

# Comparing Apples, Coffee, and Donuts

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What do brands like Apple, Starbucks and Krispy Kreme have in common? Sure, they all have great logos, creative advertising campaigns, and powerful PR strategies, but their success is due to something much less tangible and often misunderstood – the emotional connection the customer has formed with the brand.

Take a look at this list compiled by brandchannel.com of the *Top Ten US Brands for 2003*. You will probably notice that you have an immediate and emotional response to each brand name. The organizations behind these brands understand and consistently reinforce how their customers relate to the brand. As a result, customers have placed their trust in these brands to deliver on their promises.

Apple  
Target  
Google  
Starbucks  
Krispy Kreme  
JetBlue  
Nike  
Pixar  
Coca-Cola  
eBay

It's critical to understand the bond that exists between your product or service and your customer in order to develop effective campaigns that support the brand. Woe to the executive who ignores this dynamic and initiates marketing campaigns, brand extensions, or package design changes that conflict with the customer's brand experience. The result can range from brand confusion to mass brand defection.

The best example of brand defection was the result of one of the biggest blunders in corporate history: the 1985 introduction of New Coke. While the new formulation was well liked in preliminary taste tests, consumers across the country reacted strongly and negatively to the news that New Coke would replace the original drink. Coca-Cola fanatics started stock-piling cases of the original Coke in their garages for fear they would be cut-off from their favorite beverage. Coke's US market share was just under 24 percent at the time, and sales plummeted as loyal customers rejected New Coke.

Not quite three months after he made the mistake, CEO Roberto Goizueta rectified it with the re-introduction of the original Coke under the name "Coke Classic." At the time he noted the company had not understood the "deep and abiding emotional attachment to original Coca-Cola felt by so many people."

Before launching your next marketing initiative, take the time to ask your customers how they feel about your brand. Something as simple as a well-written survey is a good way to start the process. When conducting on-line surveys, written surveys, and telephone surveys, I'm always surprised at how willing customers (and key stakeholders) are to share their opinions. Of course, gathering the information is just the first step. It is equally important to analyze the data and incorporate the findings into your marketing strategy.

Remember that your brand ultimately resides in the hearts and minds of your customers. Winning and keeping their trust is paramount to creating a highly successful brand. If you continually nurture the emotional connection, one day your brand may be on the short list of top brands alongside Apple, Starbucks, and Krispy Kreme.