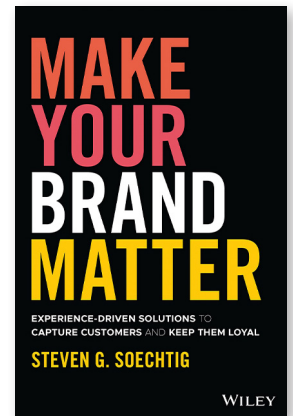


# Make Your Brand Matter

Experience-Driven Solutions to Capture Customers and Keep Them Loyal

by **Steven G. Soechtig**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

As we all know, the world changed with the Internet. Branding was no longer defined by the tag line. Capturing the attention of the consumer, and the business buyer, became significantly harder, bringing new channels, content courses, and buying behaviors that brands needed to understand. Then the smartphone came along and opened up remarkable new opportunities for businesses to build omnichannel engagement and connection strategies. This evolution and the shift in strategy that this technological revolution drove constitute the digital transformation era. Top performing brands are now emerging into the post-digital transformation era, leveraging their experience to shift from establishing their brand through messaging to establishing it through experience.

In *Make Your Brand Matter: Experience-Driven Solutions to Capture Customers and Keep Them Loyal*, author and brand expert Steven G. Soechtig uses detailed breakdowns of the journeys and strategies that top-performing brands have employed to illustrate what your brand can do to drive success in this new era. The lessons contained within will better prepare your brand to gain, retain, and strengthen the relationship you have with your customers.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to believe in your brand and redefine your strategy
- Lessons for selling experiences, not products
- How to collapse time for your customers to drive your brand forward
- The importance of humanizing the experience

### Emerging from the Digital Transformation Era

It's clear that we have entered an era beyond Digital Transformation. Outside of, perhaps, a remote yurt-based hospitality venture on the northern tip of Greenland, every brand has adopted digital engagement capability at some point in their customer journey, at some point in their employee enablement, and at some stage of their back-office process automation.

Most have adopted the fundamentals, and several have redefined their models to embrace the seismic shift in thinking over the past quarter century. These brands will be not only viable but successful as we look forward to the next 25 years.

More importantly, digital capabilities have become somewhat invisible. We can all recognize this in our daily lives. With the exception of truly forward-thinking and novel capabilities, we no longer notice digital capabilities; we expect them. If an experience isn't intuitive, seamless, and responsive, we have become conditioned to abandon the experience and look elsewhere.

The consumer no longer views the brand negatively—they simply move on and develop instant affinity for another brand. This phenomenon isn't unique and exclusive to consumer brands. Business buyers and employees alike expect a full complement of digital capabilities.

Given this fundamental change in expectation and perception, we can now declare the end of the digital transformation era. We've entered the post-digital transformation era, and brands, marketers, sellers, services, and employers must respond accordingly to capture and retain the attention and loyalty of the modern customer.

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### Believing in Your Brand and Redefining Your Strategy

The market will evaluate a brand across the entirety of the experience continuum, and unless every stage of the experience is aligned to the brand proposition, the one weak point in the experience chain will break the perception and lead to defection.

A perfect example of this is Starbucks, which creates a consistent experience from store to store that caters to the local and the traveler alike, bringing with it a sense of belonging, of community, and of serenity.

What has made Starbucks a success story is their continuous focus on digital transformation and the opportunities that data and interactivity provide to improve the experience that every patron receives.

After the 2008 recession, an internal incubator for digital technology was put together as part of the company's turnaround plan, which led to the launch of the first Starbucks mobile app in 2009. It leveraged an essential pillar of their brand experience strategy, convenience, to bring coffee ordering to a previously unimagined level.

The MyStarbucks app not only provided conveniences for the consumer, however. It also provided a wealth of data for Starbucks. They began tracking the buying habits of the consumer and, by encouraging the individual to fill out a profile with basic information, could start to create customer profiles and personas that would ultimately guide decisions from store locations to menus to in-store operations.

By the end of 2013, the stock had recovered all of its earlier losses and then some. They continue to drive growth and retain their dominance in the market, even during the COVID shutdown period when their business model should have absolutely cratered.

There are three critical lessons that can be learned from the Starbucks' story that will improve your brand experience and your connection to the customer. All three reinforce the importance of focus and dedication to the brand.

First, continuously validate your brand proposition and validate that your experiences, across every stage of the customer journey, reflect that proposition. Regardless of how strong the brand and experience strategy, and how clearly the team articulates that strategy, there's always a risk that the focus on that strategy is lower at the point of customer contact. For those brands that have a physical experience, it's equally critical to frequently visit those locations. Brand leaders should observe, visit, and talk to customers and employees, identifying opportunities for improvement and alignment.

Second, don't assume that digital enablement will hide a poor experience. Focus on the brand-experience alignment described earlier and recognize that digital platforms and technologies are an enabler.

Third, ensure your employees embrace your brand promise, as employees are the ultimate presentation of your experience. Getting employees to the point where they wholly un-

## This shift to an experience-led, digitally enabled strategy is paying dividends for all brands.

Understand and reflect the brand takes focus and investment, beginning with an understanding of the brand experience strategy and then instilling the value of that strategy. Employees need to feel that they are part of something bigger, they need to feel that they are making a positive difference, and they need to be rewarded for exceptional performance.

### Selling Experiences, Not Products

The challenge of branding has accelerated due to the shift in control away from the brand to the individual. Whereas, before, the brand and the channel controlled the narrative and the style of communication, now the individual has the ability to bounce between sites, between channels, and between feeds with a click.

The emerging generations are not emotionally triggered by the products, or even the brands, themselves. They are drawn to the experience of interacting with the brand, and the emotional response that the brand's experience evokes within them.

The well-known and admired global athletic brand, Nike, helps put a finer point on this. Nike followed similar strategies, transitioning from product focus to experience focus to remain relevant and dominant through the digital transformation era and into today's post-digital transformation time.

In the early days of their history, Nike built their brand on the concept of innovation and performance, tying themselves to great athletic performances and the contribution that the shoes had to the athlete's achievement. It was a brilliant and highly successful brand positioning platform. So as they moved toward the digital transformation era, Nike was in a good position.

They had a sound brand strategy, they had loyal followership, and they had innovative products. However, like many brands, they experienced a decline in business as the market began to change and commoditize. A contributor to the decline was the proliferation of brand messages, information, and options available to consumers through these newly emergent digital channels.

Nike recognized the need to redefine their brand strategy and shift to a model that emphasized the experience and not the product. The product, including shoes and other apparel, became the access point to the experience or the output of the experience, but no longer was the driver of engagement and growth.

Nike pivoted from product to experience through a series of digital solutions that addressed the ultimate need of its buyers: Get active, stay active, and perform at their highest level of athletic ability, regardless of sport or activity. Creating the fitness experience for Nike began by creating a community. Nike established an online presence early in 1996 and fast followed that launch with the rollout of their first commerce site in 1999.

They were early entrants to social media platforms as well, participating in some of the first online communities dedicated to topics of fitness and sports. In 2006, Nike launched its Joga campaign in parallel with the FIFA World Cup that year. It enabled users to create their own profiles, pick favorite players, choose teams and pitches, post their own photos and videos, and form global social networks with others to share, debate, and celebrate the heart and soul of football.

The brilliance of the strategy was that it in no way focuses on or emphasizes the Nike products. Instead, it creates an emotional connection with the consumer based on their passion for football. The experience was overtaking the product, and it naturally led to loyalty for the brand and its products through that experience. Even more cleverly, the initial rollout was available by invitation only, which created a sense of exclusivity.

As the digital transformation era evolved and social communities turned a bit stale, Nike continued to evolve and adjust in response. Nike recognized that as the digital transformation wave was starting to crest, consumers were shifting back to a desire for physical experience but one that included digital enablement and integration.

In response to this realization, in 2016, Nike made yet another splash by opening its flagship experience store in New York's Soho district. This was omnichannel experience at

a completely different level and as a result, the Nike brand continued to grow followership and loyalty, and Nike's revenues continued to increase.

This shift to an experience-led, digitally enabled strategy is paying dividends for all brands. A fluid mix of physical and digital components are designed to engage and delight the customer while meeting both known and unmet needs. Financial services brands, hospitality brands, manufacturing brands, all industries—need to embrace this strategy in order to retain the attention and commitment of their customer base.

There are three critical lessons we can learn from the Nike story that apply to all brand experiences looking to increase sales, engagement, and volume.

First, it's critical to understand who the customer is and what matters to the customer. When experiences are directed at both needs and emotional triggers, the effect on the customer and their progression through the journey accelerates dramatically. Your brand needs a conduit with your customer, through communities, social media platforms, surveys, and data, to learn what's most important to them.

Second, personalization is key, as it creates an emotional connection that far transcends the emotion generated by the product itself. There are several opportunities for brands to create emotion-evoking personalization, and it should be a priority to find the opportunity unique to each brand.

Third, leverage digital and data not in isolation, but as part of an integrated omnichannel strategy. Digital should enhance and compliment the physical experience, not replace it. The key is that the digital experience is so seamless and deeply integrated that it is invisible.

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### Time is the New Currency

The advent of digital introduced a new concept that has taken hold and become a critical value—the idea of collapsing time. As members of the modern society, we often talk about how there aren't enough hours in the day, how we never have time for desired activities, how we don't have time to think.

This need to be more efficient, to fit in more activity, and ultimately generate more output, in the same number of hours has been the primary driver of innovation. Every digital tool has been designed to collapse time in some form,

even if it's not the primary value proposition. Consumers and business customers alike will pay a premium to gain back time, whether that premium be in hard currency or in loyalty to the brand.

The evolution of commerce, be it the purchase of a physical product, subscription to a service, or engagement for a specific purpose, has now become a fully automated and seamless experience, with functional elements such as transparency, proactive notifications, preemptive processing, and location-based decisioning all helping to collapse time and benefit the customer. Amazon has embraced the idea of giving time back to the customer, focused on digital transformation and physical-digital multichannel optimization, and realized enormous returns as a result.

From the beginning, Bezos recognized the importance of convenience and the criticality of collapsing time. Early screenshots of the Amazon.com experience show content that emphasizes the value of Amazon's personal recommendations. Amazon.com was also one of the first sites to incorporate product search into the home page, so that all you needed to do was type in a title or an author and you'd get a short list of options that likely included what you were looking for. That was revolutionary technology at the time.

Bezos' vision extended far beyond books, remaining grounded on the idea of convenience and time savings in these early days. Amazon launched their Associates program, which allowed other retailers to market and sell their products on Amazon.com and it was an instant success. Amazon's Associates program allowed people to search one URL and find multiple products beyond books.

Amazon was relentless in its focus on saving time and introducing conveniences. In 1999, they introduced the idea of one-click purchasing, allowing customers to enter and save their shipping and payment information for future purchase.

This, together with the Amazon account data collected during account creation, allowed Amazon to start collecting browsing and purchasing habits, using the data to create a more personalized, convenient, and streamlined shopping experience. They set the standard for every other commerce experience, and differentiated their brand by collapsing time.

Their continued use of data to personalize the experience and anticipate needs are truly notable and established a standard of expectation that has penetrated the consciousness of today's generations.

As we move further into the 2020 decade, the value of time is set to increase further, and savvy brands will cash in on this trend.

There are four critical lessons we can learn from Amazon as you consider your brand experience strategy for the post-digital transformation era.

The first lesson is to continuously recognize and explore the opportunities to collapse time. Real value is generated when you think more innovatively about how to collapse time at every stage of the customer journey. Decompose every stage in the customer journey, from initial awareness through to loyalty, and evaluate how data can be used to personalize and streamline the experience.

Second, be transparent with the use of data. While you need to collect and leverage it, don't hide the fact that, as a brand, you're leveraging data to improve the experience. Establish a value construct with the customer, using time as a key component of value, which encourages customers to agree to share their information.

Third, extend the convenience to omnichannel, if physical experiences are part of your customer journey. Whether it is driven by the desire for social interaction that was highlighted during the years of the COVID pandemic lockdowns—the need to see, smell, and touch the products being evaluated, or the desire to have a complex, multidimensional evaluative conversation with an expert—generations are rediscovering the physical world, but they're doing it in different ways than before.

Finally, don't hesitate to trade time for money. The convenience of collapsed time within a brand experience drives more than just engagement and loyalty. People are willing to spend more to gain time back. As we move further into the 2020 decade, the value of time is set to increase further, and savvy brands will cash in on this trend.

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## Humanizing the Experience

There are many examples of brands that have recognized the unmet human need in the market, leveraging that understanding to capture outsized market share. Perhaps most notable in recent history is Apple, which as of the start of 2022 is the largest company when measured by

market capitalization. In fact, their market share surpasses the second largest company by over \$500 billion. That's a remarkable lead.

Apple reached this milestone by focusing on the human need—experience opportunity in every stage of growth and evolution.. They were, arguably, the first company to mix fashion and technology, addressing the human need to appear distinctive and fashion forward, which caused people to desire the product even during periods when quality was relatively low and the price point was high. Apple also built emotional excitement, sense of want, thorough experiential panache, and unending confidence, drawing on the same societal desire to be unique and part of the latest buzzworthy trend.

Apple established an experience that did more than express nonconformity—it expressed superiority, exclusivity, and, generally, a coolness factor that the PC industry, and eventually the smartphone and smartwatch industry, have been unable to match.

This continues to be a human need that is addressed each time you visit the Apple Store today, one of the few retail formats that still draws people in, and often maintains a line of people waiting to attend. People want to be part of the sleek, modern experience populated with “geniuses,” with products on display and available for exploration, and with associates walking around in black T-shirts and jeans. People want to be part of the environment and that experience.

There are five lessons that can be leveraged as you work to develop your human need-experience strategy.

First and foremost, it's critical to develop an understanding of your brand's target population and addressable market. Then you can separate members of this market into segments, with associated personas, that can be evaluated against your brand and product strategy. This allows your brand to focus its humanization efforts against these personas and their specific emotional triggers.

Second, it's important to map the entirety of the customer experience, recognizing that in the post-digital transfor-

mation era, the journey may not be linear. Customers will engage with the brand through a range of paths, equipped with information and a perspective that is already establishing their perception of your brand. It's critical to recognize the in-and-out nature of customer engagement today.

Third, use common design patterns and interaction models that are standard on digital platforms. It's critical to retain a distinct and unique identity and personalization for the experience to effectively define your brand position, but the tone and style can be unique even with fundamental methods of interaction that are commonplace.

Fourth, don't forget about the value of data. For now, data needs to replace human intuition, and analytics, enhanced by artificial intelligence, can help to profile the customer, anticipate the need, and tailor the interaction to make it even more natural.

Finally, don't lose sight of the overall brand strategy and how it aligns with experience strategy over time. There are many examples of brands that did a complete overhaul of their digital experience to reflect modern functionality or design standards, but in doing so, lost the style, tone, and visualization of the brand. It is jarring and frustrating to the customer if the voice and style completely shifts.

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### Connecting Your Customer with Your Cause

One of the most significant shifts in modern brand management has been the adoption and emphasis of corporate social responsibility. Brands today recognize that the modern consumer demands to know what the company stands for and how they articulate those values.

That has expanded to become an expectation that the brand is contributing to the betterment of society in some way, and customers look for transparency in action.

One example is The Body Shop, which from its founding in the U.K. in 1975 proudly declared that they do not test cosmetic products on animals, declaring it unethical. They went one to champion many animal protection causes worldwide, working with PETA, the RSPCA, and other worldwide organizations to promote a "more humane lifestyle" and champion the cause of not testing cosmetics on animals as a platform against animal cruelty more broadly.

They truly led from the front in terms of building a company, and a brand, around a cause, and they continue to

support this cause 50 years later.

The 2020s could be described as a time of alignment. Consumers today are looking to engage with brands, across industries and geographies, that express a vision and purpose that is meaningful to them.

In many ways, the customer relationship has shifted away from an emotional connection to the brand itself and toward an emotional connection with the brand's social cause. The shift has been dramatic and noticeable. According to a 2019 Aflac study, 77% of consumers are motivated to purchase from companies committed to making the world better.

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### Conclusion

In today's post-digital transformation era, it is important for your brand to define and articulate what your brand stands for in the world and how the brand is making a positive impact in the world in some way, shape, or form, but at the same time, this needs to be a cause that the company will embrace.

If your company only articulates the narrative and doesn't back it up with clear action, the power of social media and other real-time communication channels will expose the brand.

*Make Your Brand Matter* covers strategies that brands can employ to capture customer attention, drive customer commitment, and, ultimately, foster customer loyalty through experience strategies.

In this new post-digital transformation era, when it's impossible to predict when and how the customer will engage with your brand, adopting these strategies will likely have a positive effect on your marketing and sales key performance indicators (KPIs) across the customer funnel, engaging more customers to transact and commit, and, once converted, inspire those customers to both return to the brand and advocate for the brand in public forums.

The key is to recognize that your brand experience can never be static, as the moment you stop evolving your experiences, your brand starts descending into antiquity and irrelevance. Your market and your customer will continuously evolve, and the approaches and technology that they use to engage with you will continue to improve.

The pace of change that we experienced during the digital

transformation age will likely feel slow in comparison with what is coming in this newly emerging post-digital transformation age, and those brands that continue to evolve their experiences in response to the market, while remaining true to the brand's purpose, vision, and voice will emerge from this era stronger than ever.



Steven Soechtig currently serves as the Global CEO of Ogilvy Experience. He has worked at the intersection of brand and experience for over 20 years. At the start of the digital era, Steve was part of a small team that launched the digital agency Roundarch, which addressed the earliest questions around the impact of digital on brand and experience. Steve has also helped launch and lead two other software startups, Orchestria and Abiquo, and has served in leadership positions at Deloitte Digital and McKinsey & Company.

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