

How Serving Blind Consumers Creates Competitive Advantage



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If this demographic were a city, it would be the second largest in the United States. Its members are consistent consumers, but marketers often overlook them. Who are they? Blind people.

In the U.S., 7.67 million individuals have visual acuity less than 20/200, or are legally blind. That's a little less than New York City's 8.5 million residents, and well above Los Angeles' 3.9 million inhabitants.

Still, 7.67 million is a relatively small portion of the U.S. population, and blind people tend to be geographically

dispersed, so why should companies target them? Corporate social responsibility is one reason. Many organizations want to positively impact their communities, as Starbucks' did by opening a "signing store" to serve deaf patrons in Washington, D.C.

A second reason seems counter-intuitive at first. To meet the needs of blind customers, companies must do more than usual, or go above and beyond what average consumers 'require.' Although others don't demand the extra service or product improvements designed for blind consumers, they often appreciate and value such unexpected enhancements.

In competitive industries and mature markets where it's difficult to be distinct, companies can stand out by exceeding consumers' expectations. The same services that meet the unique needs of blind consumers often "delight" other customers, thereby differentiating a brand and even offering competitive advantage.

Since blind people have little or no vision, they rely more heavily on other senses. Sighted consumers appreciate stimulation through the same senses, but marketing tactics tend to underutilize them and ignore that engaging multiple senses enhances learning, probably because visual appeals are 'low-hanging fruit.' Companies that integrate *touch*, *sound*, and *smell* in their marketing, not only appeal to blind consumers, they also exceed the expectations of other consumers.

1. ***Touch Strategies:*** Human beings are 'wired' to touch, as evidenced by the importance of touch in relationships throughout life and by parents often needing to tell their young children, "Don't touch that." Most brands do little or nothing to tap into human's innate predilection to touch, for blind people or others, but they could.

From spoons to smartphones, so many of the products we hold have similar nondescript, smooth surfaces. People, however, often enjoy products that feel unique, like a pen with a 'rubbery grip.' Brands can further distinguish themselves by giving their products unique textures and feels. For instance, to reinforce the positioning of ruggedness, a body wash for men could use a bumpy or textured bottle rather than a smooth one.

There also are more functional applications of touch strategies. Instead of making every button and knob on car sound systems and kitchen appliances have the same feel, manufacturers could give each a unique texture, which would allow both blind and sighted consumers to more easily locate the right one just by touch.

2. **Sound Strategies:** From the subtle humming of an air conditioner to the disruptive banging of construction, sound surrounds us and influences our behavior whether we realize it or not. Although a few brands have been known for distinct sounds like Rice Krispies' "snap, crackle, pop," most don't leverage the full potential of sound, especially when it comes to improving product functionality.

One such sound application involves Bluetooth beacons, mounted on walls and ceilings, that allow both blind and sighted consumers to more easily navigate retail spaces via audio prompts from smartphones. All McDonald's outlets in Israel utilize such technology through an app called RightHear, as do many Louisville, KY businesses through a similar app named Nearby Explorer. Like voice navigation in a car, audible instructions can be the best way for consumers to find things in large or crowded retail environments.

Sound also can be a critical feature for product safety. Hybrid and electric vehicles, for example, can be hard for any pedestrian to hear. However, car manufacturers will soon be

required to alert foot travelers with “sound signatures,” which if distinct, might become an audio ‘calling card’ for the brand.

3. ***Smell Strategies:*** It’s hard not to notice the good and bad odors around us. From a coffee shop to diesel exhaust, some of our strongest memories are tied to smells, which gives brands that use them, a great opportunity to fix themselves in the minds of both blind and sighted consumers.

Since almost everything has a smell, it’s up to companies to manage theirs and ensure that the scents they give off are good ones. Some stores like bakeries and fragrance shops have naturally appealing odors, but they need to make sure their smells are not overpowering. On the other hand, office supply stores’ smells of paper and equipment are not especially appealing or pungent, which gives them the opportunity to interject a slightly stronger and more positive scent that consumers can learn to associate with the brand.

Large companies, however, aren’t the only ones that need to manage their smells. In the ‘sharing economy,’ many entrepreneurs work closely with consumers and need to be especially conscious of the odors they emit. Neither blind nor sighted consumers want to ride in an Uber or Lyft vehicle with the faint scent of cigarette smoke or the overwhelming odor of cologne. Both are likely to lead to negative reviews.

Social responsibility is a great reason to offer special services to individuals with disabilities. However, blind and other disabled consumers ultimately want what every consumer wants: a meaningful, multisensory brand experience. Firms that look beyond visuals and effectively engage customers through touch, sound, and smell are likely to see new competitive advantage.

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