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Building consumer lifetime value through brand communications

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Abstract

Before consumers can buy a product, they must be aware that it exists. Studies point out that consumers exposed to a brand's promotion more frequently, develop high awareness, perceived quality through perception building steps that involve exposure, attention and interpretation. The resulting brand equity, like the concepts of brand and added value, has also been defined both in terms of the relationship between consumer and brand (consumer-oriented definitions), or as something that accrues to the brand owner (company-oriented definitions). However, marketers' intense efforts to brand building activities and message aimed at attracting and maintaining ongoing relationship between the consumer and the products results in the bombardment of the average consumer with messages which influence the consumer to try, repeat and sustain consumption. The consumer may become increasingly vulnerable and susceptible to indiscriminate consumption to the detriment of the consumer and ultimately the brand. Stretched to the limits, the effort to build consumer and customer lifetime value through brand communications could lead to loss of efficiency, effectiveness, profits, focus and to sub-optimisation. This could threaten the essence of brand communication. This paper presents the key antecedents and potential outcomes of brand communications from literature as they pertain to perception of quality, trust and commitment and brand loyalty, suggesting that brand communications is an antecedent of perception of quality which has a direct relationship with customer retention and results in consumer lifetime value. The objective used to guide the study is to examine the relationship between brand awareness, emotional value, and consumer retention for life (brand loyalty). The research would make available to marketing managers, additional information and ideas for managing brand objectives and field executions just as consumers would find information that would guide them in their selective exposure to advertising messages and marketing stunts and ultimately caution their appetite.

Keywords: Brand, Brand Communications, Brand awareness, Perception of Quality, Brand loyalty.

Introduction

The brand construct springs from the value of having a well-known brand, founded on the notion that the owner of the brand name can generate more money from branded products, as consumers believe that a product with a well-known name is better than products with less well-known names. Thus, branded (named) products are said to have equity. Brand equity has three basic components: consumer perception, negative or positive effects, and the resulting value (Aaker 1991, Ailawadi, Lehmann, Scott & Neslin 2003, Keller 2003). They assert that firstly and most importantly, brand equity is built by consumer perception (which includes both knowledge and experience) of a brand, thus suggesting that brand knowledge is a cause/antecedent of brand equity and that the perception that consumers hold about a brand could be either positive or negative. Branding is an effort to give a unique identity to the company's products and create emotional associations with consumers, thus an attempt to define the relationship between customers and brands produced the term 'brand equity'. According to Bloemer and Kasper (1998), brand loyalty implies that consumers bind themselves to products as a result of a deep-seated commitment. they rendered a distinction between repeat purchases and actual brand loyalty. In their research, Bloomer and Kasper (1998) assert that a repeat purchase behaviour "is the actual re-buying of a brand" and that loyalty is driven by "antecedents" or reason/fact occurring before the behaviour. That ''reason or fact" could be defined as brand equity expressed as awareness, image, perceptions and associations. According to cognitive psychology, brand equity lies in consumer's awareness of brand features and associations, which drive attribute perceptions. A strong brand name works as a credible signal of product quality for imperfectly informed buyers and generates price premiums as a form of return to branding investments. Product level brand measurement compares the price of a no-name or private label product to an "equivalent" branded product where the difference in price, assuming all things equal, is due to the brand (Aaker, 1996, Ailawadi, Lehmann, & Neslin 2003). Brand loyalty, according to Aaker (1991), refers firstly, to a constructive mindset toward a brand that leads to constant purchasing of the brand over time, and, secondly, to the attachment or commitment that a consumer has to a brand. Thirdly, he considers it as the consumer's decision to resist a shift to competitors. Also, Aaker refers to it as the consumer's perception of a particular product or brand name that is derived from the marketers' effort to create advertising aimed at attracting and maintaining ongoing relationship between the consumer and the products. Not surprisingly, most companies pay millions of dollars to marketing firms to develop the best and most attractive personality for a new product through cost-effective methods of mass communication, like television, radio, print, and online outlets. The agency creates ad campaigns to attract consumers to try the new product and begin the process of developing brand loyalty. However, the success of consumer value cannot be fully understood without carefully examining its sources and the contributing factors to the formation in the consumers' mind. They rendered a distinction between repeat purchases and actual brand loyalty. This study, therefore, seeks to contribute to other studies that have investigated brand, brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, brand association, brand equity and consumer life time value creation.

Brand

A brand is a conversation. Branding is an effort to give a unique identity to the company's products and create emotional associations with consumers where the brand is a set of associations that are linked to a product range, a division, or company. These associations reside in the memory of consumers and help them understand what the brand or company is, why it is potentially relevant to them, how it is different or similar to other products made by the company or competitors. Brand will be used in this paper as identity, as a bundle of attributes or as image tailored to the needs and wants of a target market via the marketing communications mix of product, price, place, and promotion.

Brand communications

Brand communication will be defined in this study as the way a product, a service or a company communicates with customers verbally and visually. It can be through television or other media advertisements such as event sponsorships, personal selling and product packaging to enable consumers to decipher between products and decide which one they like most and to help them with purchase decisions, marketing communications try to create a distinct image for the brand. This paper defines tools for brand communication as advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing and other marketing mix elements such as price, store image, distribution, advertising expenditure, price promotions or special deals with a view to determining the relationship between these and brand loyalty or consumer value formation.

Brand Awareness

Awareness is the customer's ability to recall and identify the brand under different conditions and to link the brand name, logo and symbols to particular associations in memory. It includes top-of-mind, brand dominance, brand knowledge, brand opinion measured by the first-mentioned brand in a category, consumers know what brand, logotype and name look like, consumers recognise the brand among other brands on the shelf and consumers know what the brand stands for. It is what customers have learned, felt, seen, and heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time. Keller proposed four main constructs, namely: brand identity, brand meaning, brand responses and brand relationships. These four constructs consist of six brand building blocks, which he assembled as a brand pyramid. The basic premise of the model is that the power of a brand lies in what customers learned, felt, saw and heard about the brand over time (Keller, 1993).

Perceived quality

Perceived quality is defined as the consumer's perception of the overall quality of a product or service with respect to its intended purpose. Perception of quality in the consumer's context is not technical but perceptions about the products that are both tangible and intangible qualities, that the consumer observes. It could be positive or negative.

Brand loyalty

Aaker (1991) says that loyalty is a direct measure of how willing customers are to stick to the products or services bearing brand names and is related to the value invested on it by customers and consumers, and often expressed in repeat purchase and market share. It is a measure of the strength of consumers' attachment to a brand.

Review of Literature

Aaker (1996) highlights the strategic importance of understanding brand personality to the study of consumer perceptions and attitude toward the brand, to guide brand strategists in their communication effort and brand identity creation. Brand names help consumers identify the source of a product, specific attributes and key benefits of the product to the consumer. It is important to understand what consumers assess when developing an impression of a brand, as a positive impression towards these factors may lead a consumer to loyalty. In the following general discussion of the concepts, it will be seen that the management of consumer brand value and life time retention is an intricate, continuous, planned and long-term strategy, which aims at increasing consumer confidence in the brand. That is, consumers assign a certain value to a brand based upon their personal perception of the brand. One of view of brand communication is the way a product, a service or a company brand communicates with customers verbally and visually. It is a conversation through television or other media advertisements such as event sponsorships, personal selling, advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, product packaging and other marketing mix elements (Aaker 1991, Keller, 2003) to enable consumers to decipher between products, decide which one they like most and to help them with purchase decisions. Brand communications attempts to create a distinct image for the brand through advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing and other marketing mix elements with the objectives of helping consumers to process/retrieve information, differentiate the brand, generate a reason to buy, create positive attitudes/feelings, and provide a basis for extensions. To better understand the process of preference, let's first look at a basic communications model such as the Mathematical Theory of Communication also known as Shannon and Weaver (1948) Communication Model. The five components of this model are sender, medium, filter, receiver, and feedback. Lavidge and Steiner (1961) profer six steps that the consumer climbs from gaining awareness to purchase or take some form of action. Diffusion of innovations theories of mass communication have always focused on the cause and effects notion, the effects of the media and the process leading to those effects, on the audience's mind. Shannon's model of communication:

- **Source**: Shannon calls this element the "information source," which produces a message or sequence of messages to be communicated to the receiving terminal.
- **Sender**: Shannon calls this element the transmitter,
- **Channel**: For Shannon, the channel is merely the medium used to transmit the signal from transmitter to receiver.
- **Receiver**: For Shannon, the receiver performs the inverse operation of that done by the transmitter, reconstructing the message from the signal.
- **Destination**: For Shannon, the destination is the person (or thing) for whom the message is intended.
- **Message**: from Latin *mittere,* to send. The message is a concept, information, communication, or statement that is sent in a verbal, written, recorded, or visual form to the recipient.

Harold Lasswell (1948) in "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society", succinctly expressed this idea around the "Who says what in what channel to whom with what effects?", explaining that Some kinds of communication, on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people, under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects. Lasswell stated that the "Who" referred to "control analysis", the "Says What" referred to "content analysis", the "In Which Channel" referred to "media analysis", the "To Whom" referred to "audience analysis", and the "With What Effect" referred to "effect analysis" or feedback analysis**.**This explains the role played by advertising and the other tools in marketing communications mix such as personal selling, the point of sales. The intended effect or destination, for brands, should be retained consumers for life.

On a daily basis, we are exposed to messages via our radio, television, billboards, internet, mail, and word-of-mouth. Although these messages are pervasive, we continually screen out (perceptual screen) or ignore content that has little or no relevance to us. All messages are coded patterns and sensations – colors, sounds, odors, shapes, etc. Those messages deemed recognizable, as a basis for a relationship, are decoded and stored in our memory (filter/screen). A successful convergence between sender and receiver will result in some type of response to a brand's compelling message (feedback), Shannon and Weaver (1948). Shultz and Barnes (1999) say stored experiences in our long-term memory are connected through a series of nodes and networks. This node and connection process, called spreading activation, makes every person different. Since we all have different experiences, connections, and relationships, this supports a theory that the consumer, not the organization, owns the brand (Shultz and Barnes, 1999). Connecting with the consumer is a sure way to exchange of value between the brand and the consumer, thus securing the consumer for life. Advertising is recognized as a powerful means of creating strong, favourable and unique brand associations eliciting positive judgment and feelings (Keller, 2003), perceived advertising intensity may, therefore, influence loyalty to brand. The increase of perceived advertising intensity would mean that consumers are more often exposed to advertising messages aiming to create awareness and associations. Any break in communication could have significant negative influence on corporate goals and objectives. According to Keller, a firm’s real value lies in the minds of potential buyers discerned through market research and appropriated through strategic investments in communications and market education. Customer loyalty offers several benefits: it creates entry barriers for competing brands; makes it possible to charge higher prices; gives the company time to react on competitor's innovations; and also function as a buffer in times of intensive price- competition (Aaker, 1996). A major effect or consequence of brand communication is Brand awareness or brand knowledge which refers to the customer’s ability to recall and recognize the brand under different conditions and to link the brand name, logo and symbols to particular associations in memory, measured by top-of-mind, brand dominance. Aaker (1996) conceptualizes brand awareness as that which must precede brand associations, where a consumer must first be aware of the brand in order to develop a set of associations. Brands vary in the amount of power and value they have in the marketplace. At one extreme are brands that are not known by most users while on the other, there are brands for which buyers have a fairly high degree of brand awareness hence brand awareness is created by ongoing visibility, enhancing familiarity and powerful associations with related offerings and buying experiences (Keller, 1998). A brand with strong brand recall (unaided awareness) and top of mind can affect customers’ perceptions and lead to different consumer choices inside a product category (Aaker, 1996). Accordingly, perceived quality can be defined as the overall perception of consumers about the brilliance and quality of products and corporate brands (Aaker 1991). Brand quality perception is closely related to brand image. Researchers say brand image is mainly influenced by the organization’s presented brand as consumers employ a product’s brand image in deriving overall perceptions of the specified product. According to them, brand image has three contributing sub-images – that of the maker (corporate image), of the product, and of the users. They point out that brand image could come from a variety of sources, including consumer experience, marketing communications and/or word of mouth, essentially, any information encountered in association with the brand can become linked to the brand name in memory, and thus become part of the brand’s image (Biel 1992, Keller, 1993, Romaniuk and Sharp, 2003). Scholars assert that brand image could be a set of associations which is significant to the consumers, meaning that brand image is closely related to the uniqueness of a particular product classification. Usually, a product with the higher brand image may be inferred by consumers as a product of superior quality and value. Consequently, customer’s behaviour will be affected and determined by brand image while the inputs to brand image are perceived quality, brand attitudes, perceived value, feelings, brand associations, and attitude toward advertising. Greater amount of advertising is thus related to brand awareness and positive brand association, advertising is positively related to brand loyalty because it reinforces brand related associations and attitudes towards the brand (Shimp, 1997).

Zeithaml (1988) suggests that where intrinsic cues are not available, extrinsic ones are used though they ultimately have the outweighing effect on repeat purchase decisions. Pricing of products is shown to also have a heavy implication on perceived quality, especially when consumers don’t have information through experience on the intrinsic quality of a specific product. Furthermore, especially when a brand is unknown to consumers or when the risk of making a poor purchasing decision is high, price is a leading cue for high quality products (Zeithaml,1988). Therefore, price perception is essential as previous studies have found that price perception is dependent on various cultural characteristics (Meng, 2011). As a fundamental concept, literature suggests that there are four attributes affecting perceived quality: the *perception* process, the *product* or product group, the *place*/context/situational factors, and finally the *person* or personal factors.

Consumer-based equity occurs when a consumer is already familiar with a brand and has already developed some favourability and/or strong associations with the brand (Keller, 1993). This brings into the equation, the implications for sales, market share, profits due to effective brand management, and its consequences to the formation of brand value. This means that brand description or brand strength is related to the value invested on it by customers and consumers, and often expressed in repeat purchase and market share. It is what customers have learned, felt, seen, and heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time. It is a valuable source of competitive advantage for a company. Simon and Sullivan (1993) define brand equity regarding cash flow differences between a scenario where the brand name is added to a company product and another scenario where the same product does not have a brand name. Hellier et al. (2003) defined brand preference as the extent to which the consumer favors the designated product provided by his or her present company, in comparison to the designated service provided by other companies in his or her consideration set.

From these definitions, brand equity is the value incrementality due to a brand name, the ability to increase, repeat and grow. Brand resonance is posited to result from a sequence of steps, a process in which each step is contingent on successfully achieving the previous step. All the steps involve accomplishing certain objectives with customers both existing and potential. In short, brand resonance stresses the importance of understanding the cognitive and affective consequences of brand relationships, how consumers think, feel, and act to guide research and planning for marketers. It also emphasizes a hierarchy in brand development and the importance of sequential steps in brand building (Keller, 2012). Some proponents of the financial perspective define brand equity as the incremental cash flows which accrue to branded products over unbranded products (Simon & Sullivan, 1993). For that reason, some researchers have built up conceptualization of brand equity based on five factors: value, performance, social image, attachment and trustworthiness (Lassar, 1995).

Few empirical research attempts to understand or measure the process of brand equity formation over time. Simon and Sullivan, (1993), suggest that brand equity can be estimated by subtracting the utility of physical attributes of products from the total utility of a brand. Advertising is a powerful means of creating strong, favorable and unique brand associations eliciting positive judgment and feelings therefore, influence brand equity and result in loyalty to brand (Keller, 2003). Brand loyalty is created by the drivers of brand knowledge – brand Communications, brand awareness, brand image, brand association and perception of quality. It is difficult for customers to make a rational judgment of the quality. A brand is any label that carries meaning and associations, and a great brand lends coloration and resonance to a product or service (Kotler, 2003). Brand equity is the incremental utility or value added to a product by its brand name, like a Coke, Levi's, Kodak and Nike. Aaker (1991) defines brand loyalty as a situation which reflects how likely a customer will be to switch to another brand, especially when that brand makes a change, either in price or product features. Keller (2003) on the other hand, examines brand loyalty under the term brand resonance which refers to the nature of the customer-brand relationship and the extent to which customers feel that they are in sync with the brand. Customers, with true brand resonance, have a high degree of loyalty, actively seek means to interact with the brand and share their experiences with others. Brand loyalty is a term used to describe the tendency that consumers have to stick with the products or services bearing brand names they know and trust. Therefore, a favorable connection between a company and its customers is lucrative for the business. Aaker (1991) pointed out that a strong brand depends on brand awareness as well as being a primary factor for building brand loyalty (Keller, 1993).

Communication Theories and Models

According to Chang, Hsu and Chung (2008), research provides empirical support for the integrated brand equity model. First, marketing managers can create brand equity by managing the two independent constructs (brand attitude, brand image). Karthikeyan. & Karthikeyan.(2013) introduced a communication model highlighting five components of sender, medium, filter, receiver, and feedback. Consumers on a daily basis, are exposed to messages (sender/medium) via our radio, television, billboards, Internet, mail, and word-of-mouth. Although these messages are pervasive, we continually screen out (perceptual screen) or ignore content that has little or no relevance to us. All messages are coded patterns and sensations – colors, sounds, odors, shapes, etc. Those messages deemed recognizable, or a basis for a relationship, are decoded and stored in our memory (filter/screen). A successful convergence between sender and receiver result in some response (feedback). Since we all have different experiences, connections, and relationships, this supports a theory that the *consumer*, not the organization, owns the brand. Creating customer loyalty is neither strategic nor tactic; rather, it is the ultimate objective and meaning of brand equity. Roberts (2014), in a discursive paper that surveyed recent literature about brand loyalty as it applies to the marketing imperatives in 2015, wrote that brand loyalty is an important matter to get right in the face of brand proliferation, product parity, innovation in consumer technology and connectivity, and a bewildering array of media formats and customer communication mediums. He makes the case that emotion is the primary driver of loyalty, whether the context is designing new loyalty benefits, architecting a new mobile interface, or creating a cause marketing program to burnish reputation and proposed ways and means by which brands can communicate to achieve a state Saatchi & Saatchi refers to as 'Loyalty Beyond Reason. He framed the debates around the questions: Is loyalty a program – or an emotional connection? Can brands still even win loyalty? Or have people become 'brand-promiscuous' – playing the field like time-starved, tech-accelerated insects that flit to the prettiest blue light? The building blocks are awareness creation, which if done well, will generate affection, good affection may generate curiosity that triggers the desire to try, in the hope that the appropriate level of satisfaction is delivered will result in a commensurate degree of trust and commitment to repetitive actions. The opportunity to stand out is massive for brands that deliver big on emotion. Distribution matters intensely. The reason that repeat purchase is hard is that it means delivering what matters most to people in a particular space, every time, with an experiential, emotional interface, be it an empathetic screen anticipating your every next question and instinct, or an aisle which provides some delight or decent signposting. Lisa Wood, in a study of 'Brands and brand equity: definition and management' surmised that the difference between a brand and a commodity can be summed up in the phrase "added values". That is, a brand is something additional to a commodity product. More importantly, they suggest that brands and added value are synonymous. Added value agents such as brands provide benefits for the consumers that are sufficient to create purchases. That is, a brand is a mechanism for achieving competitive advantage for firms, through differentiation (purpose). The attributes that differentiate a brand provide the customer with satisfaction and benefits for which they are willing to pay (mechanism). Lisa Wood in summary discussion and conclusions, writes that the marketing mix should function in a way that supports the brand message, suggesting that the management of brands should be a higher level function than currently exists in many companies. A brand extension means using a brand name successfully established for one segment or channel to enter another one in the same broad market. Brand stretching means transferring the successful brand name to quite a different market.

Iivo Stojanov (2012) in this study writes that a product with higher brand image may be inferred by consumers as product of superior quality and value. Brand image conveys emotional value and not just a mental image. Brand image is nothing but an organization's character. It is the manner in which a specific brand is positioned in the market. Brand images can be strengthened using brand communications like advertising, packaging, word of mouth publicity and other promotional tools. Benefits are the rationale for the purchase decision. There are three types of benefits: Functional benefits - what do you do better (than others), emotional benefits - how do you make me feel better (than others), and rational benefits/support - why do I believe you (more than others). When the consumers purchase the product, they are also purchasing its image. Positive brand image enhances the goodwill and brand value of an organization. Producers may change their marketing tactics, invest more into advertisement, change packaging, etc. However, commonly creating strong and effective extrinsic cues for a product such as a trusted brand name is considerably more difficult than altering the product itself. Nevertheless, in situations where competitive products are very similar in physical appearance, extrinsic cues play a more central role. Objective quality is also referred to as mechanistic quality, where the characteristics or features of a product or service on the market are examined through objective criteria. In this sense however, the expression of 'objective quality' may be misleading, as the evaluative methods have shown to vary greatly. Crentsil Kofi Agyekum, Huang Haifeng, Amma Agyeiwaa (2015), assert that consumers decision to purchase a product will be influenced to a large extent by the attribute which the successful marketer is able to give or lend to the product through advertising, packing, Manufacturing, Country of origin and other promotional techniques which in a way determine product quality. Branding or brand name is a trade mark which though a carefully management, skilful promotion and wide use, come in the minds of consumers to embrace a particular set of values and attributes both tangible and intangible. Jagdish N. Sheth and C. Whan Park attempted to liberating the construct of brand loyalty from the restrictions of repeated overt behaviour. We do not limit brand loyalty to situations where a behavioural response in terms of buying the brand is necessary to measure brand loyalty. Consumers may be brand loyal even though they may have never bought the brand or the product. In short, it is conceivable that brand loyalty may arise by learning from information, imitative behaviour, generalization and consumption behaviour and not from buying behaviour experiences. We believe that the emotive tendencies are learned by the consumer either from prior experiences with the brand or from non-experiential or informational services. The examples of emotive tendencies include the strong emotional stereotypes or brand imageries which researchers talk about as commonly prevalent among consumers. The behavioural-evaluative-emotive brand loyalty largely arise from the reinforcement learning of repetitive buying or consuming experiences. It is also likely to arise from the informational sources. Delisia R. Matthews, Junghwa Son and Kittichai Watchravesringkan (2014) said that as the marketplace becomes more competitive, new options make the decision-making process more complex for consumers and one factor, however, that helps consumers make decisions are brand names. The results of the study regarding this factor shows that a consumer having knowledge of a certain brand does not necessarily mean the consumer will have an emotional connection to the brand. Thus, the retailer must do more than just carry a brand that has high brand awareness to invoke an emotional value in the consumer for the brand. For instance, in addition to carrying a popular brand, a retailer may want to provide additional information about the history of the brand, sustainability efforts, or corporate social responsibility of the brand.

Conclusion

From the literature reviewed, there is consensus that branding plays a central role in building loyalty for brands. Brand loyalty begins with the customers becoming aware of the product and gaining commitment and acceptance towards the brand. The more the customer is aware of the brand, the greater the possibility that she/he will purchase/use the brand and brand image stems from all of a consumer's consumption experiences. Aaker's (1996) thoughts on brand equity can be summed into loyalty based on brand's real or potential price premium, loyalty based on customer satisfaction, perceived comparative quality, perceived brand leadership, perceived value based on functional benefits, personality, consumers perception of organization as trusted, admired or credible, perceived differentiation to competing brands, awareness based on recognition & recall, market position based on market share, prices and distribution coverage. Hence, a strong brand with positive brand equity has several advantages such as consumer preference and purchase intention, larger market share, favourable consumer perceptions of product quality, larger profit margins, increased marketing communication effectiveness, great loyalty and the ability of consumers to resist price changes. Keller (1993) considers brand knowledge as brand awareness, brand image, brand association and perceptions. This also implies that brand awareness determines brand loyalty. Aaker (1996) conceptualizes brand awareness as something that must precede brand associations. Brand awareness also precedes brand image, where a consumer must first be aware of the brand in order to develop a set of associations and perceptions. Brand associations contain the meaning of the brand for consumers (Keller, 1993). Brand associations, created through marketing communications, consist of all brand-related thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, beliefs, attitudes (Kotler & Keller, 2006, p. 188) and is anything linked in memory to a brand. Usually, a product with the higher brand image may be inferred by consumers as a product of superior quality and value. Aaker (1991) asserts that brand image is a set of associations which is significant to the consumers, meaning that brand image is closely related to the uniqueness of a particular product and, consequently, consumers's behaviour will be affected and determined by it (Burmann 2008). Therefore, brand awareness created by ongoing visibility, enhancing familiarity and powerful associations with related offerings and buying experiences (Keller, 1998) is a sine qua non to building consumer value and gaining consumers for life.

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