



## Customer Stimulation. It's much more than selling and promotion, and it's your only way forward.

IT HAPPENED TO ME AGAIN LAST WEEK. I pulled into Walmart to simply—and solely—fill a prescription, and I ended up leaving with a bag full of stuff. It wasn't superfluous stuff: I would have purchased it somewhere during the next few weeks. But the bottom line is that despite my intention (get in, get my drugs, and get the hell out), I ended up buying more.

One reads a lot about Walmart's "everyday low prices," supplier management, and strategic use of information technology. But little is written about Walmart's strategic use of customer stimulation; a strategy designed to fan the flames of desire and increase both sales and profitability. They don't talk about it much, but the folks at Walmart know precisely what makes customers tick and how to influence their buying behavior with promotions, signage, placement, and routes. They know how to drive shoppers to buy, and that focus drives their growing business.

By contrast, I know a lot of smart people at organizations large and small who have the best of intentions, as well as valuable products and services, but most are stuck in park or are rolling backwards. Their budgets have been cut and their people are frightened and disengaged. The competitive environment is putting pressure on their margins, and in many cases, their very survival. The resulting effect is similar to what happens to people drowning in icy water; they're gradually losing their dexterity and their consciousness.

Customer stimulation is the way out of the downward spiral. It's a framework to inspire idea creation and motivate people. Customer stimulation isn't simply about merchandizing or even sales (although these are two apparent and much overlooked sources). Customer stimulation is about everything. It's about empathy, creativity and experimentation. It's about turning people on to an idea and bringing it to life for their benefit, and for yours. It's about creating desire.

Desire is what animates the marketplace. Desire is the force behind every inquiry and exchange. Customer stimulation is about arousing and feeding desire. It's about developing and stimulating the use of new products and services, as well as the sharing of novel ideas, all of which are designed to turn people on and improve their lives.

Customer stimulation is Apple's development of the iPad. Zappos' motivating return policy. Amazon.com's book recommendations. Trader Joe's depth of interesting and singular products. Walmart's check cashing service. Southwest Airline's Ding! application. The newfound aesthetic of the Ford Focus. And Domino's revamped pizza recipe and savvy PR campaign.

Customer stimulation is a hunger fed. Customer stimulation is an itch scratched. Customer stimulation is a new and engaging package design. It's an easy to use and elegant app that saves people time. Customer stimulation is a service rep who proffers advice on how to improve your experience with their products. It's a warm and friendly smile. It's a caring word. It's a kind gesture.

Although at first blush "customer stimulation" sounds a lot like customer service, marketing and innovation, it is much more. It's a mindset. It's an obsession with figuring out how to engage fence-sitters, and "go deep" into your relationship with customers and their relationship with you and each other. It's about waking up and breaking out of the limiting cycle of best practices, benchmarking, and other forms of imitation.

Success is about uniqueness and passion. Success is about growth through novel ideas that unlock people's hearts and minds. Success is about stimulating desire. It's about new processes, new business models, new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing, and new ways of interacting. It's an endless game of seduction.

And, in this economy, it's your only way forward.