

MIND THE GAP

How the gap between expectation and reality can create both a headache and an opportunity for your brand to win.

One of life's rarest yet greatest moments is when someone or something turns out to be as good as we hoped it would be.

A Tinder swipe, a first date, an online purchase, a holiday destination, a meal we've spent hours cooking, a movie we've waited months to see; no matter what it is, that amazing feeling of elation that comes with having our expectations met or exceeded is absolutely second to none

However, the flip side of this feeling of elation, is its polar-opposite crushing disappointment and anti-climatic frustration that comes when something or someone doesn't live up to the expectation.

Often our emotional reaction becomes disproportionate to the actual situation.

But think about it, we've invested time, energy, emotion, effort into an event, to then be so cruelly let down. Well, we all know what it's like.

When it happens we get mad. We feel let down and cheated.

We feel that we weren't given what we were promised; be it the handsome Tinder profile, or the picture in the recipe book, the scintillating movie trailer or the glossy picture of the beach in a brochure.

And yes, as I said, we get mad.

But here's the thing, often we are setting ourselves up to fail, because no matter the expectation set by others, expectation is ultimately something of a self-created, selfish pursuit.

Because at its core, expectation is the notion of expecting a particular outcome, individually modelled on what our own unique definition of said outcome is.

As any outcome can be achieved in literally an infinite number of ways, is expectation nothing more than an arrogant desire from us overly pampered humans?

From the time we have the sentient ability to experience, the concept of expectation forms a core component in what makes us who we are.

"I really enjoyed that episode of Peppa Pig, so I'm convinced the next one will be super!"

Or as articulated through the lens of a three-year-old...

"More PEPPA PIG. Peppa good! Want more. Now!"

But as we grow older and potentially wiser, an interesting evolution in expectation takes place.

The thrill of anticipation.

Functional expectation suddenly takes on even more of an emotive condition, because we move into a state of 'anticipation'.

A cocktail of excitement, enthusiasm, desire, hope and longing all blended into one state of being.

Suddenly the wait becomes infused with meaning, but with this meaning comes a downside.

Every day we spend in anticipatory glory, the expectation of the end-result increases.

"The thrill of anticipation beats anything & everything."





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Is anticipation always more enjoyable than the event?

As we start to take pleasure in the journey, rather than an overt focus merely on the destination, this provides a huge opportunity (and challenge) for brands and their customers.

Feeding in to the anticipation and desire is easy, from the perfume advert that promises us an overnight transformation into Natalie Portman in a Dior dress or Ryan Reynolds in a Hugo Boss suit to the sleek sophistication of the Fiat 500 driver or George Clooney with the right coffee machine.

But whilst this is fantastic for generating interest and identification brands are skating on thin ice at times and need to be increasingly aware of the shifting expectation of well...expectation.

Especially when the expectation isn't matched accurately by the reality.

This disconnect between expectation and reality is as old as time itself. When early Western explorers first set eyes on the The Great Wall of China, you can be reasonably sure at least one of them uttered the words...

"Oh. I thought it would be 'greater-er' than this..."

Anticipation in marketing terms is obviously fuelled by slick advertising that shouts loudest about the positive attributes of the brand, leaving no tolerance for anything even approaching a negative. Which is obvious.

A brand is there to present itself in a flawless light all the time, even if the odd wart is visible to the more discerning customer.

But what if your brand were to call out these warts before the customer experienced them?

Brave or commercial suicide?

As with any brand related exercise, it's all about the execution. Attempting to narrow the gap between expectation and reality should be an ongoing operational focus for your brand, but where obvious disconnects in perception and delivery exist for a key commercial reason, don't be shy. Speak up.

This approach was adopted successfully this year with a campaign launched for [retailer TK Maxx](#).

By making any perceived service weakness an integral element of your brand, not only is the gap between expectation and reality substantially reduced, the potential to create a truly memorable experience is proportionally increased.

Idiosyncrasies in your brand can be what distinguishes you from the competition, so embrace them, highlight them, celebrate them.

The core to enjoying an open honesty with your customer base is to start with understanding.

Understand their needs, desires and pain points and you position your brand far more organically in their line of sight.

By setting realistic expectations, you automatically reduce the gap between these anticipated experiences and the reality of delivery.

Finally, an idiosyncratic alternative to managing expectation and embracing the reality of your customers, is to disengage with all known reality and paint a brand picture that is so fantastic, so fabulous as to render the product or service itself somewhat secondary.

One sector personifies this better than most. Fragrance.

You are selling a lifestyle. Not just a scent. Or not even a scent. Style over substance? [KENZO anyone?](#)

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