

## Every employee, every touch point counts in building a brand-driven business.

I was recently sitting on a United flight at the gate in Denver getting ready to depart for Jackson Hole and a Brand Establishment conference, when the cockpit made an announcement. Maintenance was in the cockpit fixing some gizmo and take off would be delayed 30 minutes. The captain making the announcement, in his best customer service voice, was empathizing with us frustrated customers that he couldn't understand why maintenance had waited until now to fix this gizmo (as the maintenance person was right next to him doing his job).

Fifteen minutes later, the captain came back on the intercom, enthusiastically letting us know that the mechanic had fixed the gizmo, and we could get under way sooner than expected – that is, if the maintenance people get the paperwork here – they usually take their time.

Five minutes later, it's the captain again. Oops! "Maintenance now informs me the mechanical repair is complete, but we apparently need some connectors that are supposedly on the way, so we'll be on our way as soon as we get the connectors here." That last "as soon as we get the connectors here" was offered at a deliberate pace and with inflection to offer us poor customers an insider's wink that says we all know how slow those maintenance people can be.

United spends millions of dollars every month in branding initiatives to tout its focus on the customer. The captain sure was customer focused. He felt our pain. I just wondered how the maintenance guy felt as he was professionally doing his job fixing the gizmo, when the captain winked at us with his lighthearted "you know those maintenance people" banter.

Think it's possible the maintenance guy went back to wherever maintenance people go and told his buddies how that pilot had ridiculed his department? I wonder if the mechanic's supervisor may have been a real brand champion leading his people toward zero defects, total dedication to customer safety and cheerleading everyone to spread the United story that this airline will prosper in this competitive marketplace because United has the best people and they work as a team.

With just a wink and a clever aside, 100 passengers on that flight, including me, took away from that customer touch point a building-block perception that there is a little less “team” in the brand than advertised. No big deal, right? Oh, but what about that maintenance guy and his buddies? “Let’s bust our butt for the team” may have resonated a little less than United’s CEO might have liked to think his branding investments were earning that day. Oh, and there’s those business people reading this right now who may take away a little impression, and they weren’t even there! Funny how this works.

I wondered how I, and my fellow travelers, would have perceived that touch point if the captain had told us that maintenance, in its preflight check, had detected a problem that should be addressed before departure. “We regret that it will delay departure by 30 minutes, but safety always comes first here. Our maintenance people are the best in the business. Everyone in the industry knows that and they’ll do everything they can to get us on our way quickly. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

Every touch point is important. Every United employee makes a difference. Sure, you can’t control what every employee does every minute. But you can drive strategic brand thinking deeper and deeper into the organization so that individuals make better decisions because they understand that their behavior affects customer perceptions that impact profitability and, ultimately, their jobs. It’s called operationalizing the brand, and it’s how great brands, and great companies are built.