



Susan Carrabis' From the Crofter's Loft

DeBranding

Branding is Experience, DeBranding is Experience gone Bad

Most everyone has heard of Branding. It happens when you ask for a Coke® when you want a soda. You ask for a Kleenex® when all you really want is a tissue. That's **Branding**, when a name brand has become the generic term for an item. It's a positive experience associated with a name brand being applied to a generic item. **DeBranding** is when a negative experience becomes associated with a name brand. You'll never shop at so and so's because of the way you or a friend were treated. What causes this **DeBranding**, and why do consumers think it's happening – in corporate attitude if not in name -- more and more frequently? Here are a few examples that might help us understand why DeBranding is happening.

It's the Little Things That Get You

Ever notice that it's the little things that happen that eat away at you, that wear you down? We can handle the large annoyances pretty well. It's the little aggravations that happen here and there, day after day. They peck at you and eat away at your patience till you're ready to explode. That's usually how **DeBranding** occurs; little annoyances with a product or service become huge aggravations. These little annoyances share three traits:

- people don't get any satisfaction when attempting to solve the problem,
- they tire of attempting to solve the problem and
- they associate their failure with a company or brand.

Tangible and Intangible Annoyances

These annoyances fall into two categories:

- Quality of Work
- Pride in Work Performed

What happened to the quality and pride in the work place and in the products produced? According to several people interviewed there use to be a time when salespeople and stores went out of their way to help people. You never had to return items as they rarely failed to operate. People took pride in what they did. There were professional waitresses who were amazing to watch. There wasn't a stigma of "Oh, you're just a so and so."

Work Ethics in Today's World

I was never one who was happy with the concept of trying to look busy at a job. If there was something to do I did it. It didn't matter if it was someone else's job, I always pitched in with whatever work there was to do. I was always asking my managers if there was

something that needed doing. In today's work environment people won't do anything that's not in their job description. You can't blame them -- they don't get credit for doing the extra things and when they stop doing these extra things -- because no one seems to care, they are usually yelled at for slacking off. It's a no-win situation that many workers face today. They would prefer to stand around and do nothing because they feel that they won't get a reward for helping out.

Part of this work ethic problem is due to companies hiring 20 year olds for management positions, expecting them to have the experience and people skills to manage other people.

Experience is Expensive

From the company's standpoint, experienced managers are expensive to hire, so instead they hire people without experience in the hopes of being able to train them. This leads to young people being set up to fail by being placed in positions for which they have neither the experience nor the training. Classes and mentoring that would make them better managers are not to be found, only classes in how to sell, *sell SELL!* The people that they're supposed to be managing are now resentful because (chances are) one of them applied for the position and were told they weren't qualified, if they were told anything at all. After the outside hire is working the current employees see what the company thought was manager material and are left scratching their heads.

This dissatisfaction of the "old" employees leads to problems when -- as a consumer -- you now have to deal with the results of the company's decisions. I've conducted interviews with a number of people and have made notes of the various incidences that have occurred over the years. Here are some I'll share with you.

Remember when you used to be a customer at a store?

Target™ now calls its customer's "guests" and their customer service line "Guest Relations". It doesn't matter if you change the names of the departments; if consumers believe the service is lousy then changing the name only gives them two things to be upset about. One interviewee had purchased a \$100 product from this particular chain. About every three months the product would fail and this interviewee would have to return the item for a new one. After the third time of returning it they were fed up and just wanted their money back. Target™ had taken the original receipt the first time that the item was returned and a return slip was issued. This, of course, caused a problem in that now this interviewee didn't have the original receipt. The 20 something manager with their "vast" world experience couldn't comprehend that the reason they didn't have the receipt was because the store took it in the first place. The manager also had trouble with the concept that if a product had to be continuously returned, and others were also returning the product, then there is probably something wrong with that product. No, to this manager it was simply a case of "No ticket, no shirt". Stores used to stand behind what they sold. If the products weren't good then the stores wouldn't sell it. Now it's what ever the front office can purchase in the greatest volume at the cheapest price.

Times They Are a Changing

Back to our little tale. The best that Target™ would do was keep giving this individual a new item even though they said that they were through returning the product, that it was clearly defective and they wanted their money back. The manufactures of the product were contacted and they wouldn't help because Target™ had the money. Both places would rather loose people as customers and let the unsatisfied customers tell their horror stories to whomever would listen than remedy the situation to the customer's satisfaction. Calling the store's "Guest Relations" number proved equally unsatisfactory. This interviewee explained that they would never treat a "Guest" this poorly and that Target™ had an interesting way of treating "Guests". This interviewee wouldn't be shopping at Target™ anymore. This individual has never been back to Target nor do they plan on going back.

It would be one thing if the above was an isolated incident, but there are many examples that share the traits in the above anecdote; quality of work issue or pride in one's work.

Quality of Work

Let's consider the quality of work issue first. This is where defective or inferior products get shipped. This could be because, as one company in our research stated, "It will ship and it will be a success". It could also be because there are no real quality checks in place to catch defective goods before they are shipped.

Many people interviewed purchased items with the intent of using them at some future time. The example which came up most often regarding this was purchasing CD's, DVD's or VHS tapes to view or listen to them when the consumer was in the mood.

Interviewee "TK" had purchased some boxed sets of TV shows on DVD and was beginning to go through them. She found a scratched disk in one particular set. This would be something that would be easy for an automated quality control system to pick up. Barnes & Noble™, where she purchased the set, was gracious and ordered her a new one. When she went to watch another DVD set several of those discs couldn't be recognized by the DVD player. In this case the discs weren't finalized properly. Again Barnes&Noble™ ordered her a new set. This new set had the same problem. Barnes&Noble™ replaced that one as well, but now TK was becoming very frustrated. That same shipment contained another damaged DVD set and again Barnes& Noble™ replaced the item.

This is an example of the retailer, Barnes&Noble™, doing its job, but what about the original manufacturer of the DVDs? These problems should have been noticed before the product even left manufacturing. Doesn't anyone check things before they're shipped anymore?

Another example of the lack of quality was offered by "SM"; A book was purchased to be read on vacation. In the middle of the book chapters were missing. One hundred pages of the text had been replaced with a reprint of the first 100 pages of the book. A minor inconvenience, true. The world won't stop revolving because the book wasn't finished on the vacation. But the point is that now SM felt he has to check each book he purchases to make sure that all of the pages are there. His lament was said in many ways by many

people, but he said it best, "Why do people have to do other peoples jobs?" It's bad enough that the copy editors aren't finding typos or grammatical errors in the books these days. Now they're not finding printing mistakes. Borders™, where the book was purchased ordered a new copy and said that unfortunately this was not an uncommon incident.

Those petty annoyances add up

The frustration and exhaustion from the people interviewed was coming through loud and clear. If only one of these things happened then they could deal with it, having to deal with all of these, what seem like petty annoyances to most people, day in and day out is wearing on the psyche.

"BJ" was recently watching a taped series that she purchased several years ago, Joseph Campbell's "Mythos". BJ explained "These are the types of tapes that you need to be in the right frame of mind to watch." Unfortunately for her she wasn't ready until recently and, in a 5-tape set, there were two copies of tape 3 and of course no copies of tape 2 in the box. Some readers might respond "BJ should have watched those tapes when she got them" but BJ's lament (and most consumers in our study agree) is that she shouldn't have to. She purchased them thinking that they would be fine. Why should people have to check to make sure that there was one of each tape sent? What if this had been a gift? She checked online to see if she could exchange them and this series is no longer available on tape. Any one out there have 2 of tape 2 and no tape 3? I'll set up a trade.

This same thing also occurred with a boxed CD music set that was purchased by CL. There were 2 copies of CD 1 in the set and no CD 2. This wasn't noticed until they were put on an MPEG player and the CDs were played back to back. Now it's too late to return them as they are several years old and are no longer available.

I can hear readers shouting "Caveat Emptor", "buyer beware". If these people were more diligent and checked things when they were first purchased then these problems could be solved. As I stated earlier none of these incidences are world stopping, at most they are annoying. Yet it's the little things like these that try your patience and annoy you to death. It's also little things like these that destroy consumer confidence and trust, and are how and why debranding is occurring more and more in modern society.

Pride in your work

The way I was brought up I always taught to have pride in what you did, from sweeping floors to writing a 510k submission for the FDA. It's not what you do, it's how you do it. Take pride in the task, do it to the best of your ability, no matter what it is.

Another interviewee, "WD", had been ordering pet supplies from a catalog for years. In the last 10 years there has been a problem only twice. A good track record I assure you. In the first goof the order was placed online. When WD received the email confirmation of the order they realized that they had ordered an item in the wrong size. They called the company and told them of the mistake and the operator told them that a note was being attached to the order and would be sent along to the warehouse for correction. When they received the order, you guessed it, the item was sent in the wrong size. And best of all

there was the note on the bottom of the order form to correct the size. Now in all fairness this company is outstanding with returns and corrections. They send a return slip with the correct item, no questions asked and with no charge for return shipping.

However this incident, in several interviewees' opinions, never should have happened. Another order placed with this company required signoffs by two people and still an incorrect item was shipped.

DeBranding Becomes Branding When Companies Take Action

On the other side of this incident is that this same pet supply company took WD's advice and they simplified the on-line order process. WD suggested that this company incorporate some features she liked on other web sites. Specifically, if you are a returning customer, show me my previous orders, chances are I'll be purchasing some of those same items. Also have a button going to an order form to be used with customers who have a catalog in front of them. These two suggestions were incorporated and it's made shopping on their site on-line a better experience.

Nibble, Nibble Everywhere

Goofs happen everywhere. BP had been having problems with the oil gauge in her car. It was behaving very erratically. At first the garage didn't believe her. Every time they had it in to work on they would hook it up and of course it behaved perfectly. Like going to the doctors, every ache and pain you had when you made the appointment is gone once you're in the examining room. Finally she dropped by the garage when it was going psychotic and they took it the next day and replaced the gauge in the dashboard. This was fine for a few days and then it was acting up again. This time they replaced the sensor and declared the problem solved. A few days later, same problem. The garage said that they really didn't know what else to do. After spending \$250 BP was left with an oil gauge not working. It just so happened that the car was due for its inspection and she decided to take it to the dealer. She explained the history of the problem. They replaced the wires between the gauge and sensor and lo and behold the problem was truly fixed. She hasn't had a problem with it since. My question is "Why didn't the garage replace the wires when they were replacing the gauge or the sensor?" This nibbling at a solution cost BP \$250 from the garage and more from the dealers who replaced the wires.

You can just feel the patience being nibbled away bit by bit, nibble, nibble, chomp.

I don't understand this mentality of "I've done what I can do and so sorry you still have the problem but I consider it solved." "Thanks for your money, now go away." You get that attitude with tech support calls as well. After 2 hours on the phone a scanner/printer KL purchased still didn't do a simple operation which was the basis of the purchase, but tech support people have never seen this problem before. Ya gotta love these "I've never seen that before" problems. They've done what they can do so now it's your problem and hey just how often are you going to need this feature? Forget the fact that this feature needs to be used right now and maybe not for months to come, but right now this feature is needed. Oh well, so sorry to be you.

They start coming out of the wood work now

After word got around that I was collecting stories like this, I started getting people emailing me their tales of woe. Friends had friends send their stories to me.

One of these stories involved SC. He had owned Jeep Cherokee Sports for years. He sold the first Jeep he had to his nephew and it now has over 200,000 miles on it and just recently went to that car graveyard in the sky because he couldn't find the parts for it in the junk yards any more. SC's wife has a Cherokee Sport with over 119,000 miles on the dial. So, when SC needed a new vehicle he naturally went with another Cherokee Sport. After driving it for 2 years the clutch master cylinder gave out. In SC's case, almost an understandable problem; he never uses the brakes so maybe he was over stressing the clutch. Then after only 45,000 miles the engine head cracked.

The reason SC bought the Jeep when he did was because Chrysler wasn't going to make the Sport anymore and they weren't going to make a Standard shift either, two important features to SC. So, if you wanted these you had to buy now. After the cracked engine block, SC was really not happy so he contacted Chrysler headquarters, something that the dealer should have done. They agreed with the dealer and SC's assessment that the head shouldn't have cracked. Chrysler was kind enough to reimburse him more than half his cost of having the engine replaced. Nice when you consider that had he not had it done at the dealer they would not have reimbursed him anything.

But wait, you know there's more. The engine was replaced in the summer and when SC originally purchased the car he had an engine block heater put in for those cold New England winters. Can you guess what the dealer did, or rather didn't do, when the engine was replaced? They didn't transfer or put in a new engine block heater. When this was brought to the dealer's attention they said that they could put one in for \$80. They couldn't understand why this was not a good solution. The car was brought to them with the heater. Shouldn't it leave with one?

And yes, there's still more. This same dealer wanted to have the oil changed in the new engine after 3000 miles, check belts, hoses etc. So SC took it back to the dealer to have this done. As he was paying, the technician asked him if he wanted to schedule his 60,000-mile engine check up. SC stared at the man and said you just put in a new engine and it only has 3000 miles on it. The technician looked through his records again and said "Oh Yeah. So you don't want to schedule that 60,000 mile engine check-up?" SC just shook his head and walked out. He's still getting postcards in the mail to come in for that 60,000 mile check up.

Chrysler has now lost a very loyal customer. It's amazing how for a \$100 item, Target™ has lost a customer and for even less, \$80, Chrysler has lost not just one customer but a whole family.

On the other side of the "pride in your work" issue is the new attitude of clerks at stores and the service contracts. Interviewees almost unanimously agreed that, when offered, they would not get them. After all, if these products are any good they should last and an extended warranty shouldn't be needed. On the other hand, if the quality is so poor, then

it will fail before the 21 day return is up (it use to be 30 days to return goods something I talk about below).

Finally some one explained that with the technology changing so fast the CD player you just bought becomes obsolete as you walk out the store. To avoid this "inconvenience", it was explained, purchase the extended warranty, then physically drop the item on a hard floor or sidewalk (I'm not kidding. This suggestion or something similar was made at several different stores in several different towns to several different people) before the contract is up. In this way the store now has to replace your old technology with new. On the face of it this seems dishonest, but if the salesperson is the one suggesting it?

Return Policy Changed

Another change in customer relations is that you now have 21 days to return a product. It use to be 30 days.

Another favorite story involves IG and his experiences at CompUSA® with their shortened return policy. IG had purchased a RAVE™ MPG player. IG went through five RAVE™s in one month. They all had the same problem. The store refused to give IG his money back because, horror of horrors he thought he had 30 days to return something and didn't realize until day 29 that he only had 21 days to return it for a refund. IG had them send it out to the factory for repairs. Within three days of getting it back he had the same problem. After going through five of them IG finally got a manager who allowed him to trade it for another one, buy the extended warranty, then return it for his money back because it, too, didn't work. With the extended warranty you can get your money back. But why should the consumer have to purchase the extended warranty in the first place?

What the above incident taught people in our study is that whatever is purchased must be used immediately. If they're the slightest bit unhappy with something, return it immediately to get their money back.

DeBranding occurs with people too

A lot of what has occurred in the examples given has been **DeBranding** with a company or item. But consider this, **DeBranding** also happens with people. If you have a history of people lying to you or betraying you, each of the incidents written about can be interpreted as another lie, another betrayal. Soon you don't trust anyone. You don't trust them to do their job, let alone a good one. Is it any wonder that we've become such a cynical society? Nibble, nibble.

While we're on the topic

Why is it that when PBS stations decide to do fundraising they change their line up? Viewers have fallen in love with a particular program then find out that the station is doing another round of fundraising and have replaced your favorite with what they call "Viewers Favorites". They usually show the same programs every time. If these are such favorites then why aren't they shown on a regular basis, not just during fundraising. This has happened with a few shows that people have told me about.

According to interviewees, what usually happens is that when fundraising starts they stop watching those stations. After a while, as the fundraising now goes into week 4, interviewees have gotten out of the habit of watching the shows they tuned in for because "special programming" has gone on for far too long and they've lost interest or forgotten when their favorites are being shown. This one is a bite. It's started to go beyond nibbling now.

Stores can get in on the fun too

Along a similar vein is the compulsion for grocery stores to change things around. Many people interviewed like to go in a store with their list, go down the aisles they need to, get their things and leave. They take no great pleasure from grocery shopping, it's something that needs to be done, a chore. It's not a great adventure or social event nor is it a way of filling their day. They'd rather be doing lots of other things. The stores are too crowded with people not knowing where they're going and usually on a cell phone. These same people on the phones insist on parking their cart in the middle of the aisle and talking loudly on the phone about who knows what, then they look annoyed if someone over hears the phone conversation or asks them to move their cart.

Grocery stores move products around for a variety of reasons. One is to make room for more products. MK's grocery store recently moved things to make room for more organic products. This is a good reason, and now MK can either ask some one where they've moved things or they can play the logic game of "If I were them where would I move the Peanut Butter to?" Some people like this change. Great for them. The people I interviewed are of a different opinion.

I wonder, if the large chain stores did a "How many of our customers like having the products moved around?" survey, how would it turn out? If very few liked this then that particular chain would have a unique marketing strategy. "Come to our store, You'll always know where things are." Interviewees said that they could handle it better if there was some type of warning. If the stores put up a sign saying that they were moving things around to give the customers a better selection, make the store easier to navigate, etc. it would go along way to smoothing things out.

Any one want to get in on the rebate issue?

I got a lot of emails about rebates and the headaches associated with them.

PD had purchased several items and had all the rebate information filled out. Of course each rebate must have a copy of the receipt, copy of the UPC, copy of the rebate form etc. and each must be mailed out separately. PD had seven to do, so thankfully one of the items purchased was a copier. PD diligently made all of the required copies, stuffed all envelopes and mailed them off, then waited and waited some more. Nothing. After 10 weeks they began phoning. The evasions were impressive. One said that PD didn't send this, another said he didn't send that. PD patiently assured them that he had. The companies said that the envelopes are opened in one location and mailed to another for processing and that they had no way of verifying what PD said. So PD re-sent what they needed and waited some more.

Now 13 weeks had gone by. Some rebate checks start arriving. PD is thrilled. With some rebates the customer can go online and check the status. These are good because it saves a phone call. One place said that now they were denying the rebate because it was submitted to late. Another phone call was made and this was corrected. PD told them that the original submission was well within the time frame and that all this delay has made it fall outside the date. Again the wait, nibble, nibble.

Now the Nibbles become Chomps

Week 16. Now the rebate is denied because the company doesn't have the original receipt, the second time PD submitted the rebate it had to be a copy. This involved another phone call to sort it out and PD explained that he didn't have the original as it was mailed to them with the original submission, so of course they'd only get a copy as they themselves had requested. Oh, so sorry, we'll get right on that.

Week 18: Again denied, this time because, according to the letter, the items were purchased on different days, and they can't read the date on the receipt and the required rebate item wasn't purchased. Oh, PD just loves making phone calls. He pointed out in a call and by letter that if the company knew that the items were purchased on different days then they could read the purchase dates. Strike one of their reasons. PD also told them that if they looked on line four of the receipt it showed that the required rebate item was indeed purchased. Oh, so sorry. PD also explained why the items were purchased on different days. The store had given him the wrong item that had the rebate, so he had to go back to the store and get the one that was on special that week. PD even asked the salesman at the time of the return if this was going to confuse the rebate people. The salesmen said no, so long as the purchase was within the same week, it should be fine. PD knew leaving the store it would be an issue.

PD said that he has never worked so hard for \$20. The on-line rebates, he said, were great, no questions. Type in the information, hit send and there it is. No questions, no lost information.

Finally after 6 months PD received all of the rebates.

Perhaps there's hope?

In the summer of 2006 Rhode Island passed legislation that put an end to mail-in rebates. Any rebates would be given at the register and the store offering the rebate would then submit it to the company. This is a great idea and one that the people I interviewed loved. They thought that all states should pass this legislation.

The consumer loses again

The above experiences are truly **DeBranding** at its best. The people interviewed said that they wouldn't buy anything with a mail-in rebate unless it can be filed on-line. They'd rather go somewhere else and pay full price than go through the nightmare of mail-in rebates. But that's what the store is counting on. Most rebates are never redeemed. The store isn't out anything, only the consumer. Again.

The other side of the coin

There is a gentleman I interviewed for this piece who, in my mind, has a great customer service policy. His company sells software. The customer gets two customer support calls. After this the company refunds the customers money. The reasoning is that if you need more support than two calls, then you, as the customer, are too "expensive for them". They've succeeded as a company with this plan.

I like it. Target™ would have had to return the money; all other cases would have been resolved with happy customers and the companies would still have their business.

Branding done right

I'm not sure how many people saw the pictures of the tractor trailers from Europe on the internet. These were sent around a couple of times. The trailers had painted advertisements for various products. The art work was so beautiful that it caused people to stop and pay attention. It was also very life-like and in some instances I'm sure it almost caused a few accidents as people were trying to figure out how the illusions were done. This form of advertising makes you stop and pay attention and therefore get branded.

It may have even put a smile on people's faces.

There are good Nibbles too

The people I interviewed also had some delights each day. The little joys – such as finding out that they didn't get charged the late fee on their credit card that they thought they would. Seeing a shooting star when they're out walking their dog at night. Seeing swans on a river where they didn't think there were any in their part of the country. It's the simple joys in life that balance out the nibbles and chomps of everyday life that get you through the days.

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