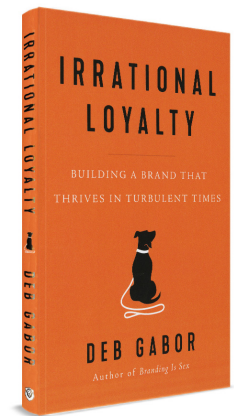


Irrational Loyalty

Building a Brand That Thrives in Turbulent Times

by **Deb Gabor**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In *Irrational Loyalty: Building a Brand That Thrives in Turbulent Times*, author Deb Gabor shows CEOs, VPs, and marketing and branding professionals how to build a brand with customers that are so dedicated that their loyalty is irrational.

Irrational loyalty exists when customers are so dedicated to a certain brand that their lives would be diminished if that product disappeared. Customers with irrational loyalty wouldn't even consider using an alternative brand because they would feel like they were cheating. The way brands build irrational loyalty among their customers is by bonding emotionally. Brands thrive when they have committed relationships with their customers for the long term.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why brands are like people and need a solid emotional foundation with their customers.
- Three “brand questions” that must be asked and answered to create your brand promise.
- How today's world affects brand image and can lead to a branding crisis.
- What a crisis of leadership or a crisis of culture can do to a brand image.
- How to survive a branding disaster by making an artful apology.
- Why you should build a brand designed to be used, not sold.

Brands Are Like People

The brand-customer relationship is analogous to a romantic relationship between two people. First, they meet; they become interested in one another and there is a courtship. Then they begin to date each other exclusively, and eventually, they fall into a well-worn routine of contentment and comfort being together. Slowly, the values and belief system of the other person comes into focus, and their actions and behaviors make sense. That is, until one of them cheats or screws up in some major way.

The relationship between brands and customers is very similar. The way people behave, what they say, what they do, how they act, how they engage with other people—in all of those things, you see evidence of values and beliefs. The same is true of a brand. The values and beliefs of a brand drive their actions. If your brand isn't living, breathing, and acting according to your values and beliefs, your brand is broken.

In any good relationship, you want to build equity in the emotional bank account. This happens when you clearly express your values and beliefs, and then consistently behave in a way that's aligned with those stated values and beliefs. You are confident that they have your back and that they won't let you down. As a result, they become an important, indispensable part of your life. Brands also build loyalty this way. They are clear about what they stand for. They are consistent in their actions. And eventually, they become meaningful and indispensable to their customers. Brands really are like people. Humans have compassion, feelings, values, and beliefs. So do great brands.

Three “Brand Questions”

There are three “brand questions” that must be asked and answered in order to build the foundation of a great brand. These questions are designed to get at the emotional core of your brand. Asking these three questions will help you identify the brand values and beliefs which will then guide all future actions. The clearer you get with your answers to the three questions, the stronger your brand promise will be.

1. What does it say about a person that uses this brand? The functional features and benefits of two similar products from different brands might be exactly the same. But the customer chooses one brand over another because it helps him communicate something not only to the rest of the world but also to himself about himself through its use.

2. What is the singular thing customers get from this brand that they cannot get elsewhere?

Customers choose great brands because those brands are singular in delivering on a very specific promise for the customer. This question gets to the essence of your brand; it's the part of the brand that makes you, you.

3. How does the brand make the customer the hero in their own story? People choose products that help them tell the story of their own life. If you can make your customers feel like the hero in their own movie, you have a customer for life.

Brand-New World

A brand construct is made of two parts: brand identity and brand image. Brand identity is the part that you, the brand, owns. Brand image, on the other hand, is the part your customer owns. For the past twenty-five years, companies put way more emphasis on brand identity, which includes the brand strategy process, brand creation, and brand management. In recent years, the emphasis has shifted dramatically toward an equal focus on brand image, which includes what everybody else in the world thinks of your brand. Brand image is based on not just what people experience in using a brand but also the impact of what people see online, in the news, in reviews, on social media, in apps, and on video. Brand image can surge or plummet based on a single video clip, a tweet from a social media influencer, or any communication that drives public opinion. Brands have to worry about external drivers now more than ever before. This has completely changed the way brands operate.

With today's always-on social media channels and instantaneous news cycle, when something happens involving your brand, millions of people could be reading about your brand crisis before your CEO gets a morning coffee. Your strongest defense—your only defense—is to strengthen your brand so you can survive any disaster. A brand can proactively prevent a brand crisis from spiraling into a disaster by making sure every single person in your organization understands your values, beliefs, and promises to your customers and knows how they can deliver on that promise without hesitation. Inevitably, something bad will happen, so you'd better build a brand that has a strong enough foundation to endure, not just in good times but in bad times, too.

There are companies blending the lines between social media and consumerism, and there are new ways to market, shop, and purchase goods we haven't even seen yet.

Everyone in the company needs to know what the brand promise is...and needs to behave in accordance with that promise.

This means that brands need to be vigilant about creating the emotional connections that transcend politics, social changes, and the addition and deletion of marketing and sales channels. Brands need to be thoughtful and deliberate about building brand relationships, which requires them to get to the gooey emotional core and focus on building a brand that can withstand all this tumult.

Crisis Of Leadership Or Culture

When a company has a bigger-than-life founder and CEO who behaves in a certain way, it doesn't matter what the brand promotes in its marketing materials or its advertising because the CEO is setting the tone and the direction of the organization. On the positive side, founder-led cultures can be very strong because they're driven by the passion and vision of the founder. But the downside is that a founder/CEO can lead a company into a toxic culture. That founder is often seen by the employees as the human embodiment of the company's brand in human form.

When brands put their corporate leaders on display as the face of their brand, they're at especially high risk for a branding disaster due to a crisis of leadership. When customers see that person behaving in a way that is inconsistent with their ideal of the brand, it brings the entire relationship with the brand into question. A company leader's public face and image must match the values of the company.

Corporate culture is the sum total of the behaviors, attitudes, values, and beliefs of everyone inside the organization. If that's out of whack with your expected and stated brand promise, then you have a crisis of culture. The company culture must live up to the brand promise. This means that culturally you need to drive those values through every single role within the company. A healthy corporate culture has to come from the top down. Everyone in the company needs to know what the brand promise is, and every single person in the company needs to behave in accordance with that promise. When the leaders at the top lose their way, the rest of the company will follow.

Surviving Brand Disasters

The strongest brands are clear on their values and live those values. They hire, train, and incentivize their employees based on those values. They maintain customer relationships according to those values. They make sure there is alignment with those values at every level of the organization. Their marketing promotes and is consistent with those values. Brands that do this can withstand any crisis. Having a foundation of strong brand values does not, however, negate the need to a proper apology when a brand screws up. Both are required. It is the combination of strong brand values plus an artful apology that prevails after a brand disaster.

If you are not sure how to master the art of the apology, follow these steps:

- First, take action right away to acknowledge that damage was done to another person or group. Do not wait. Get out in front of any potential social media or public backlash.
- Second, the top leader of the organization must accept full, unconditional, personal responsibility for what happened.
- Third, own the offense, admit fault and be sincere. Speak or write in the first person, avoid passive voice, don't offer excuses, never blame the victim, and own it.
- Fourth, acknowledge the impact your actions had on the other person or persons. Never try to minimize what the people affected by your actions felt, because you don't know.
- Fifth, don't offer too much explanation. Keep explanations short and relevant and don't use them to justify your actions.
- Sixth, explain what you're going to do about it. If you promise to make changes in the organization, follow through on those promises.

- Finally, clearly state the bedrock values and beliefs of the brand. Acknowledge that you missed the mark this time, then recommit to living up to those values in the future.

Build A Brand That Thrives

It's easy to build a brand that looks good on paper and shows up smartly dressed on a first date. It is much better to create a brand that connects on a deeper level. The goal is to build a brand that customers are going to fall in love with, stay in love with, and grow deeper in love with as time goes on. Brands that can do that will be able to survive any crisis. Put another way, some organizations build a brand to sell; others build a brand to bond. You should always strive to build brands that bond with customers. When your brand bonds emotionally with customers, you create irrational loyalty.

Making a brand look good in superficial marketing and flashy commercials doesn't cut it. You have to build a brand that becomes part of someone's self-concept. The goal is to have customers that want to use the brand. Always build a brand to use, not to sell. When you build a brand that's designed to be used, they will experience the benefit of it. It will elevate their self-concept and turn them into brand advocates. Pretty soon, they will be recommending the brand to all their friends.

When we look at some of the strongest brands in the world—Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Google, Amazon, Apple, Oracle, SAP—they all have one thing in common. They built really strong brands by aiming at an ideal customer. These brands elevate their users' self-concept through the use of those

brands. They make each of their customers a hero in their own story, and those customers broadcast that to the world. When you create irrational loyalty, your brand will thrive just like those marquee brands.

The goal of *Irrational Loyalty* is to inspire people to build a brand that doesn't just attract customers in the short term but keeps them in a long-term, constructive, value-added relationship. It is not easy. The process of branding is hard. As the leader of a company, the president of an organization, the head of marketing, a solopreneur, or the founder of a nonprofit who is trying to make an impact on the world, you have to be willing to do the hard work of branding. Your business can be transformed through the process of branding. At the end, when you emerge with a reignited strategic brand strongly aligned with the values and beliefs of your ideal customer, you're going to have a brand that can withstand crisis.



Deb Gabor is the founder of Sol Marketing, a consultancy that has led successful strategy engagements since 2003 for global brands like Dell, Microsoft, and NBCUniversal, and for numerous digital brands, including Allrecipes, Cheezburger, HomeAway, and many more. As a leading expert on brand disasters, she has been featured in USA Today and other major publications.

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