

# Information Architecture and the Support of Brand Promise

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## Brand Promise: A Primer

Before the Internet, the best way a company could directly interact with their customers was through their actual product or service. The customer built a perception of the company while using what was provided. That perception was (and still is) difficult to gauge and manipulate on a one-to-one basis.

Use of a product or service is and always will be a crucial facet of the customer experience. However, compared to a web site, it is less dynamic and sometimes difficult to control, thus diminishing the ability for marketers to facilitate a brand message. Products and services are subject to their environment, mired in a wide range of disruptions generated by employees, operational conditions, and competition.

The relationship between a company and its customer has always revolved around the brand promise. A brand promise is essentially what the company says it will do for the customer. This promise is what customers *perceive* they can expect from the company. A successful brand promise is possessed within a four-step process, which I'm calling the *brand promise lifecycle*.

### BRAND PROMISE LIFECYCLE



Fig. 1

1. **Communication** The promise is conveyed to the consumer.
2. **Scrutiny** The consumer analyzes and considers the promise.
3. **Acceptance** The consumer chooses to accept the promise.
4. **Maintenance** The consumer continues to compare the promise with the experience.

The consumer's perception must be built carefully to avoid extending the business beyond its promise. It is crucial that the business build a promise that is realistic, manageable, competitive, and adds value. The mindful business will pay close attention to the brand promise and design its services, suppliers, and support around it.

Maintaining the brand promise is equally essential. Businesses that provide a recurring experience consistent with their brand promise will cultivate strong customer loyalty. That loyalty creates the returning customer, a necessary bond to act against the forces of competition in the long term.

## **Brand Promise Meets the Web**

With a website, marketing attains a new level. Customers can “experience” companies, and companies can “experience” customers. The website is becoming, if not already, the most powerful and meaningful touchpoint available in the marketing world.

With websites being such a significant aspect for the customer-to-company relationship, the creation and maintenance of a brand promise is more important than ever. Though the force of a website can fortify and amplify a brand message, it can equally bring the customer’s perception to its knees – in seconds.

In the rush to “get online,” many businesses left behind many principles learned by sweat and tears (read: money) in marketing and advertising, including supporting the brand promise. Design was (and often still is) traded for “time to market.” With the crushing fall of dotcoms, these principles resurfaced to remind companies that they exist only because of the customer. Regardless of industry type, businesses share at least one common burden: it is the consumer who ultimately decides whether a product or service has value. Marketers may be able to adjust perception, but the consumer owns it.

The return of these principles makes information architecture more relevant than ever before. The need to “clean the channel” of communication and differentiate from competition demands information architectures be strong, scalable, and communicative.

When designing sites, information architects stay mindful of how the information is organized. They ensure the content and functionality is accessible, usable, and logical. In the sender-receiver communication model, the main enemy of messages is noise; a poorly designed and confusing architecture is pure noise for the user and will diminish the message into obscurity. Even worse, a shoddy architecture will facilitate distortion of the message, harming the user’s perception of a brand. Given the choices available on the Internet, that user will likely leave and possibly never return.

### **Details, details...**

Information architects gather requirements, create a structure and means to navigate it, determine how that structure will be populated, and with what. To make these determinations, information architects draw business rules, goals, and need from the client, as well as those of the user. During these design decisions, all phases of the consumer buying process (and how it interacts with the brand promise lifecycle) must be considered and supported.

## CONSUMER BUYING PROCESS

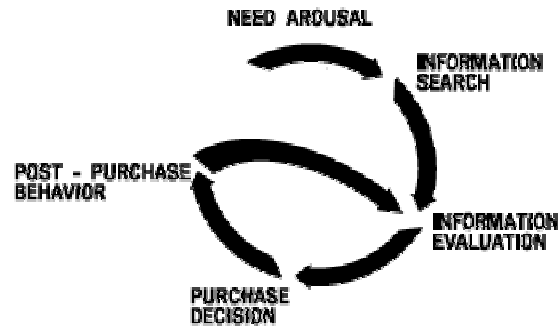


Fig. 2

1. **Need Arousal** The consumer recognizes a need.
2. **Information Search** The consumer determines which brands will fulfill the need. Brand promise begins to be communicated to the consumer.
3. **Information Evaluation** Based on what has been discovered, the consumer weighs the characteristics of the brands under consideration. Brand promise comes under scrutiny.
4. **Purchase Decision** The consumer selects a single brand. The brand promise has been taken, and will be relied upon.
5. **Post-Purchase Behavior** The consumer experiences the brand firsthand and develops a mature perception.

Though originally the stopping grounds of marketers and advertisers, this buying process comes into play when designing and implementing information architectures. The *brand promise lifecycle* becomes an important aspect and can be mapped directly to considerations for information architects.

## BRAND PROMISE LIFECYCLE & I.A. CONSIDERATIONS

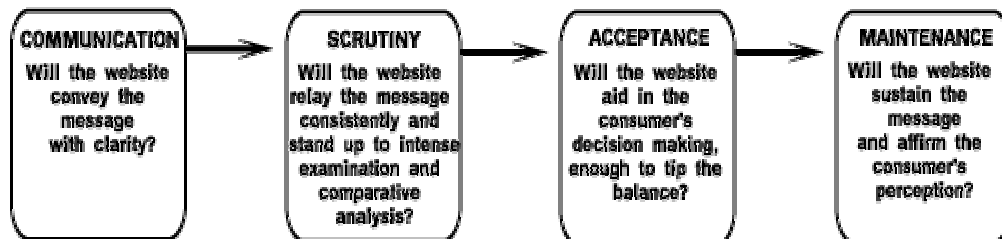


Fig. 3

1. **Communication** Will the website convey the message with clarity?
2. **Scrutiny** Will the website relay the message consistently and stand up to intense examination and comparative analysis?
3. **Acceptance** Will the website aid in the consumer's decision making, enough to tip the balance?
4. **Maintenance** Will the website sustain the message and affirm the consumer's perception?

Download speed, security, and visual quality are a few examples of how brand promise can be affected. Content must be concise and informative, speaking to the correct audience. Navigation must be streamlined, allowing movement through the site without the user losing their sense of place. Functionality must add value and be usable.

## **Conclusion**

During the design of a website, as with all promotional materials, brand promise must be considered a priority. Though technical in its foundations, websites need not be burdened solely by technological considerations. The customer is not only a website user in need of logical structures but an individual evaluating price, quality, safety, speed, and support – a cohesive package.

With the voluminous surge in websites and message dilution being the increasing dilemma faced by advertisers everywhere, information architecture asserts an important foothold in the message delivery process. Differentiation among brands has become an art lost to the noise of modern media, yet the opportunity is still there. Despite the “new economy” game in which brands rise and fall with accelerated zeal, the original question begs: “When a brand speaks, who is listening and what do they hear?” With a well-designed information architecture, the answer is far easier to control and deliver with accuracy.

*Additional articles on brand promise*

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