

Are You Not Entertained? Exploring the Increasing Importance of Entertainment in Developing Relationships with Customers

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Entertainment as a means of gaining attention, attraction and affecting emotions is not novel. Entertaining is at the heart of the arts and many aspects of culture that we hold dear. Participating in an act or performance for the simple sake of being entertained is hedonistic and, in many ways, illogical; however, without entertainment, many would consider their lives to be incomplete.

Entertainment has been used as part of the function of many organizations. For example, we have Entertailing, which combines Entertainment in a Retailing environment [1,2]; Edutainment, which incorporates Entertainment into Education [3,4], and Advertainment, where Entertainment is used as the primary means of Advertising one's products [5]. So, why not take an approach to business that is based on entertainment?

We know that operations can be entertaining, but there is a fundamental difference between having an entertaining business and purposefully making a business that is entertaining. We recently undertook research into the use of branded entertainment, which specifically looks at how some brands are drawing on entertainment as the primary means of engaging with customers. Therefore, can entertainment create a social contract between customers and producers, which encourages an improved relational bond and subsequent sales?

There is this fear, perhaps, that by being 'fun' it would be difficult to be taken seriously as a business. If a firm cannot be taken seriously, how likely are you to invest your time and funds into a firm? Perhaps this is just the realm of kooky creative houses that produce quirky advertisements. Or, perhaps, there exists an opportunity to build such a bond with one's customers and employees that using entertainment may become fundamental to one's entire existence.

In the same way that Social Contracts create a bond between businesses and society in an attempt to encourage ethical operations [6] why not see entertainment creating a similar social contract between a business and its stakeholders? So, rather than a business focusing on attracting and retaining customers by maximizing a their personal economic utility, a business would be able to engage better with customers, retain them, and encourage repeat business by being entertaining and fun. In this sense, every business could, legitimately, be considered to be in the entertainment industry.

A cold, transactional exchange, that is commonplace between customers and businesses, can be an effective business model [7]. However, from our research, we have been able to show that some customers engaged more with business and built a sense of friendship and relationship with a brand as a result of being entertained by them. This ability to garner a sense of affection and closeness between an inanimate brand and a customer can be likened to how businesses are able to develop a relational connection with its stakeholders, through its marketing operations [8]. However, beyond simply an affectionate relational approach, we also saw a growing respect for the brand from customers that had been entertained. In this way, although some businesses fear the idea they may be seen as frivolous, being entertained has the ability to foster respect and admiration from customers.

We operate in a business environment that harbours cynical consumers and breaking consumer cynicism is no easy task [9]. However, building a relationship with consumers built on fun, and equality, respect, can dually break down this cynicism and build closer ties with one's customers. In the same way that some businesses are operating with a new dominant logic based on serving customers [10], could we not equally see a dominant logic that is based on entertaining customers?

The cynical consumer is becoming tired of the normality and mundanity of business operations that focuses so heavily on gaining their trust and subsequently, their cash. Introducing an element of entertainment into one's business operations can be a way to break away from a banal *modus operandi* and begin to build a more attentive and more loyal customer base. Of course, encouraging one to be entertaining is far easier said than done and may be viewed as a risky move for many businesses. However, we propose that this could be a risk that would have positive results. People love to be entertained, so why not mix business and entertainment?

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