



What Brands Can Learn from Charlie Sheen. It takes more than awareness and tiger blood to rock the marketplace.

BY MOST ACCOUNTS, Charlie Sheen, the brand, bombed this past Saturday in Detroit, the first stop on his multi-city live performance tour. Despite his sky high level of brand awareness, conversational style, and out-and-out authenticity, the “total friggin’ rock star from Mars” was met with boos and walkouts as his brand failed to live up to his audience’s expectations.

Sheen was dazed and confused by the tepid market response to his popular brand and, it appears, by the very concept called “brand.” He seemed to believe that “Charlie Sheen” was the brand, and that people were exchanging their time and money simply to be in the presence of “the Warlock.” Perfectly fine reasoning when expectations are low, like when organizers hire celebrities to hike up attendance at live events, but certainly not acceptable for ninety minutes of premium-priced entertainment.

Sheen’s brand was obviously not what he thought it was; namely his tacit “promise” to his audience of his unique brand of crazy. His brand was what his audience expected of his show. It was their anticipation of value, created from memories of Sheen and from their experiences with alternate forms of entertainment and other entertainers. And those expectations, whatever they may have been, were far from met.

Suffice it to say, the evening did not go as Sheen had planned. And that’s because there was no plan. Sheen didn’t understand or care about his audience’s expectations—a.k.a his brand. He didn’t put himself in their shoes. He didn’t imagine what it felt like to

shell out a week’s worth of grocery money for an evening of entertainment. And he certainly didn’t connect with them: “I’m not smoking crack,” said Sheen, who has bragged about “banging seven-gram rocks.” “But if I were smoking crack, what better place than Detroit?”

His audience, likewise, didn’t connect with Sheen, which resulted in a disastrous, co-created experience. Most felt ripped off. Some asked for their money back. Sheen responded, as many egotistical brands do, by intellectualizing with his audience, reminding them that they bought tickets having no idea what they were going to see. Naturally, that didn’t go over well, either. Blaming your customers is not the best way to engender their good will.

But hey, Sheen did leave Detroit reportedly \$150,000 richer and definitely a bit wiser about how the marketplace works, as well as what a brand is and is not. He’s now quite sure that a brand is not a name, identity, personality or promise. He’s enlightened to the simple, yet profound fact that people make choices based on their expectations, and when those expectations are not realized they become disappointed, or even angry. And, most importantly, he has learned that he’s responsible for the brand, for empathizing with his audience and helping to create and fulfill a unique and compelling expectation of value.

Here’s the interesting thing: It only took Sheen one day to learn those critical brand distinctions. Most organizations have spent years in the marketplace and they still haven’t learned.