

Beyond Satisfaction: How Meaningful Difference Drives Brand Growth



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Customer experiences contribute far more to brand perceptions than advertising, with brands that deliver meaningfully different experiences achieving sustainable growth while commanding pricing power that competitors cannot match.

When Starbucks arrived in my suburban town in the early 2000s, the purple armchair was more than just a piece of furniture. I vividly remember walking into that first Starbucks and being struck by the immediate sensory experience: the drama of pressurised steam, whipped cream towers atop coffees, and the rich aroma creating an atmosphere unlike anything else in town at the time.

Those purple chairs represented something special: comfortable seating in a 'third space' away from home and work where you could sit with friends for hours, nursing slowly cooling coffees and enjoying good conversation. What made it truly remarkable was the consistency worldwide; whether in Solihull or Santiago, the experience felt comfortingly familiar.



Fast forward two decades, and Starbucks has grown to over 38,000 stores worldwide. But something important has faded along with those iconic purple chairs. Despite rising NPS scores, Starbucks has seen a decline in brand power and uniqueness, leading to disappointing commercial results. As new CEO Brian Niccol recently acknowledged, "There's a shared sense that we have drifted from our core".

This paradox, improving customer satisfaction alongside declining brand strength, raises important questions for businesses. What truly makes a brand strong? And what role does customer experience play in driving long-term growth?

Experience as the Primary Driver of Brand Strength

For decades, organisations have invested heavily in advertising to build their brands. Yet research shows experiences matter more than ads ever could. Paid media delivers only 25% of brand-building impact, leaving 75% of brand perceptions accounted for by all other interactions combined. Indeed, direct customer experience and word of mouth typically comprise around half of this (Kantar, 2023).

This is clear in the utilities sector, where 55% of brand memories come from experiences. The brand's app often creates more lasting impressions than TV advertising or social media. When people regularly check their energy usage, the app design and functionality shapes their brand perception more than any advertisement.



If they need to call up for support, while infrequent, this interaction can leave a memory that has a lasting impact on perceptions. (Meta-analysis of Kantar Utilities Touchpoint Studies, 2018-2023).

Octopus Energy shows this approach working brilliantly. Since 2019, they've become the UK's top energy provider by market share without massive TV ad campaigns. Instead, they've created distinctive experiences that customers remember. Their "Wheel of Fortune" turns boring meter readings into a game, while their contact centres are organised as "Universal Energy Specialists" teams who can solve complex, cross-department challenges.

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As Jeremy Bullmore, one of the most widely known and influential thinkers on brands, beautifully put it: "People build brands the way birds build nests... through the straws and scraps they chance upon." Every interaction adds another twig to the nest of perceptions in our minds. Companies that see experiences as their best brand-building opportunity gain a real advantage.

The Power of Difference in Predicting Growth

What’s the best predictor of a brand’s growth potential? Most businesses look at customer satisfaction, NPS, or market penetration. Our research points to something more surprising: difference.

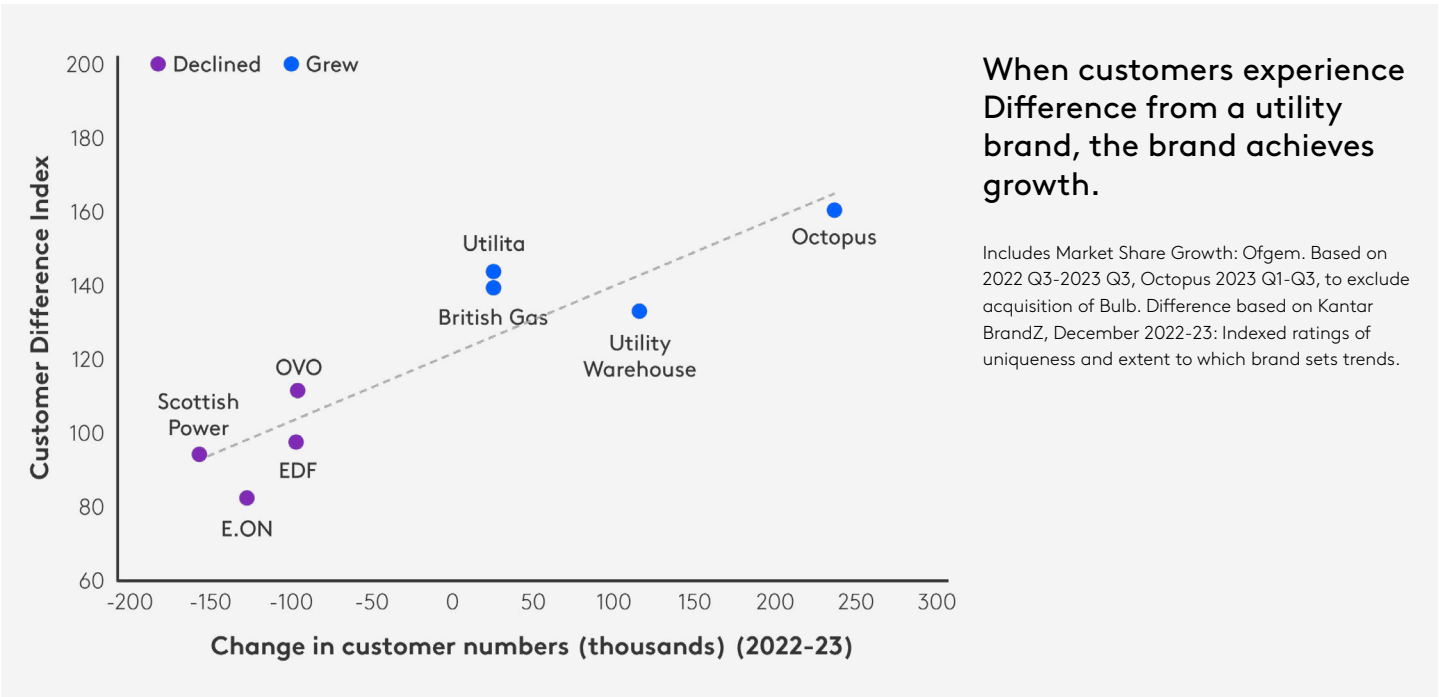
Looking at nearly 10,000 brands, we found those that stand notably apart from competitors are four times more likely to grow (Kantar BrandZ, 2023). This has been independently verified by The University of Oxford’s Saïd Business School, which identified difference as the strongest predictor of brand growth.

In utilities, where there are relatively simpler products and fewer pricing variables, an exceptional experience is vital. Comparing Kantar’s customer perception data with Ofgem’s (UK regulator for gas and electricity markets) market share data, we found that customer perceptions of utility brand

difference predicted 82% of the change in customer numbers that year. In line with this, creating an experience that felt meaningfully different from the competition was the key factor driving growth for Octopus (Kantar Energy Provider Analysis, 2024).

Being different does more than attract customers; it also allows for better pricing. Netflix, seen as the most differentiated of the streaming platforms, has increased prices while keeping subscribers. Their unique content and experience make customers less sensitive to price change.

Difference also builds loyalty. Nationwide, a UK bank, found that customers who see their experience as different are 50% less likely to switch banks (Kantar CX Benchmarking, 2023). When most services feel the same functionally, being meaningfully different creates protection that price-matching can’t overcome.



Balancing Meaningful Relevance with Distinctive Difference

Being different for difference's sake won't sustain growth. The strongest brands balance being different with being meaningful, meeting real customer needs in distinctive ways.

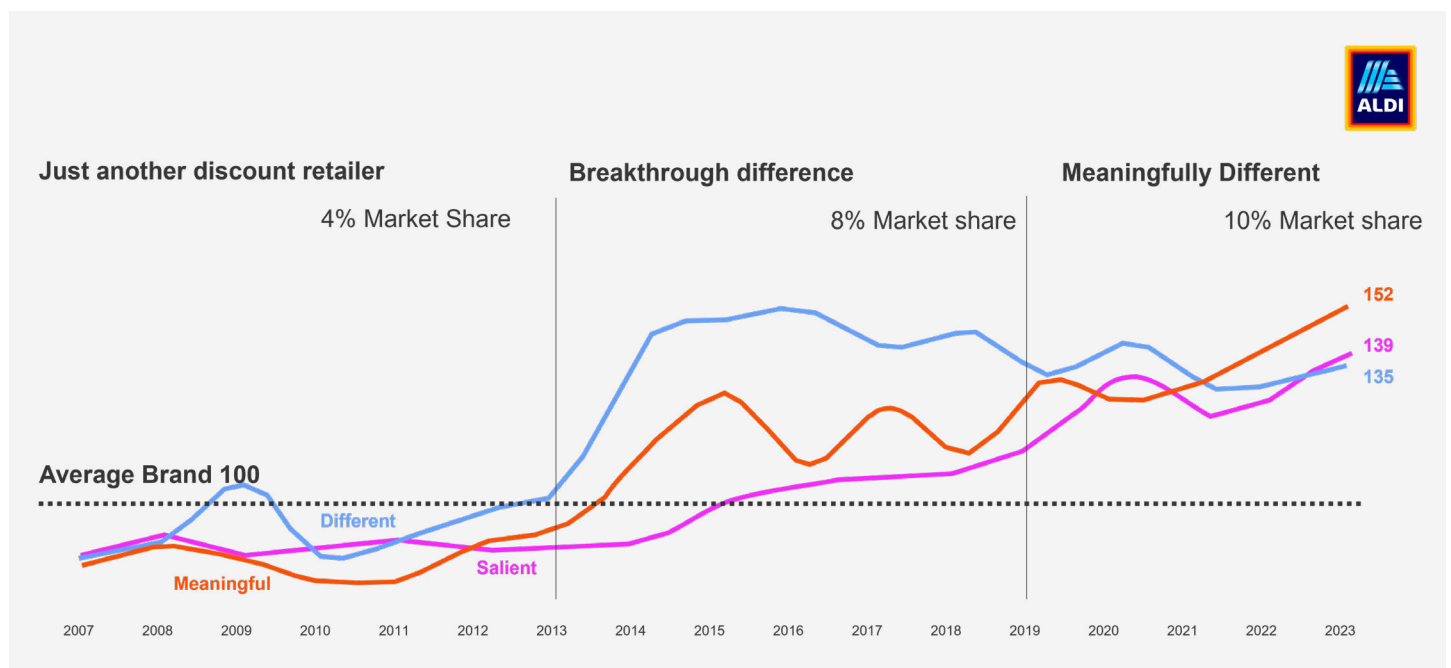
Starbucks shows what happens when this balance fails. While they have successfully scaled operations, offering a greater range of products and ways to buy, they've diluted what made them special. The result: a more meaningful brand, but one that is less memorable and differentiated. Their core brand power has declined despite better satisfaction scores, leading to poor commercial results and scrapped forecasts.

ALDI tells a different story. They've grown from "just another discount retailer" with 5.3% market share in April 2015 to 11% in April 2025, managing to increase their relevance while remaining distinctive (Kantar Worldpanel UK, 2023).

I've seen this as a shopper. ALDI's narrower product range makes shopping easier by reducing choice paralysis. Their checkout process reimagines a typically stressful moment: rather than frantically bagging items with an impatient queue watching, you place everything back in your trolley and pack at leisure at a dedicated shelf. This small change removes anxiety while improving efficiency.

As ALDI expanded store numbers and became more meaningful, they kept their distinctive approach to quality and value. As CEO Giles Hurley noted: "Britain is shopping very differently to how it did 18 months ago: fewer trips, more own-label products, and switching supermarkets in search of better value."

From marginal to mainstream



The Six Elements of Meaningfully Different Experiences

To create experiences that drive growth, companies need a framework for understanding meaningful difference. Our research identifies six key elements:

For creating **Meaningfulness:**



1. **Effectiveness:** Delivering on promises consistently



2. **Ease:** Making experiences effortless and enjoyable



3. **Affinity:** Building connection through empathy

For creating **Difference:**



4. **Authenticity:** Staying true to core values



5. **Uniqueness:** Offering what others don't



6. **Inspiration:** Creating memorable moments

Octopus Energy shows how these elements work in real life. Their customer-centric teams reflect authentic values, while unique features create memorable interactions.

My experience with Octopus illustrates this perfectly. Our meter is in our cellar, requiring a trek out the back door, down the decking, through two locked doors, and fumbling for a light switch. This created a real barrier to submitting readings. But Octopus's "Wheel of Fortune" feature, which turns this chore into a game with prizes up to £512, changed our behaviour completely. We now submit readings regularly despite the physical hurdles.

I love how this small innovation challenges conventional thinking. Most energy companies would reject the idea outright: "Why give away money for meter readings?"

Yet this seemingly playful feature creates a chain of benefits: more accurate bills, fewer surprises, fewer complaints, and ultimately lower customer churn. Most importantly, it creates a memorable experience that strengthens Octopus's brand personality.

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From Measurement to Action: Creating Growth Through Experience

Most companies measure customer experience with CSAT and NPS, while tracking brand health separately. This makes it hard to see how experiences shape brand perceptions and business results.

A better approach is measuring experiences through the same lens as brands. By seeing how touchpoints contribute to meaningful difference, companies can invest in both immediate satisfaction and long-term brand strength.

The business impact is clear. Brands that improve their experience over two years are 2.5 times more likely to significantly increase market share (Kantar BrandZ Experience Analysis, 2023).

Creating meaningfully different experiences requires consistency. Brands with what we call “emotive clarity” (consistent expression of distinctive character) score 13 points higher on brand difference (Kantar Brand Expression Study, 2023). This doesn’t happen by accident; it needs deliberate design across every customer interaction.



Future-Proofing Through Meaningful Difference

As customers become more selective about where they spend, creating meaningfully different experiences isn't just about growth but survival. Brands that will thrive will:



1.
Understand how they stand out to enhance growth potential



2.
Identify what matters most to customers and focus difference there



3.
Make CX investments for now and the future, balancing immediate satisfaction with long-term brand building

For Starbucks in the early 2000s, the purple chair wasn't just furniture but a symbol of difference. For ALDI, the middle aisle creates a unique treasure hunt. For Octopus Energy, it's organising around customer outcomes rather than company functions.

The key question every organisation must answer is simple: "Does your experience make your brand feel different?" If not, you're likely competing primarily on price and convenience, a precarious position today.

Today, functional excellence is the de facto expectation everywhere we look. Meaningful difference through experience is the new opportunity for competitive advantage. The brands that go beyond satisfaction to create distinctive memories will be the ones we're still talking about decades from now.

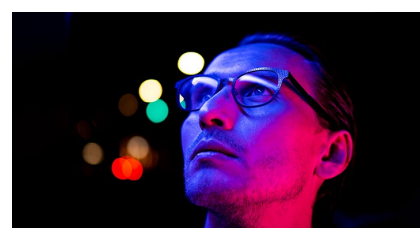
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For more information about how Kantar can help you accelerate your brand growth, get in touch with your local Kantar office or make an enquiry via our Kantar website

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