The Differences Between Frequent Purchasers and Fiercely Loyal Consumers

THE PROBLEM

One of the goals of every Chief Marketing Officer is to increase customer loyalty. But what does this mean exactly? Usually, customer loyalty is conceptualized in terms of repeat purchase behavior. If a consumer buys the same brand over and over again, they are deemed loyal. However, this view of loyalty encompasses two very different types of consumers: those who are stuck with a brand and those who love a brand.

Consumers who are stuck with a brand may buy the brand repeatedly, but will only do so as long as there is no better alternative. In contrast, consumers who love a brand will purchase the brand repeatedly regardless of the other options available. Consumers who love a brand may view it as a way of expressing themselves, or even as a friend. They may experience passionate emotions, a strong commitment, and a sense of fit between the brand and themselves. These consumers will also actively advocate the brand to others and defend the brand if it is criticized. In other words, these consumers are fiercely loyal to the brand.

Researchers at the Georgetown Institute for Consumer Research set out to understand how they were different from consumers who merely purchase a brand repeatedly without feeling any attachment to the brand.

The researchers presented participants with descriptions of two brand types. The first—Frequently Bought (FB)—referred to brands that consumers habitually purchase. The second—Extremely Loyal (EL)—referred to brands that consumers feel a great deal of loyalty toward. The participants were then asked to list either an FB brand, or an EL brand. Participants then rated the extent to which they felt various positive (e.g., happy, love, excited) and negative emotions (e.g., disgusted, irritated, hate) for their brand and the main competitor of the brand. In addition, participants rated the extent to which they believed various statements about the brand (e.g., “This brand has unique features not present in other brands”) and their attitude toward the brand (e.g., “I like the personality of this brand.”).

FINDINGS

Participants in the EL condition showed a big split in their positive and negative emotion levels; they reported high levels of positive emotions toward their brand, and high levels of negative emotions toward the main competitor of their brand (Figure 1). Moreover, these participants reported high levels of agreement with statements that represented positive beliefs and attitudes toward their brand (Figure 2). In contrast, the FB participants didn’t feel strong positive emotions toward their brand, or strong negative emotions toward the competing brand. Moreover, they had low levels of agreement with the belief and attitude statements.
Beyond emotions, beliefs, and attitudes, EL and FB participants also differed in terms of a variety of behaviors. Participants who were thinking of an EL brand were vastly more likely to champion the brand to others compared to participants who were thinking of an FB brand. When asked, “How likely is it that you would recommend this brand to a friend or colleague?” 71% of the EL participants said they would be extremely likely to do so. However, only 19% of the FB participants gave the same ratings. In keeping with this notion of being brand champions, EL participants were far more likely (than FB participants) to advocate the merits of their brand if other brands were being discussed, and were more willing to wear clothing that displayed their brand.

Moreover, EL participants were more likely continue to purchase their brand if it was accused of allegedly engaging in harmful labor practices and defend their brand if it did “something bad (for e.g., produce a product with defects, harm the environment in some way, etc.).” Finally, the FB participants were much more likely to agree that they would consider another brand if it was inconvenient to purchase their brand, or if another brand was cheaper.

Thus, fiercely loyal consumers differ in their emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors from frequent purchasers. So as the Chief Marketing Officer, should you be seeking to get consumers to merely purchase your brand repeatedly, or should you be seeking fiercely loyal consumers? While they may seem similar in terms of their purchase behavior, these findings suggest that fiercely loyal consumers should be greatly valued as they will not only continue to purchase your brand, but champion and defend your brand as they would a loved one.

Key Points

- Usually, customer loyalty is conceptualized in terms of repeat purchase behavior.
- Fiercely loyal consumers differ in their emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors from frequent purchasers.
- Fiercely loyal consumers should be greatly valued as they will not only continue to purchase your brand, but also champion and defend your brand.