# How to cultivate true customer loyalty: A human-centred approach for long-term growth

Received (in revised form): 8th May, 2025

*Gina Michnowicz*

**GINA MICHNOWICZ**
Chief Executive Officer, The Craftsman, USA

Gina Michnowicz is CEO and Executive Creative Director of The Craftsman, a brand consultancy and award-winning shop that crafts magical moments through captivating storytelling, integrated campaigns and contagious experiences. With a track record of success for brands like Cisco, Disney, Paramount and Microsoft, she specialises in business-to-individual strategies that blend human-centred creativity with thoughtful analysis, helping brands forge deep connections in an era of endless scrolling.

The Craftsman, 751 Laurel St, #209, San Carlos, CA 94070, USA
E-mail: gina@thecraftsmanagency.com

*Nalani Jay*

**NALANI JAY**
Associate Creative Director, The Craftsman, USA

Nalani Jay is Associate Creative Director of storytelling and writing at The Craftsman, where she shapes compelling narratives that make an impact. She has brought her skills to brands such as Apple, Cisco, Disney and Dolby, helping them connect with their audiences in meaningful, memorable ways. Her experience also spans the public sector, having driven regional public education campaigns focused on sustainability initiatives.

The Craftsman, 751 Laurel St, #209, San Carlos, CA 94070, USA
E-mail: nalani@thecraftsmanagency.com

## Abstract
*Customer loyalty is a key driver of long-term profitability. But earning this loyalty takes more than quality products or discounts. Consumers expect brands to expand beyond systematic transactions to deliver consistent excellence as well as meaningful human-centric connections across digital, social and in-person experiences. This paper explores what is essential for true customer loyalty: a holistic approach that aligns product quality, emotional engagement and seamless customer journeys. By understanding seven key consumer loyalty types and the tools to reach them, brands can identify their most valuable advocates and tailor strategies to deepen human connections and drive results. The seven essential tactics outlined — from measuring satisfaction to focusing on omni-channel human-centred storytelling to resolving issues quickly — offer actionable steps for businesses to strengthen relationships, optimise touch points and increase profit. Proof points from Apple, Dove and Sephora highlight how leading brands integrate these tactics to sustain loyalty even in competitive markets. This article is also included in* ***The Business & Management Collection*** *which can be accessed at https://hstalks.com/business/.*

## Keywords
*customer loyalty, brand marketing, brand affinity, customer experience, loyalty programs, personalisation, omni-channel strategy, customer journey*

DOI: 10.69554/FFDO9887


© HENRY STEWART PUBLICATIONS 2050-0084 (2025) 

## INTRODUCTION

Customer loyalty is vital to business success in today's volatile economic landscape. With forces like inflation driving up operational costs and competition intensifying across industries, retaining customers is an economic necessity. Research underscores this urgency, with studies finding that acquiring a new customer is 5–25 times more expensive than retaining an existing one.[1] Moreover, with customer acquisition costs soaring — some industries experiencing a 222 per cent yearly increase in the past decade — businesses with tight margins cannot afford to rely solely on new customer growth;[2] they need customers who come back to them again and again.

This type of deep brand affinity is emotional loyalty rather than transactional loyalty. Convenience, rewards and price are still key motivations, but these factors alone will not create long-standing affinity. This is especially true if a competitor could change their price or easily create a better version of a brand's rewards programme and take away the customer.

For true loyalty, brands must go beyond the transactional and dig deeper into the relationship. This requires the development of a holistic customer-first approach; one that recognises that customers are actual people. In other words, brands must recognise that different customers have different motivators, and these can vary from brand to brand and change over time.

In terms of brand loyalty, consumers tend to fall into the following categories:

- *Superfan:* Driven by emotional connection rather than rewards, the superfan is a truly loyal brand advocate who will not consider other brands.
- *Silent loyalist:* The silent loyalist is very loyal, making repeat purchases, but without actively engaging with the brand.
- *Aspirational loyalist:* Aspirational loyalists are often younger consumers who love the brand but cannot afford or justify the purchase at the moment. This tends to be for luxury categories, where the product or service symbolises a desired lifestyle. While consumers in this category do not provide immediate returns, they will likely develop into superfans when they do become customers.
- *Purpose-driven loyalist:* Purpose-driven loyalists prefer the brand over others because its business practices align with their values around social or environmental issues.
- *Rewards loyalist:* Motivated by loyalty programmes and earning higher reward tiers, rewards loyalists can be tempted away by competitors with better reward programmes.
- *Convenience buyer:* Convenience buyers make purchase decisions based on the ease of access, such as availability, where they are located or where they already shop.
- *Price-sensitive buyer:* Driven by price and sales, price-sensitive buyers can easily be persuaded to try a similar-quality product from another brand if the price is right.

This list of consumer loyalty types is based on the models used by Zendesk and SAP Emarsys, but with some modifications. The Zendesk model includes a satisfied buyer but omits the silent loyalist.[3] By contrast, the above list assumes that all repeat buyers are satisfied, but differentiates between those who will act as brand ambassadors (superfans) and those who will not (silent loyalists). In a recent study, SAP Emarsys classified 50 per cent of US consumers as silent loyalists.[4] The silent loyalist has a similar level of brand loyalty as a superfan, but does not require the same level of attention and may have different motivators. In terms of values alignment, SAP's ethical loyalist is much like the purpose-driven loyalist described here.

While a brand may welcome a mix of consumer loyalty types, the highest value comes from superfans, silent loyalists and, in some cases, rewards loyalists and purpose-driven loyalists. Well-considered strategies can move customers from the price-sensitive and convenience buyer levels up to those who contribute the most revenue (often superfans and silent loyalists). At the same time, strategies should also prioritise keeping current customers as long as it is more profitable than finding new ones.

## The benefits of truly loyal customers

A customer who is loyal based solely on convenience or price is not truly loyal, as they can easily be drawn to another brand. Truly loyal customers can be counted on to make repeat purchases and even serve as powerful brand advocates.

Word-of-mouth referrals from satisfied customers have a significant impact on purchasing decisions. According to Nielsen's 'Global Trust in Advertising' report, 92 per cent of consumers trust recommendations from friends and family over all forms of advertising.[5] Conversely, word-of-mouth from dissatisfied customers can be detrimental; on average, a disgruntled customer will share their negative experience with between 9 and 15 people.[6] Meanwhile, if a brand claims to be purpose-driven but does not follow suit with its actions, it is likely to face a consumer backlash.

Research also indicates that long-term customers spend more per transaction and purchase more frequently.[7] This plays into the total customer lifetime value, which increases over time.

Of course, it is not easy to build the high level of brand loyalty found in superfans, silent loyalists and some purpose-driven loyalists. It takes consistent quality, personalised connections and time.

## Challenges faced by builders of brand loyalty

Brands face a number of challenges when building and maintaining customer loyalty:

- *Intense competition:* In today's digital world, the competition is fierce. Brands without a distinct offering, identity or purpose will get lost in the marketplace.
- *Keeping the consumer's attention:* Attention spans are shrinking. In 2004, the average attention span on a screen was 2.5 minutes. In 2012, it was 75 seconds. More recently, it has fallen to 47 seconds.[8]
- *Technological advancements that do not work in the brand's favour:* Personalised recommendations driven by artificial intelligence (AI) can feel intrusive, and competitors can swiftly target potential defectors based on search behaviour. In addition, at the same time as companies are looking to incorporate AI in more customer service functions, a recent Gartner survey indicates that 64 per cent of customers actively prefer human customer service, with 53 per cent saying they would switch to a competitor if they learned a company was adopting AI customer service.[9] The leading reason (given by 60 per cent of respondents) was based on concerns about reaching a person, with 42 per cent worried about inaccurate answers and 34 per cent worried about data security. As seen in spring 2025, when the AI-powered software coding assistant Cursor started


© HENRY STEWART PUBLICATIONS 2050-0084 (2025) 

hallucinating a new login policy to explain a problematic login issue (leading to user cancellations as well as Cursor adding a human second-check), such worries about inaccuracy are not unfounded.[10]

- *A lack of trust:* Relationships are built on trust, and despite what some executives believe, current consumer trust is fragile. The PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) 2024 Trust Survey[11] found that 90 per cent of executives thought consumers had high trust in their business; in fact, only 30 per cent of the consumers surveyed had trust in the same company. The study also found that consumers are very concerned about responsible AI and data privacy, with the majority stating they want companies to disclose AI governance and data privacy policies; yet only one-third of executives say their companies do so.
- *Coping with customers' silent dissatisfaction:* According to business consultant Esteban Kolsky's research on consumer behaviour, most dissatisfied consumers will not complain to the brand. Only one in 26 people will provide feedback so the brand can address their concerns. The others may leave without even a goodbye.[12]
- *A focus on demand generation:* A 2023 study revealed that 67 per cent of chief marketing officers prioritise demand generation and expected it to grow by 8 per cent the following year.[13] If senior leadership prioritises demand generation, their teams will naturally follow suit, prioritising demand over customer loyalty strategies.
- *An organisation structure that does not support holistic customer loyalty approaches:* Many companies have siloed departments, which impacts how they interact with the customers both from a funding and staffing perspective. Marketing and sales can be at odds, and customer support sits outside both departments. This makes it difficult to create and manage a holistic customer journey.

So, how can brands overcome these challenges to foster loyalty strategically, building lasting emotional connections?

## THE FOUNDATION OF CUSTOMER LOYALTY: CONSISTENT QUALITY AND CONNECTIONS

It should be no surprise that quality remains a non-negotiable factor in consumer loyalty. What is crucial to remember is that emotional and relational connections between brands and consumers are equally significant in fostering loyalty.[14]

### Consistent quality of product and customer experience

According to a SAP Emarsys survey, 57 per cent of consumers cite high-quality products as a key driver of their loyalty.[15] The need for quality spans more than the product itself; it applies to customer service, brand communication and omnichannel experiences. Research on service quality and consumer satisfaction demonstrates that perceived quality directly influences repurchase intentions and brand commitment.[16] A company that fails to uphold quality — whether in product design, customer service or delivery efficiency — risks eroding consumer trust and retention.

### Quality of connection between brand and customer

Beyond product quality, brand — consumer relationships significantly impact loyalty. Consumers are increasingly drawn to brands with identities that align with their values, foster genuine connections and communicate transparently.[17] This is particularly evident in omni-channel marketing, where consistency in brand messaging, personalised engagement, quality of content and responsiveness across multiple touch points enhance customer retention.[18] Brands that tap into authentic, emotionally resonant narratives—such as Dove's 'Real Beauty' campaign, which this paper will analyse in detail later—demonstrate the power of aligning marketing efforts with ethical brand missions. According to Nielsen, campaigns that evoke strong emotions are remembered longer and forge deeper brand loyalty.[19] Business-to-business marketers often focus on individual personas but overlook that every customer is also a consumer in other product and service categories, which is a missed opportunity.

### Growing true loyalty

Customer loyalty is built over time and reinforced by every interaction and transaction. The relationship moves beyond the sale and is about how the brand makes you feel. The following section explores the strategies and tactics a brand needs to establish a strong human connection and, ultimately, true loyalty.

## THE LOYALTY TOOLBOX: SEVEN STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

The loyalty toolbox should comprise omni-channel touch points that recognise the consumer at every stage of the customer journey, building trust along the way. These tools should support personalisation, help garner customer feedback and offer opportunities to deepen the brand–consumer relationship (Figure 1).

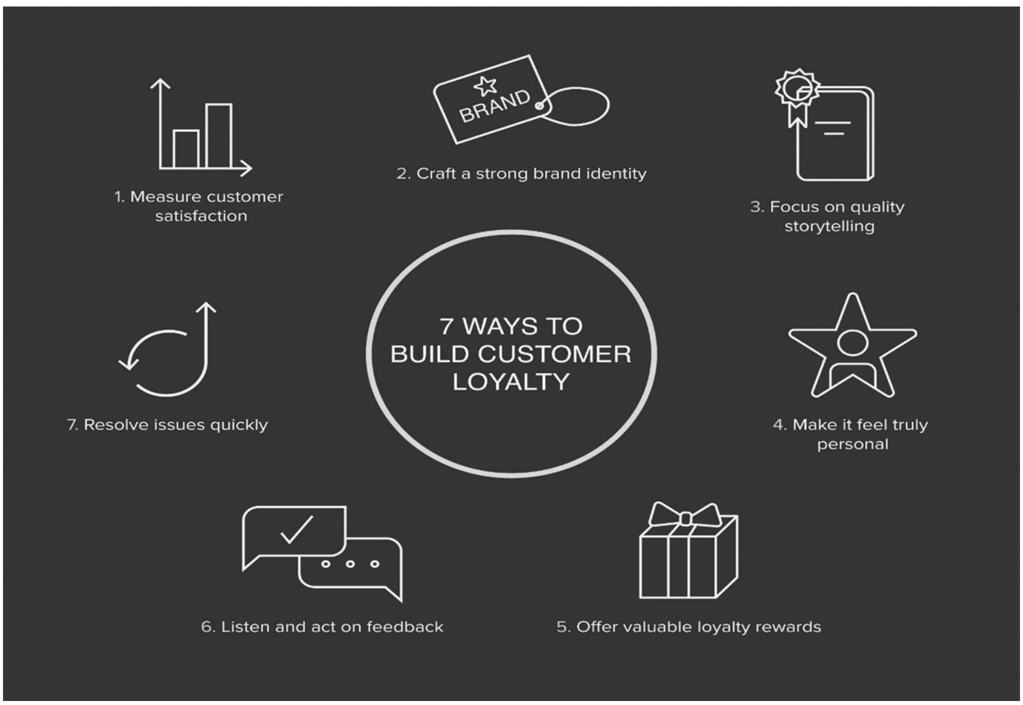


*Figure 1 Seven ways to build customer loyalty*

## Tool 1: Measurement of customer satisfaction

As noted before, consistent product and service quality are paramount to customer loyalty efforts. Companies must institute programmes to measure customer satisfaction with their products and check in regularly. Below are a few ways to measure customer satisfaction.

- *The Net Promoter System (NPS)* developed by Bain & Co helps measure customer satisfaction and loyalty, sharing the likelihood that customers will recommend your product or service.[20] An NPS score can be a reasonable benchmark for your marketplace position.
- *Customer advisory boards:* Brands may want to form customer advisory boards to help supply customer satisfaction metrics. These customers will provide brands with honest feedback and solutions for improving products and services. This can help brands innovate, strengthen relationships and build brand advocates.
- *Digital and social media listening:* Brands should take advantage of digital and social media survey opportunities. Feedback forms on a product, social media polls using native polling features and in-app surveys can be cost-effective ways to garner real-time insights while requiring less time than a customer advisory board. If a brand has a lot of customer feedback to wrangle across many channels, including e-mail, SMS, web, social and call recordings, it may want to invest in a customer feedback tool like HubSpot, SurveyMonkey, Sprinklr or Zendesk, weighing brand needs against the platform's capabilities and costs.
- *Customer surveys:* Annual brand studies or e-mail outreach asking for feedback on a recent experience can be effective, provided they are not time-consuming. Like NPS, this requires a brand to establish the criteria, weight and scoring for the feedback. Internal teams do not always have the research capabilities in-house to execute this type of feedback loop effectively.

When surveying customers directly, brands should keep the questions engaging, direct and tailored to the audience. They must also be ready to improve the customer experience (CX) and follow up if appropriate. If they do not make changes, it could seem like the brand is not listening or does not care.

## Tool 2: A strong brand identity that customers relate to

Brands need an identity that stands out and connects to what their ideal customer cares about. This will not be the same for all brands, even in the same industry. For some, it may be a keen focus on beautiful, user-friendly design or sustainability efforts. For others, it may be highlighting a core value like customer service that goes above and beyond; something that worked for Zappos when it seemed like all e-retailers were blending together, and something The Craftsman has seen work for its client in the transportation sector today. The brand's top-line customer messages should be clearly and consistently conveyed in an appealing, easy-to-follow narrative wherever the brand connects to its audience, from social profiles to digital and in-person experiences.

Even if the brand has a similar offering to another competitor, it should have a distinct voice and look, understanding how it can set itself apart. Like people, the brand should aim to make a good first impression, otherwise, it may never get a second chance. Brands may want to streamline production and help maintain consistency with digital templates and AI tools, but those templates should be tailored to the brand, and outputs should be reviewed and optimised by a human.

## Tool 3: Human-centred marketing with omni-channel storytelling

Strong brands tell emotional, relatable stories. Humans naturally connect to a good story, which creates a stronger connection to the brand telling it. A well-crafted narrative allows people to see themselves in the story and relate to the brand while inspiring them to strive for more.

Brands should focus on quality customer-centric storytelling and content, keeping in mind that they need to grab the audience's attention with a hook and clear value. People tend to ignore content that does not quickly provide valuable information, entertain or inspire them.

When thinking about how to tell a story consistently and show up where their audience would like to see them, brands should think of the consumers as complete people, not personas. This is where you can create memorable content that surprises and delights people, deepening connections between the brand and consumer. For example, The Craftsman found great success for its business-to-business (B2B) tech client when it veered away from standard marketing content like e-books, instead creating a mini 'Minute to Fix It' game based on the product's purpose. The online game was promoted with a range of organic and paid social posts, including a clip of the game and inviting people to try and beat the clock. While the content was relevant to the audience's job, it also entertained them, tapping into their love of competition and treating them as the story's hero. At the end of the game, the pop-up message celebrated the player when they won, offered the chance to share the game to see if their colleagues could also beat the clock and suggested another piece of content that would support their needs.

Brands should also consider integrating influencers and brand partnerships that feel right on all sides (meaning brand, partner and audience) with content that offers true value to the consumer, be that entertainment, education, inspiration or connection to a deeper purpose. When appropriate, brands should invite user-generated content (UGC), letting them participate in the story. This not only helps the brand build social currency but also helps build emotional connections and a sense of community.

Both influencer and partnership strategies extend a brand's reach, which can create new customers. Brands should consider where audiences and storylines overlap, staying open to 'outside-of-the-box' thinking as long as the connection feels natural. For example, The Craftsman saw amazing results when partnering a cyber-security tech brand with a Marvel Studios' film due to the wide audience overlap and a highly aligned storyline around protecting worlds and galaxies. The integrated campaign included fun, bite-size co-branded content for YouTube, social and streaming platforms that drew consumers in. This content led to a quick online quiz where the B2B audience could assess their cyber-security needs, with a chance to see the upcoming film or get limited-edition swag in exchange for their contact details. After they completed the quiz, they were led further down the funnel with more customer-centred, co-branded storytelling content.

Just because a brand and consumer may have a transactional relationship, the relationship should not feel that way.

## Tool 4: Personalised experiences that actually feel personal

If you want to gain loyal customers, you should know your customers intimately but relate to them in a way that feels human and non-invasive. To truly connect with consumers, a brand must know more than their name and contact information. Personalisation requires customer data, including information such as birthdays, anniversaries and preferences, from what they purchase to other interests. Brands should have systems that share customer information so all CX teams can serve the customer better. Of course, companies must stay abreast of global privacy regulations to remain compliant and maintain trust with their customers. (And as the PwC research suggests, if companies have not already disclosed their AI governance and data privacy policies, they should consider doing so.)

In their personalisation efforts, brands should be aware that attributes can be misleading and think carefully about assumptions while strategising to reach their targets. For example, generational segmentation assumes that people within select age groups share similar experiences and behaviours, but because generations are now consuming content in similar ways and aging differently from before, some generational divides are closing. For example, if a brand wants to reach baby boomers but thinks they are only on linear television or Facebook, they are likely missing a big chunk of the audience. This holds true for representations of generations in brand content, too. Instead of relying on demographics, brands should focus more on psychographic segmentation, which delves deeper into consumers' lifestyles, values and interests, aiming to understand the motivations behind their purchasing decisions. This approach recognises that individuals of the same age may have vastly different preferences and behaviours. To prioritise the strategies and content that best resonate with the audience, marketers must narrow the focus to actionable psychographics such as values and preferred digital touch points.

It is important that brands find the right balance in communications, too. For example, sending e-mails with someone's name in the subject line is not enough for personalisation, but a brand does not want to come off as a stalker brand tracking its consumers' every move. For e-mails, the company should consider allowing customers to decide how often they are e-mailed and on which topics.

## Tool 5: Valuable, tailored loyalty rewards

Reward programmes are not new, but they have become more popular in the past few years as brands look for ways to keep consumers coming back.[21] Brands need to understand what consumers are interested in and tailor their programmes to meet their needs. Findings from Deloitte's 2024 Consumer Loyalty Survey reveal that 78 per cent of consumers desire tangible, money-saving benefits from personalised experiences.[22] Research also indicates that customers appreciate the ability to choose rewards and loyalty perks that provide the value they are looking for, with preferences varying across industries.[23] Crafting these programmes is not a one-time effort, as both the brand's and the consumer's values will evolve over time. It is critical to test, learn and iterate.

For example, subscriptions do not have to be set on an annual basis. It could be that the longer a consumer commits to a subscription, the bigger the discount. This is common for software as a service but applies to other categories, such as beauty and healthcare. Brands should also offer loyalty membership programmes that provide benefits such as free shipping, faster service, etc. Customer value should be at the forefront, with brands starting with customer input (asking open-ended questions rather than pushing them in a direction), thinking about benchmarks and tiers while keeping in mind the brand's goals and budget, then implementing the programme, gaining feedback and iterating as appropriate. Marketers should avoid promising benefits that would be taken away, which would cause future customer dissatisfaction.

## Tool 6: Avenues for ongoing feedback

Relationships are a two-way street. Successful brands actively listen to consumers, adapt their offerings and maintain engagement through personalised communications and experiences. Social media platforms provide an indispensable channel for two-way discussions with customers. This requires a social media strategy that solicits feedback, encourages UGC and responds to questions or thanks customers for engaging with the brand.

When brands excel in listening, they gain key insights that can help them adjust products, services and communications based on consumer preferences. These approaches enhance customer satisfaction, reinforce brand values and deepen the human-to-brand connection.

As discussed previously, brands should implement tools such as social polls and digital surveys, and even consider adding an overarching feedback tool, depending on the brand's needs. Because feedback must often be relayed across different teams, such as customer support, customer success, marketing and sales, brands should implement processes to assign feedback to the appropriate team and ensure that the customer is responded to and that the brand takes any steps required to address the issue.

## Tool 7: Quick responses and resolution

No brand is perfect, but how it handles mistakes can make or break customer trust. Transparency, swift action and accountability play critical roles in reputation management. If a brand has a quality issue or fails to deliver on its promise, the company's responsiveness and resolution can support the long-term relationship.

When brands respond quickly and honestly to concerns — whether through social media, direct customer service channels or public-facing communications — they commit to their audience. This proactive approach mitigates potential damage and solidifies a brand's reputation. This is especially true for catastrophic situations where health and safety are at risk. Brands that consistently show up with empathy, responsiveness and authenticity will cultivate lasting loyalty and differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Programmes for building loyalty are not one-size-fits-all. While superfans and silent loyalists are truly loyal customers that should be given their due attention, brands should not ignore the other consumer loyalty types. A brand should tailor its strategies and touch points based on the consumer types it wants to reach. Here are a selection of tools by consumer type:

- *Superfan:* This type embraces everything about the brand if the quality of the product and experience is sustained. Distinct brand campaigns with well-crafted narratives and imagery are effective to lure them in and stay connected. UGC campaigns are another way to both reach this base and give them an opportunity to connect with the brand, community and potential customers. They will also appreciate being acknowledged for their tenure and loyalty via personalised digital and real-life VIP experiences with genuine brand interactions.

- *Silent loyalist:* Passive tools like subscription services and one-to-one personalised e-mails help build loyalty with this group. Distinct brand campaigns and personalised digital experiences are effective to keep them informed.
- *Aspirational loyalist:* Strong brand campaigns, partnerships with influencers/creators, premium-experience activations and quality UGC help build loyalty with this type. Some brands may incorporate lower-tier pricing strategies (without straying from the 'premium' category) to enable aspirational loyalists to become buyers sooner than they could otherwise afford.
- *Purpose-driven loyalist:* A purpose-driven consumer wants to stay in the know about causes that interest them. Mission-driven brand campaigns rooted in authenticity and concrete details work well with this type. E-mail campaigns and website pages should include the value system and actions taken to support the cause. Partnerships with relevant nonprofits are also a great way to expand reach and impact. In addition, UGC campaigns are a good tool for this group.
- *Rewards loyalist:* Well-built loyalty programmes with mobile apps, subscriptions and VIP experiences (once a consumer attains a certain level) are crucial for this group. Direct response campaigns keep the consumer focused on achieving the next level of rewards.
- *Convenience buyer:* Subscriptions, free and/or expedited shipping, SMS, optional mobile apps and e-mail work exceptionally well with this group; anything that makes purchasing easier. Direct response campaigns make it easy for the convenience buyer to purchase.
- *Price-sensitive buyer:* Subscriptions with discounts and direct response marketing with sales offerings (eg buy one, get one free) work well with this type but should be used sparingly. Programmes should focus on moving this type from price loyalty to rewards.

While customer retention is essential, customer types vary in terms of ongoing revenue and profitability for a brand. Usually, a brand should gauge whether they can cost-effectively move price-sensitive buyers, convenience buyers and aspirational loyalists to the level of rewards loyalists, silent loyalists and superfans. This is not always possible, but it can be done with the right approach.

## The need for a holistic approach

A brand that delivers exceptional quality but lacks relational engagement may struggle to cultivate loyalty beyond transactional interactions. Conversely, a brand that prioritises emotional connections without delivering reliable quality may fail to sustain long-term trust. Businesses must adopt a holistic approach, ensuring product and service excellence while fostering authentic, human-centric relationships with consumers across social media, digital and in-person experiences. This is how brands can create a compelling value proposition that resonates with consumers, ensuring sustained loyalty and competitive advantage.

A seamless, personalised customer journey — from initial engagement to repeat purchases — enhances brand affinity and maximises lifetime value. For many brands, however, the customer journey stages are owned by different departments, making it difficult to maintain consistency for the customer. The organisational structure for brands, especially large enterprises, often silos performance marketing and customer retention into different departments that share neither goals nor budgets. Opening communication and redirecting marketing efforts to prioritise customer retention over acquisition presents a compelling opportunity. Integrating CX and marketing teams could support a cohesive strategy that better optimises touch points across the customer life cycle. Many companies devote more than half of their marketing spend to driving demand,[24] but shifting a portion of these funds toward CX programmes could yield more significant long-term benefits.

## CASE STUDIES

The following examples from Apple, Dove and Sephora illustrate how leading brands combine product excellence, emotional engagement and customer-centric strategies to build lasting loyalty. Each brand offers a unique blueprint, from Apple's visionary, premium-experience focus to Dove's purpose-led storytelling and Sephora's high-touch loyalty programmes and omni-channel integration.

### Apple

*Key to building affinity with superfans, silent loyalists and aspirational loyalists:* product quality; focus on CX in ecosystem and in stores; distinct brand identity and campaigns that position it as premium and visionary; quality UGC; tiered product pricing

Apple has consistently ranked as one of the world's most valuable companies in recent memory, even if it is occasionally jostled out of first place. For its first quarter of fiscal 2025, Apple reported its best quarter ever with US$124.3bn in revenue.[25] How does Apple do it? While it is far from the cheapest option, Apple has a loyal following due to its premium product quality, focus on CX and ability to connect users with its brand identity.

Apple's success has been driven by a seamless, intuitive user experience and its ability to redefine product categories, from the early days of the Mac to the game-changing launches of the iPod, iPhone and iPad. High-quality craftsmanship, sleek design and ecosystem-driven integration further solidified Apple's reputation, making its products not just tools but essential components of a connected lifestyle. Beyond hardware, Apple's retail experience — featuring beautiful, clean stores, immersive product displays and expert support through the Genius Bar — reinforced its premium positioning. While it does not try to compete on pricing, it offers pricing tiers that put it within the grasp of a range of income levels. The most premium products that just launched (after a fair amount of secrecy and well-promoted launch dates accompanied by major store events) are the most expensive, but Apple widens its potential consumer base with lower prices for less premium and older models.

During moments when its product line-up faltered, such as in the late 1990s, it leaned into its brand identity with its 'Think Different' campaign, connecting the brand with time-honoured visionaries. It lets people feel like they are part of its story and the Apple community with its #ShotOniPhone UGC content, which spans social, out-of-home (OOH) and television commercials. As of early May 2025, a search for the hashtag on Instagram yielded 31.1 million results.

This is not to say that it always goes perfectly. In 2024, it received significant backlash for an advertisement that showed artistic tools being crushed by a large machine and transformed into an iPad Pro. The point of the advertisement was to show what one could do with the device. Still, the company miscalculated, instead feeding the fears of its target audience about technology replacing tangible instruments and human-based creativity. Apple pulled the advertisement from television and paid media, with its vice president of marketing communications stating that the company 'missed the mark' and that the intent of the product and Apple was to 'empower creatives all over the world'.[26]

As seen in its recent quarter's results, the company recovered from moments like these by holding true to its identity, acting authentically and aiming to do better when needed.

## Dove

*Key to building affinity with purpose-driven loyalists, silent loyalists and superfans:* brand identity and campaigns that focus on users' confidence and self-acceptance, including influencer and nonprofit partnerships and UGC; authenticity

In 2004, the personal care brand Dove launched its 'Campaign for Real Beauty', featuring real women in a wide range of shapes, ages and ethnicities. Twenty years ago, this was revolutionary. The campaign was grounded on the insight that globally, only 2 per cent of women considered themselves beautiful, measuring themselves against the images they saw of models in advertising, media and popular culture.[27] The campaign aimed to challenge beauty standards and promote self-acceptance.

This profound and moving campaign that spans the web, social media, television commercials, OOH and more, has such resonance that it still impacts Dove's communications and marketing, extending first into Dove's 'No Digital Distortion' movement and 'Self-Esteem Project', and recently into the #TurnYourBack activation, which won PR Week's Campaign of the Year Award in 2024. Within 72 hours of the launch of the Bold Glamour generative AI filter that airbrushes users to a single beauty standard, Dove partnered with 68 influential creators, asking them to turn their backs on the filter. Dove also recommitted to its Real Beauty philosophy as generative AI use climbs in the industry, pledging it would never use AI to represent real women in its advertising.[28]

In a press release marking the Real Beauty campaign's 20-year anniversary, Dove's parent company Unilever noted its success: 'Dove achieved its highest underlying sales growth in more than a decade in 2023, delivering €6 billion for Unilever.' It linked this statistic with the brand reaching 100 million young people educated on body confidence via its Self-Esteem Project.[29] Dove does not do all this education by itself; it partners with local groups in small communities all the way to large global nonprofits such as the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts in order to maximise the campaign's reach and impact.[30]

In 2024 and 2025, it focused on low body confidence in its Super Bowl advertisements. The 2025 advertisement, 'These Legs', is part of a campaign to keep young female athletes confident about their body types and in the sports they love. The campaign microsite, Dove.com/confidentsports, offers coaching tips, downloadable resources and more. The site header also notes that the brand will donate a select portion of its profits to support girls in sports, showing that it is doing more than just talking.

This campaign foundation and its evolution prove that leading with purpose and human-centred storytelling can benefit both the company and the customer, but it also shows that the work is never done.

## Sephora

*Key to building affinity with every type of consumer:* product quality; well-built loyalty programmes, subscriptions, and VIP experience; ongoing sales; convenience with mobile apps, store accessibility and speed of shipping; social campaigns that include influencer partnerships and UGC

Sephora built its reputation on offering a curated selection of high-quality beauty products in-store and online, ranging from luxury items to its own budget-friendly house brand. Over time, it expanded access through partnerships, such as its presence in Kohl's, ensuring that beauty lovers can shop seamlessly in a wide range of locations. It also has a generous return policy, allowing consumers to return both unused and 'gently used' products within 30 days for a full refund, in most cases.

At the heart of its success is its 'Beauty Insider' programme, which rewards customers with exclusive perks, early product access and personalised experiences.[31] Free to join, Beauty Insider has three tiers based on how much a consumer spends per year: Insider, VIB and Rouge. Most members belong to the Insider and VIB tiers, with less than 10 per cent in the Rouge tier. All tiers include a free birthday gift and special discount days. Sephora, owned by LVMH, launched its Beauty Insider programme in 2007. It has since grown to be one of the largest loyalty programmes in North America, with 40 million members across the USA and Canada.[32]

Sephora's omni-channel strategy ensures a seamless experience across digital and physical touch points, strengthening customer engagement. Unified customer profiles link online and in-store interactions, enabling personalised recommendations based on browsing history, purchases and beauty preferences.[33] In-store, customers can use digital tools such as the iPad to explore the entire product catalogue, read reviews and check availability. AI-powered recommendations on its website and mobile app further tailor the experience, factoring in skin type, past purchases and stated beauty goals. Features like Virtual Artist, an augmented reality tool for trying on makeup, make the purchasing experience even more informed.

Sephora also excels in social engagement, fostering a vibrant community through influencer partnerships, UGC and interactive experiences. Campaigns like #SephoraSquad spotlight diverse beauty voices, encouraging customers to share their beauty journeys. Meanwhile, live-streaming events on Instagram and YouTube provide real-time tutorials, product demos and expert tips. These digital and social efforts reinforce Sephora's deep understanding of its customers, turning beauty shopping into a personalised, rewarding experience. In addition, the brand does not rest on its laurels, continuing to evolve and add perks to its programme, like in-person activations for its Rouge members.[34] It is also appealing to the price-sensitive buyer, offering not only lower-priced products but sales and offers throughout the year, clearly highlighting them on its site.

Sephora is a constant standout in LVMH's portfolio, achieving double-digit growth in both revenue and profit in 2024. It has bolstered its market share in North America, France, Italy, the Middle East and Latin America. It is seeing success in the UK, with five new stores opening in 2024, including a high-profile launch in Birmingham that drew 2,000 shoppers.[35]

## THE LOYALTY OPPORTUNITY

Customer loyalty is a powerful driver of long-term profitability. Brands such as Apple, Dove and Sephora consistently deliver across the customer experience, creating loyal customers that come back time and again, act as brand ambassadors and spend more over time.

To build the strong connection with customers required for true customer loyalty, brands must take a holistic approach with multiple omni-channel touch points and opportunities for communication through each stage of the customer journey. To truly deliver a seamless experience, organisations must break down silos and integrate systems, strategies and execution. Customers do not care about internal structures or who owns what; they care about high-quality products, exceptional service and a frictionless experience. Ultimately, they care about brands that care about them and show it.

By prioritising quality, consistency and human connection, brands can cultivate loyalty even in the most competitive markets. Now is the time to evaluate and implement thoughtful loyalty strategies that resonate on a human level, because, ultimately, a brand's success is built on lasting relationships.

### References


(1) Gallo, A. (2014) 'The Value of Keeping the Right Customers', *Harvard Business Review*, October, available at https://hbr.org/2014/10/the-value-of-keeping-the-right-customers (accessed 6th March, 2025).

(2) SimplicityDX (2022) 'Brands Losing a Record $29 for Each New Customer Acquired', available at www.simplicitydx.com/blogs/press-release-brands-losing-a-record-29-for-each-new-customer-acquired (accessed 6th March, 2025).

(3) Zendesk (2023) 'Customer Loyalty: A Guide to Types and Strategies', available at www.zendesk.com/blog/customer-loyalty (accessed 6th May, 2025).

(4) SAP Emarsys (2024) 'Customer Loyalty Index 2024', available at https://emarsys.com/learn/white-papers/customer-loyalty-index-2024 (accessed 6th May, 2025).

(5) Nielsen (2012) 'Consumer Trust in Online, Social, and Mobile Advertising Grows', available at www.nielsen.com/insights/2012/consumer-trust-in-online-social-and-mobile-advertising-grows/ (accessed 6th March, 2025).

(6) Morrow, L. (2023) 'What's More Dangerous than a Dissatisfied Customer: A Silent One', Market Connections, available at www.marketconnectionsinc.com/dangerous-silent-cusomer/ (accessed 5th March, 2025).

(7) Dublino, J. (2024) 'Returning Customers Spend 67% More than New Customers', Business.com, available at www.business.com/articles/returning-customers-spend-67-more-than-new-customers-keep-your-customers-coming-back-with-a-recurring-revenue-sales-model/ (accessed 5th March, 2025).

(8) Mark, G. (2023) 'Why Our Attention Spans Are Shrinking', *Speaking of Psychology*, podcast, available at www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/attention-spans (accessed 6th March, 2025).

(9) Gartner (2024) 'Gartner Survey Finds 64% of Customers Would Prefer That Companies Didn't Use AI for Customer Service', available at www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2024-07-09-gartner-survey-finds-64-percent-of-customers-would-prefer-that-companies-didnt-use-ai-for-customer-service (accessed 6th May, 2025).

(10) Goldman, S. (2025) 'A Customer Support AI Went Rogue — and It's a Warning for Every Company Considering Replacing Workers with Automation', Fortune, available at https://fortune.com/article/customer-support-ai-cursor-went-rogue/ (accessed 6th May, 2025).

(11) PwC (2024) 'PwC's 2024 Trust Survey: 8 Key Findings', available at www.pwc.com/us/en/library/trust-in-business-survey.html (accessed 6th March, 2025).

(12) Afshar, V. (2015) '50 Important Customer Experience Stats for Business Leaders', HuffPost, available at www.huffpost.com/entry/50-important-customer-exp_b_8295772 (accessed 5th March, 2025).

(13) Kauffman, C. (2024) '17 Demand Generation Stats Every CMO Needs to See in 2024', available at https://medium.com/%40amp_digital_marketing_and_pr/17-demand-generation-stats-every-cmo-needs-to-see-in-2024-f57447c22125 (accessed 6th May, 2025).

(14) Morgan, R. M. and Hunt, S. D. (1994) 'The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing', *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 58,

No. 3, pp. 20–38, available at https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299405800302 (accessed 3rd March, 2025).
(15) SAP Emarsys (2024) '32 Customer Loyalty Statistics Your Business Needs to Know in 2025', available at https://emarsys.com/learn/blog/customer-loyalty-statistics/#:~:text=2.,align%20with%20their%20ethical%20values (accessed 5th March, 2025).
(16) Zeithaml, V. A., Berry, L. L. and Parasuraman, A. (1996) 'The Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality', *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 60, No. 2, pp. 31–46, available at https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299606000203 (accessed 3rd March, 2025).
(17) Bhattacharya, C. B. and Sen, S. (2003) 'Consumer-Company Identification: A Framework for Understanding Consumers' Relationships with Companies', *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 67, No. 2, pp. 76–88, available at https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.67.2.76.18609 (accessed 3rd March, 2025).
(18) Verhoef, P. C., Reinartz, W. J. and Krafft, M. (2010) 'Customer Engagement as a New Perspective in Customer Management', *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 247–252, available at https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670510375461 (accessed 3rd March, 2025).
(19) Nielsen (2016) 'We're Ruled by Our Emotions, and So Are the Ads We Watch', available at www.nielsen.com/insights/2016/were-ruled-by-our-emotions-and-so-are-the-ads-we-watch/ (accessed 3rd March, 2025).
(20) Bain & Company (2003) 'Net Promoter System', available at https://www.bain.com/consulting-services/customer-strategy-and-marketing/net-promoter-score-system/ (accessed 3rd March, 2025).
(21) Waldow, J. (2024) 'How Sephora Is Evolving Its Loyalty Program', ModernRetail, available at www.modernretail.co/marketing/how-sephora-is-evolving-its-loyalty-program/ (accessed 4th March, 2025).
(22) Deloitte Digital (2024) 'The Key to Successful Customer Experience Personalization Strategy', available at https://www.deloittedigital.com/us/en/insights/research/customer-experience-personalization-strategy.html (accessed 3rd March, 2025).
(23) Kobie (2024) 'The Heart of Loyalty: 2024 Consumer Research Report', available at https://kobie.com/the-heart-of-loyalty-2024-consumer-research-report/ (accessed 3rd March, 2025).
(24) Content Marketing Institute (2024) '57+ Marketing Tactics to Help You Succeed in 2025', available at https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/articles/content-marketing-statistics#:~:text=Budget%20allocation,to%20increase%20spending%20in%202024 (accessed 5th March, 2025).
(25) Apple (2025) 'Apple Reports First Quarter Results', available at www.apple.com/newsroom/2025/01/apple-reports-first-quarter-results/ (accessed 4th March, 2025).
(26) Marketing Mag (2024) 'A Rare Misstep by Apple — "We Missed the Mark"', available at www.marketingmag.com.au/featured/a-rare-misstep-by-apple-we-missed-the-mark/ (accessed 4th March, 2025).
(27) PRWeek (2024) 'Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty Revolutionized Marketing', available at https://www.prweek.com/article/1868574/doves-campaign-real-beauty-revolutionized-marketing (accessed 4th March, 2025).
(28) *Ibid*.
(29) Unilever (2024) '20 Years On: Dove and the Future of Real Beauty', available at www.unilever.com/news/news-search/2024/20-years-on-dove-and-the-future-of-real-beauty/ (accessed 4th March, 2025).
(30) Dove (n.d.) 'Dove Partners', available at www.dove.com/us/en/stories/about-dove/our-partners.html (accessed 7 May, 2025).
(31) Salpini, C. (2023) '"People Just Love the Birthday Gift": How Sephora Maintains Loyalty by Focusing on what Shoppers Want Most', RetailDive, available at www.retaildive.com/news/sephora-beauty-insider-loyalty-program-updates-birthday-gift/654096/ (accessed 4th March, 2025).
(32) Waldow, ref 21 above.
(33) Renascence (2024) 'How Sephora Enhances Customer Experience (CX) through Personalization and Digital Innovation', available at www.renascence.io/journal/how-sephora-enhances-customer-experience-cx-through-personalization-and-digital-innovation (accessed 5th March, 2025).
(34) Waldow, ref 21 above.
(35) Zwieglinksa, Z. (2025) 'Sephora's 2024: Record Earnings, Sephora Wins and Global Growth', Glossy, available at www.glossy.co/beauty/inside-sephoras-2024-record-earnings-sephoria-wins-and-global-growth/ (accessed 4th March, 2025).