

Don't Go Breaking My Heart

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Not every romance has a happy ending. Greet Sterenberg looks at ten “heartbreakers” – the things that can make customers fall out of love with brands.

It’s hard for brands to build a relationship with a customer. But unfortunately, it’s all too easy for brands to break that relationship. For a recent study, Research International Qualitatif spoke to customers worldwide about the brands they’d fallen out of love with. We came up with ten “heartbreakers” – the factors that can kill a relationship with a brand.

1. Decline in Product or Service Quality Relationships are built on care and respect. A decline in product or service quality shows a lack of these qualities, and leads to a lack of trust. It’s also worth noting that quality is relative - a brand can show no absolute decline, but it may be seen as poor compared to improved competitors.

2. Crisis in Product or Service Quality Any relationship is vulnerable to a sudden crisis and a brand’s response to this can make or break its relationship with customers. Respond well to bad PR and the relationship may be unaffected, even strengthened. Respond late or poorly and people can turn away. This applies just as much to crises affecting only a single customer - rude service, for instance.

3. Stagnation Boredom is often a relationship’s worst enemy. Brands need to stay fresh in order to prosper – this might mean technical innovation, snappier communications, or exciting new offers. Fail and your relationship with your customers might slip back to being simply functional.

4. Poor Advertising and Communications Relationships can run aground when one partner doesn’t know how to behave in public. An inappropriate or obnoxious brand story can frustrate and turn off consumers. It may only be a minority of customers who take this as a reason to end their relationship with a brand, but it can be a contributory factor for other heartbreakers.

5. Brand Has Moved Away From Customer People change, and so do brands. A brand may be seen as having violated its original vision, perhaps by becoming too popular or mainstream. The customer no longer feels part of the brand’s target audience, and the relationship corrodes. But this can be a necessary evil - a brand may want to position itself as a more mass-market proposition

6. Customer Has Moved Away From Brand Sometimes relationships founder on a change in circumstance, and consumers can renounce

previously cherished brands if things in their own life change. An upwardly mobile individual might change car or clothes brands; a new father might reluctantly put his Sony PlayStation in the attic. If the relationship is strong enough, though, the customer might make your brand something they carry over from one lifestage to the next.

7. Loss of Control? You might love somebody but hate their friends. Similarly a brand relationship can be strained if the brand finds itself hijacked by undesirable users or unable to control its identity. A clothing brand that finds itself popular among football hooligans, for instance, can quickly lose its more reputable customers.

8. Inauthenticity Suspicion and dishonesty poison many relationships. Consumer goods brands are vulnerable to being faked, which creates insecurity. For online services in particular this is a global problem – “fake” spam™ emails claiming to be from banks or auction sites can seriously dent customer trust.

9. Ethical Issues “Stand by your brand?” Not everyone does. The behaviour of a brand or its parent company can have a significant effect on customer relationships. The sense of personal identification with the brand can be damaged by a perceived clash of values. Ethical issues linger as part of the public perception of a brand.

10. Cultural Issues The tenth heartbreaker is the one which brand managers can do least about. Wider cultural issues, like anti-US feeling in Latin America, or concerns about nutrition and obesity in Europe, can have a negative impact on even a strong relationship.

Some of these heartbreakers are easier to avoid than others, but the best way to escape them is to know your customers and their world as well as possible.