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Is your “personal brand” holding you back?

“A brand is nothing more than an expectation,” says T. Scott Gross, a customer service consultant and author of *Positively Outrageous Service*. Products and companies have brands that create consumer expectations for quality, fast and friendly service, dependability, and any number of other positive characteristics. But brands exist on the personal level as well.

Personal branding is important, because it affects the way we are perceived by customers, coworkers, and managers, says Gross. “From the clothes you wear, to the way you answer the phone, to how you speak, to the way you handle yourself at work — all of that piles together and the composite of that becomes your personal brand.”

Every rep will have a “brand” in the eyes of customers, coworkers, and managers. The problem is that in many cases you won’t know what that brand is — and it could be negative. Think about it. Are you seen as the person who is willing to take on the toughest problems, or one who is likely to shirk off something that becomes too complicated? Are you seen as someone who believes in the products she is handling, or someone who just sees it as a job?

“In the eyes of management, a customer service rep could be perceived as the quickest to get back to customers, the best at defusing irate customers, or as really good at add-on sales,” says Gross. But a rep might also be “the complainer, the shirker, or the one we would never give a tough assignment to.”

“Everyone has a brand whether they want to or not,” says Gross. The trick is to understand what you stand for in the eyes of others — know what

their expectations of you are — and find ways to manage those expectations by changing your behavior if necessary.

Managing your personal brand

How can you manage the expectations that people have of you and thereby manage your personal brand? “I think it begins with awareness,” Gross says. “You have to be aware that you have a brand, and second, you have to sit back and ask: ‘What do I stand for? What does it look like I stand for? Am I making it clear what I stand for?’”

“You have to be cognizant of the fact that everything you do and say creates an expectation and is an act of branding. Decide which brand you want to project, then go about managing it by monitoring what you do and say.”

Your personal brand can also come into conflict with your department, company, or product “brands,” suggests Gross. And it is important for these to be in alignment as much as possible. “If your personal values and the values of your company aren’t in alignment, then you could be generating incredible amounts of stress,” he says.

To minimize the potential for stress, you should understand your personal brand and know as much as you can about the brands you are





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promoting, as well — the company and product brands you are handling. “A lot of customer service reps are expected to sell or provide service for something they haven’t really experienced,” Gross says. “So getting personal and corporate brands in alignment could be as simple as understanding the product and understanding the values that your company wants to create through its branding efforts.”

“In effect,” says Gross, “customer service in general is the expression of your company’s brand — of the values that it holds. And when a rep has stress on the job, it’s because his personal values don’t match with the corporate values.” Sometimes, a few minor adjustments in behavior and attitude can bring these values or brands into closer alignment.

Contact: *T. Scott Gross, T. Scott Gross & Company Inc., www.tscottgross.com.* ■



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