

WHITE PAPER

# A Marketer's Utopia: Product Experiences That Build Brand Value. Own It.

by **Ed Holme**



If you want to build brand value, you have to create brand-value-building product experiences. But before we examine this awesome marketer responsibility, take a moment and answer one question:

When does the product experience begin?

I ask this because the experience begins earlier than most people think. And that answer is vital to this discussion.

Most people think the experience begins when a customer first starts using the product, which is truthful in a literal sense. Nonetheless, this answer isn't correct. In fact, many other physical and psychological / emotional experiences likely have occurred well before the first product use.

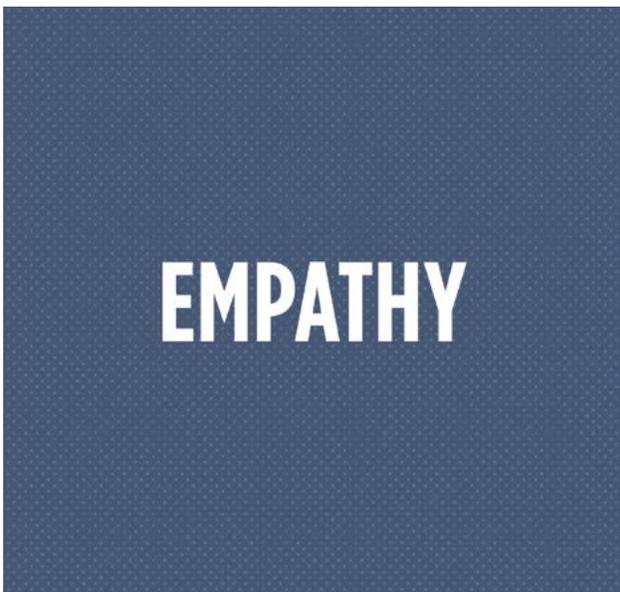
Physical experiences may include your customer being present when a friend uses the product. Or, when an end user touched and examined the product in the store. Perhaps he or she

viewed a product demonstration on TV or the internet. These are direct product experiences that have engaged your target's physical senses.

Harder to quantify, but no less real, are the psychological / emotional experiences people have with products before or during the physical experience. These are experiences of the mind through more indirect stimuli. Similar to the imagined experiences we go through when "dreaming" about what it would be like to own and use a particular product, they are the perceptions our mind creates that are stored and remembered.

"I wish you had been here," sighs one friend to another, proceeding to describe in mouthwatering detail the delicious Swiss chocolate truffles she gorged on the night before. The listener, imagining the experience, lets slip a Pavlovian drool. That is a product experience. As is the visceral experience created in a person's mind of that equipment they will splurge on one day, when they can finally pursue their favorite pastime. That commercial stove for a refurbished country kitchen, the perfectly balanced fly fishing rod for weekends in Montana, the pro-quality table saw for a workshop, or that growling roadster for the open highway. Whatever the desire happens to be, the customer has experienced—emotionally—the accompanying product integral to the dream.

Brand awareness begins at the first point of exposure to the brand name—however encountered. Brand experience is the effect that exposure and future interactions have on a person. Product experience is tightly knit within the brand awareness / experience spectrum, but also has a life of its own. As a marketer, it is your job to acknowledge that path of product experience and include it as you travel the six stages of employing it.



Here are the six stages of employing brand-value-building product experiences that will help marketing professionals secure customers for life.

**Understand.** Comprehend and communicate your brand.

**Imagine.** Facilitate imagination of each product experience stage.

**Design.** Intentionally craft each product experience stage.

**Validate.** Test and refine product experience design ideas.

**Deliver.** Release your products to market, mindful of all stages.

**Receive.** Stand in the shoes of your end user and receive every product experience.

Let's examine each of these from a marketer perspective. You, being the expert brand voice, are ultimately responsible for the brand-value-building product experiences.

## Understand

First and foremost, you must understand and be the source of knowledge about your brand. You must be able to clearly communicate to your development team the **5 P's of your brand: Purpose, Pillars, Positioning, Personality and Value Propositions**. Then help them understand these elements in the context of the product they are developing.

Second, you must understand the target user for whom the product is being designed. Through varying forms of research your design team can discover and prioritize the correct feature set and interfaces. Also, they'll learn about challenges / problems with existing products. But ultimately, it is you who needs to bring the end user mindset, attitudes, behaviors, and motivations to the table. You must understand how your existing and target end users think, feel, and act, and how they respond and engage with visual images, verbal messages, and sensory cues. If you have more than one target user "persona," treat them as individual end users, developing a strategy for each.

Third, be sure you understand your end users' journey. From initial need-state to research and consideration, to evaluation, to decision and purchase, to receipt and through product life cycle use. It's vital to gain this knowledge before the next stage—"Imagine." Search each point along the journey for an opportunity to deliver a brand-value-building product experience. And note, **if you are not building value at each point, you might just be eroding value.**

## Imagine

At this point good marketers assume the mantle of facilitator and evaluator.

Using your brand expert status and in-depth knowledge of your target end user, facilitate creative brainstorming and role playing for each phase of your end user's journey. The team you lead should include out-of-the-box thinkers, realists, and experienced users—to name a few. Address each phase from initial need-state and research, all the way through product life cycle use.

Paint the picture of each phase in words and images. Consider recreating the environment where these phases might happen. The goal is to place your participants in the shoes of your end user persona at each point, and inspire them to imagine which product experiences might be most meaningful and valuable to them. If your new product is a washer / dryer combo, visit appliance retailers with your team when they are immersed in the consideration phase. Then take them to a Lowe's and ask them to switch over to the evaluator mindset and confine them to two brands. During these moments, what is the ideal experience with your product to best build value in your brand?

Document your efforts closely. Have tablets for taking notes, photos, and videos. Allow the team to build on each others' ideas. Though this will likely take multiple sessions, this creative thinking is invaluable. It brings to life opportunities

for creating meaningful product experiences in a way desk work can't.

Evaluation of ideas that are born can be done with a smaller, core team. Your evaluation consists of filtering each idea through your brand's five P's and your close understanding of your target end user—their feelings, attitudes, behaviors, and motivations. When finished, send the most viable ideas to your design team for conceptual development.

## Design

The focus that you as marketer bring to this design stage runs parallel to product design, but has a broader perspective. Again, a product experience is not just about using the product after purchase. Other, less tangible experiences are also your concern and need to be intentionally designed as much as possible.

At every touchpoint on the end user journey, challenge your design teams to think about the experience they will create through their design as they consider form, function, ergonomics, human factors, impression, perception, and communication. About how that experience needs to be one that brings value attributed to the brand.

You are the expert brand voice in the room. You are your brand's champion.



“  
THERE'S A WAY TO  
DO IT BETTER—FIND IT.

”

THOMAS EDISON

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## Validate

As the conceptual product experiences start to take shape in verbal descriptions, two-dimensional images, and three-dimensional forms, it becomes time to validate what you're doing. This stage of testing and refinement is important for honing the designs to truly deliver the required experiences.

A number of research methods are available depending on your product category and availability of qualified participants. The key is to make sure that not only product designs are validated, but also the reactions and feelings your participants exhibit as they go through each experience.

Once again, evaluate these through the filter of your brand. Is the value of your brand increased in your target user's mind through the presented experiences? Does the experience positively impact their perception of your brand? How? Why? To what effect?

Keep refining all this input until the total product experience is where it needs to be. One that will build brand value when developed, executed, and delivered.

## Deliver

This is the marketers' realm. Delivering branded products to market in all their finery. Trumpets blaring. Fanfare. Excitement. Applause. The assumption of this paper is that you

know what you're doing in this phase. This is your wheelhouse. You're in control and the process works.

Just remember that your purview has widened. The product experience may well start sooner than you previously contemplated, so monitoring and evaluating the success of your delivery becomes a broader task. Which brings us to the final element—Receive.

## Receive

As proposed in the title, marketers need to own the product experience. Now that it is delivered into the marketplace, responsibility and accountability for success and tangible increases in brand value lie squarely in your lap. This is true at every touchpoint with your target end user: initial need-state, research and consideration, evaluation, decision and purchase, receipt and product life cycle use.

To maximize your success and confirm the efficacy of the designed experiences, you now will take the final step. Put yourself in your target end users' shoes. Feel what they feel. Think what they think. Embrace their mindset and adopt their attitude. In other words, receive the product experiences yourself.

You alone are equipped with the comprehensive knowledge to objectively experience, as an end user, the brand-value-building product experiences your teams have imagined, designed, and delivered. From A to Z, experience, appreciate, and evaluate each one.

And now? Start all over where the initial need state is once again identified at a critical point during life cycle use. Be there. Thinking about it. Anticipating it. And creating the next evolution of brand-value-building product experiences.

This is the major key. The process that will help you secure your customers for life. Your purpose.



### MEET ED

*Since joining BOLTGROUP in 1994, Ed's experience in brand strategy, research, and sales and marketing has been instrumental in building high-value client relationships through the strategic alignment of their needs and goals with BOLTGROUP's expertise to maximize our impact on their business.*