

Marketing Lessons from Ben and Jerry

Many years ago, I lived in Vermont when a new home-made ice cream store opened its doors.

The ice cream stand, located in Burlington, was in a gas station that had long ago been abandoned. This was not a fancy operation. This was very bare bones. It was functional without a lot of fluff.

Behind the counter were several ice cream machines that looked like they could barely work. The machines squeaked and moaned as they turned, creating home-made ice cream.

The people behind the counter had a passion for what they were doing. They eagerly served their customers whatever was requested. Each customer was treated as if they were special. A nod and a smile or positive comment accompanied each item sold.

Slowly by slowly the business grew. Ice cream cone by ice cream cone the word went out: if you want to get great ice cream, you need to check out Ben and Jerry's. People flocked to the ice cream store. Soon, lines out the door were common. Ben and Jerry were advertising their product with powerful, word of mouth, viral marketing.

The reason for their success was more than just the ice cream. They gave back to the community. The owners started a tradition during the summer by showing free movies once a week. The movie was projected on a wall outside the ice cream stand. This became a much anticipated community event. Crowds showed up for every movie, with blankets and beach chairs. They turned the parking lot into a miniature drive-in theater. The crowds ordered a lot of ice cream. They all told a lot of their friends about Ben and Jerry's. Now their marketing message was spreading like a virus.

I left Vermont and moved back several years later. The ice cream stand had moved down the street to a brand new location. Business was booming. The tradition of summer movies had been replaced by various community projects.

Now, the ice cream owners sponsored concerts, festivals and fairs and continued to give back to the community. They made a point of supporting local farmers. All of the milk and produce that went into their ice cream was always purchased locally, first.

After a few years, the demand for their ice cream increased. First demand increased in Vermont, then to neighboring states, and finally across the country. Pretty soon their products began to show up in grocery stores as well.

When Ben and Jerry's were big enough to start selling stock, they had state-wide community meetings. The initial stocks (Initial Public Offering) were sold first, through these community meetings. Any Vermonter who wanted to buy part of Ben and Jerry's company was given the opportunity. They always remembered the local community. They never forgot where they came from and their mission.

Ben and Jerry became very successful but never forgot they started in that abandoned gas station all those years ago. They always thought of their customers. They continued to give back to the community. They capitalized on word of mouth advertising and fierce brand loyalty.

They practiced the law of reciprocity. If you give something, you will get something. They always remembered their customers. They gave much to their customers and they got much back in return.

The lesson here is clear: have passion, then, take action.

Ben and Jerry had big ideas that took their company to the next level.

Always remember your customers and the power of word of mouth advertising.

Remember always, the law of reciprocity. When you give back, you get back...

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About the Author

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