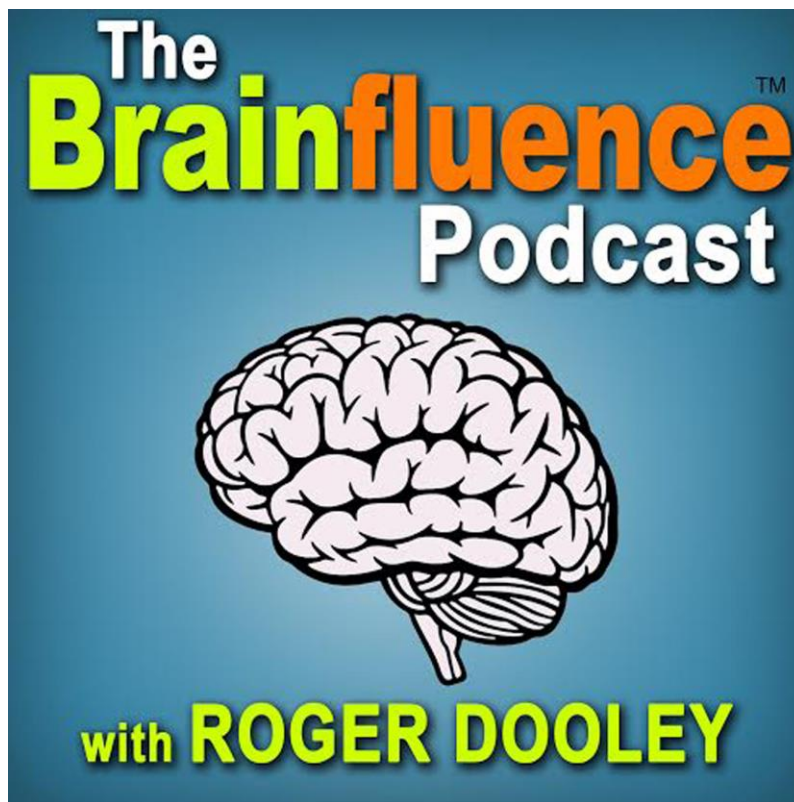


Ep #32: A Surprising Way to Improve Real Customer Experience



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host



Roger Dooley

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Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Welcome to The Brainfluence Podcast. This is Roger Dooley. This week, we're going to talk about how the expectations that you set can affect your customer's real experience with your product or service and why the old maxim of under-promise and over-deliver may not be the best in most circumstances, really some circumstances.

Starting with the latter part, I spent the early part of my career in sales, and one of the maxims even then was always under-promise what your company can do and then exceed those expectations when you actually deliver, and with objective measures, that's not a bad rule. In other words, if you know that for a product a delivery is variable, it might take two to four weeks, you don't want to tell the customer that it will probably be done in two weeks or perhaps a bit longer, because inevitably, it won't happen that quickly and the customer, rather than being pleased, will be upset that their expectation wasn't met, and unfortunately know all too many sales people who in order to get the order will always fudge at the best possible outcome, and then the company of course tries to meet that outcome, but it doesn't always work, and in the long run, the customer is unhappy.

The under-promise approach may not be that good for subjective measures like certain kinds of quality or level of service, and what we're going to do is look at a few experiments, both in social science settings and in neuroimaging, that explain why that isn't always the case. The first one was performed by Cornell researchers. They went into a fixed-price French restaurant. In other words, every diner had the exact same meal served to them. There were no choices to make and they served each diner a free glass of wine with their meal.

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Half the diners were told, table by table that is, that the wine was from Noah's Winery in California, which of course is one of the finest wine growing regions in the world. The other half of the tables were told that it was from Noah's Winery in North Dakota, which I suppose there are wineries in North Dakota, but they certainly aren't renowned for their quality.

Of course, all the wine was the same. In fact, it was something that some of you may be familiar with. It was Two Buck Chuck, which is Charles Shaw Wine that is available at Trader Joe's, and it actually cost about three dollars in most places these days. It's a very inexpensive wine, but it's a favorite of psychology experimenters because first of all, it's cheap. It only costs a few dollars a bottle. Second, it's pretty standard. In other words, it's not like a wine that's going to vary from bottle of bottle or vintage to vintage. It's mass-produced, so it tends to be pretty consistent in its flavor. Finally, it plausibly tastes like wine. Obviously, at that price it's not a great wine, but by and large, it's considered to be okay for a sub-five dollar wine, and for non-sommeliers it tastes like wine and it doesn't taste too bad.

What the scientists did was, after serving this glass of wine, they weighed the amount of food that each diner left on their plate. Now science isn't always glamorous. This doesn't sound like much fun, but I'm sure they had some grad students to help out. They found that the diners who had been served the California wine supposedly - in fact, all Two Buck Chuck comes from California, although it's not considered one of California's finest products - those folks ate more food than those who were served the North Dakota wine. An interesting outcome, and also the California folks were more likely to rebook a reservation.

This experiment was repeated, in again, kind of a similar way at an MBA student reception where they measured the amount of cheese at a wine and cheese serving that people ate. Again, the people served the California wine ate more cheese. The effect was that even though all the wine was identical, in some way the experience that these diners had was affected

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by what their expectation was, where clearly the folks who were served the California wine expected something better than those served the North Dakota wine.

Now, another experiment actually used brain imaging to further show how this works. In this case subjects were put in an fMRI machine and given wine tastes. In this case some of the subjects were told that it was a five dollar wine, and the other portion of the subjects were told that it was 45 dollar wine. Half would have been expecting a pretty cheap wine and the other half would have been expecting a rather good wine.

Of course, once again, it was all Two Buck Chuck. What they found, perhaps not too much of a surprise, was that the people who tasted the supposedly 45 dollar wine did indeed say that it tasted better. Their average rating was higher than the folks served the five dollar wine. But, in the fMRI machine the people who were served the 45 dollar wine, actually the pleasure center in their brain lit up more than the folks who were served the cheaper wine.

Again, all the same stuff but the more expensive wine actually tasted better. In other words, it wasn't just a self-report thing. If a friend of yours served you a wine and said this is a 45 dollar wine, you would probably tend to say good things about it, even if it didn't taste like anything special to you, just to humor them and not to appear foolish, because if it's 45 dollar wine it could be that your palette is off, not the wine. It went beyond that. The wine physically tasted better to them, as evidenced by the fMRI data.

That's a great example of how setting a high expectation actually improved the customer experience. If somehow the makers of Two Buck Chuck could go out and convince people that they were drinking a 50 dollar wine, the experience of those wine drinkers would be better than those who simply picked up a bottle for a few dollars at Trader Joe's.

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Now one thing I wrote about recently was packaging, and that's another way of setting expectations. We all know that Apple and Steve Jobs so well, he was in charge, were absolutely obsessive about packaging. They had a whole sort of lab area set up for evaluating packaging. They would routinely evaluate hundreds of box configurations to find the packaging that was going to be absolutely the best for their product. It wasn't enough for them to create a product that was, in itself in its own design, elegant and high performing. They knew that the packaging had to be equally elegant and match the product to give the maximum customer impact.

That's something that today is particularly important still, because we have all these unboxing videos. I'm not quite sure I get the appeal of those, but you've probably seen a few where these videos that often are very popular get tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even more views of people un-packaging a new product and describing what they're experiencing as they do that.

The packaging experience that I wrote about involves some shirts. I'm not really big on going to the mall and shopping for clothing. Not one of my favorite activities, although I will do it occasionally. But when I can I will order product online from vendors that I trust. By and large these days, if you order a shirt from a company like Macy's or Kohl's or Amazon, it will come packaged in a shapeless plastic bag because clothing products by and large are indestructible in terms of being crushed or having damage done to them. It isn't like shipping fine china where you have to have a lot of protected packaging around it.

As a result, the most economical way to ship these is to use these plastic bags that actually provide pretty good protection for the product. But when they arrive they are just this shapeless mass that you can then cut open. I ordered some shirts from a British firm, Charles Tyrwhitt, and they do a really nice job, first of all, in their ordering process and their presentation of their products. They call themselves a custom shirt maker, and indeed their

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products can be customized, although I would say that they are sort of a mass-customizing type company.

When their product arrived it was in a rigid cardboard box with the company's name on it and it was a very elegant presentation. For me, the expectation for that product was a lot higher than when I get this shapeless plastic baggie in the mail. To me, that's one way companies can improve their customer experience. I probably felt better about the shirts in that box than I did about a similar or even more expensive shirt that came in the shapeless bag.

I think it's important that these differences aren't price-related. They could be. High price sets expectations in and of itself. In the same way we talked about the wine where the 45 dollar wine was perceived as being better, in the same way a more expensive shirt or any kind of product has a higher expectation of quality and customer experience than a cheaper one.

Expectations are particularly important in areas that are kind of nebulous like service. If you set high expectations by describing your service in glowing terms, and what the customer actually experiences doesn't really contradict that expectation. They themselves will likely describe the service as superior.

The key in all this is that the reality can't be too far from the expectation. The supposedly 45 dollar wine tasted really good to the subjects who tried it because the inexpensive wine they tasted was pleasant enough and it tasted like wine. Chances are, a professional sommelier would not have been fooled by that. If they were told that they were going to experience a 45 dollar wine and tasted a three dollar wine, they would likely immediately say "Hmm, something's wrong here," and their experience, if anything, would be worse because they knew what they were expecting, and whatever they got did not match up to that.

If you tell a customer that your service team is the most friendly and helpful group of people that you ever worked with, and they are in fact reasonably

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friendly and helpful, the customer experience will be improved, but if they're rude or uncooperative, the high expectation that you set won't help. It will likely backfire on you.

To sum things up, instead of under-promise and over-deliver, I propose a new motto, at least for some circumstances, and that would be overpromise and plausibly deliver. That will be a way to not only satisfy your customer but actually improve that customer's experience. We'll have links to information about these studies and any other references in the show notes at rogerdooley.com. To get to the podcast, go to rogerdooley.com/podcast.

By the way, while you're there feel free to leave a comment. Most of my podcasts are interviews and I've got about four in queue here that should be really good, something you'll love I'm sure. I also enjoy doing these solo podcasts from time to time. Let me know what you think. If you want less of these, more interviews, or more of these, by all means drop by and leave a comment. Thanks very much and we'll see you next week.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at RogerDooley.com.