically and explain the meaning behind every instance in life, people have set expectations for almost *every* social context. These expectations are based on "what people predict will happen rather than what they desire" (Griffin et al, 2019, p. 84). Whether we admit it or not, the questions we ask, the clothes we wear, the places we visit, and the people we associate with are often guided by the expectations of those around us. While there are certainly benefits to understanding and following cultural norms, sometimes the element of surprise can be fruitful. In other words, it can *actually* benefit communicators to go outside of the social boundaries.

Judee Burgoon introduced this concept through her Expectancy Violations Theory. She explained that, in certain situations, it is more rewarding to exceed or violate expectations rather than just meeting them. One core idea to this theory is that a deviation from expectations will "elicit an orienting response in receivers that leads them to interpret and evaluate the behavior in question" (Ramirez and Wang, 2008, p. 20). Therefore, unexpected verbal actions are sure to generate a cognitive response leading to courses of action among an audience. Consequently, individuals, who seek to portray themselves as distinguished, likable, and important, could immediately benefit from applying the principles from this theory. But the concept has important applications for brands as well.

Using the Theory to Understand 21st Century Word-of-Mouth

Every day, people around the world are talking. Some talk more than others, but when it comes down to it, everyone will *at some point* feel the need to share information. Communication theorists and psychological scientists have tried to narrow down the options and discover the true reason behind all of this discussion. A key question among researchers has been: what makes information newsworthy (in the minds of individuals) as opposed to forgettable?

Due to the advent of social media, these concerns about interpersonal sharing are more relevant than ever. Today, two billion people on the planet have the ability to publish a message for 338 Facebook friends *on average* to see (Smith, 2014, para. 7). Then, those friends have a choice: to share or to scroll. That leaves theorists with another question: what ultimately determines the subjects of our daily, real-life, conversations and our social media posts?

The expectancy violations theory suggests that it isn't up to mere chance. The theory fortuitously explains how people feel about certain communicators, pieces of news, and even the brands they come in contact with. Typically, a post gets shared if it was interesting to the user. Subsequently, content is often made interesting by including the element of surprise or an expectancy violation. More often than not, "reactions to a surprising event are generally stronger than reactions to an event that is identical in content, but expected" (Valenzuela, 2010, p. 4). For this reason, when brands do promotion, "communicating information between the seller and potential buyer" (Perrault et al, 20, p. 352), it is important for them to *at least* consider deviating from the same old, outbound marketing messages. When a brand does something that positively

violates a consumer's expectations, the amount of referrals, positive online reviews, and word-of-mouth marketing will increase drastically. Therefore, it is *this* violation of predicted behavior that can turn something uninteresting into something that people will share with their friends.

Brands that Have Successfully Violated Expectations

There are many cases of brands doing something out of the ordinary to earn the attention of a larger audience. In the early days of YouTube, Blendtec (a company who produces blenders) took advantage of the platform with a popular marketing campaign called "Will It Blend?" To this day, these videos feature the company's CEO blending different technology products, sporting goods, and household items. As of 2013, the series has grossed 217 million views (Gutelle, 2013, para. 2), and the videos have been noted as "viral darlings" (PR News, 2008, para. 1). The brand managed to take a rather mundane product, like a blender, and turn it into an internet sensation that millions of people shared. No one ever expected a blender to have such personality and humor attached to it, but because the company was able to violate that expectation, customers *still* hold fond memories with the brand.

Another example, that's particularly relevant to the academic world, is Chegg. Chegg started as a college textbook rental service that offered discounted prices. However, there's nothing particularly remarkable with their business model. In the 21st century, we all have a good grasp on logistics and online ordering — so another delivery service isn't necessarily newsworthy. But in order to get students talking amongst themselves about their brand, Chegg began sending a complimentary can of Red Bull energy drink in every shipment. This violated most customer's expectations

and therefore has received quite a bit of positive hearsay. Chegg is now known as a student's best friend rather than a big corporation after the college market.

Soon, the beer companies, who seem to be ever-present in the marketing communications sphere, jumped on the train of expectancy violation. In 2013, Sly Fox Brewing Company introduced an unconventional can where drinkers peel off the entire top "exposing a 1.75-inch-wide opening"(Galligan, 2013, para. 5). This unique feature sparked a great deal of internet exposure and became a successful point of differentiation for the brand.

Advice for Future Campaigning

Any doubt surrounding the relevancy of expectations in our culture is removed by the existence and persistence of social media. People are sharing an entire genre of short, funny YouTube and TikTok videos that describe how reality differs from their expectations — aptly named 'Expectations vs. Reality' (Jain, 2019, para. 1). Since social media is the latest communication medium, and the preferred means of information dissemination, brands can begin the process of violating consumer expectations online. By far, the easiest step is to be active and responsive on social media. In our highly communicative commerce system, it would be wise to invest in a well-trained social media team. Responding to comments, good and bad, is a pleasant surprise to those customers, who have been on hold for hours, and have never had their voices heard by corporations. It's also important to communicate with customers for the sake of building relationships instead of just improving the bottom line. Social media users want to sense that a brand is active online, contributing to the content, and hearing their concerns…but they rarely expect such behavior. If a brand can deviate from the

norm and communicate well, their followers will view them as less impersonal and more trustworthy than the competition.

Another point of emphasis should be placed on legitimately taking care of the customer. When a complaint is brought up, whether over the phone or in the comment section, a representative *must* take care of it. Sometimes reparations (such as coupon codes) are needed, but in other cases a sincere apology is appropriate. Sadly, no one really enjoys making a customer service call. But if a brand can prove themselves to be genuinely helpful, they will reap tons of customer loyalty.

Finally, brands should present themselves as credible first and foremost. The products must be quality, prices must be fair, and the promotions must be honest and clear. These actions will establish a positive ethos, or perceived credibility, for a company and its products (Cho et al, 2021, p. 3). Once this public image has been set, the brand can follow-up with efforts to exceed their previous levels of quality and care.

Final Discussion

In recent years, one main goal of marketing communication has been to make brands relatable through anthropomorphisms. The industry calls it *brand personality* — "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand"(Aaker, 1997, p. 347). So, if brands truly desire to be overflowing with irresistible personality, the companies behind them must start implementing communication tools that correspond to human traits. Promotional material must be newsworthy and share-worthy by providing useful information, unexpected friendliness, and continuous innovation. Doing so will violate the preconceived expectations of consumers and leave them feeling cared-for and satisfied.

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