

ATOMICDUST™

Building Brand Love in B2B Industries.



Does **brand love** matter for B2B brands?

“Brand love” may be a buzzword in consumer marketing, but that doesn’t mean B2B leaders should dismiss it. “Love” is an attainable goal – and often a necessary one – when crafting a B2B brand identity, marketing plan or campaign that truly connects with audiences.

In this guide, you’ll learn:

Why it’s a smart business move for today’s B2B brands to build emotional connections with customers, employees and other stakeholders

How “brand love” gives brands the time and space to innovate

How to use your brand’s imperfections to make your audience love you

The differences between building brand love and building a great sales team

Five questions B2B leaders should ask as they build a more “lovable,” connected brand

Empathy

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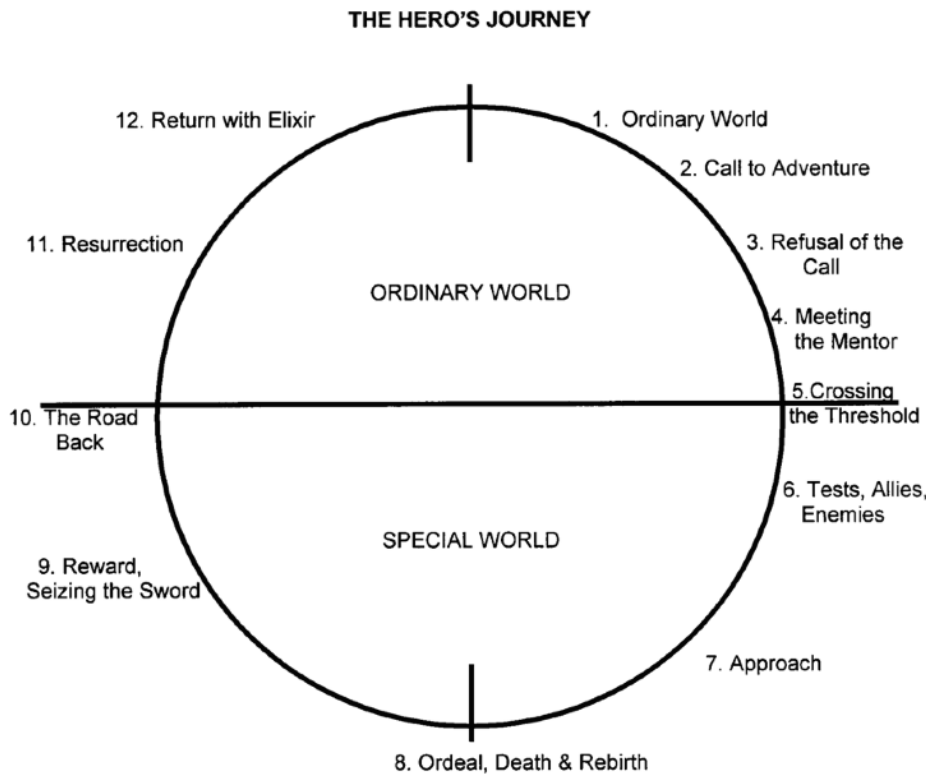
**The Hero's
Journey**



That is how friendships begin: one person reveals a moment of strangeness and the other person decides to just listen and not exploit it.

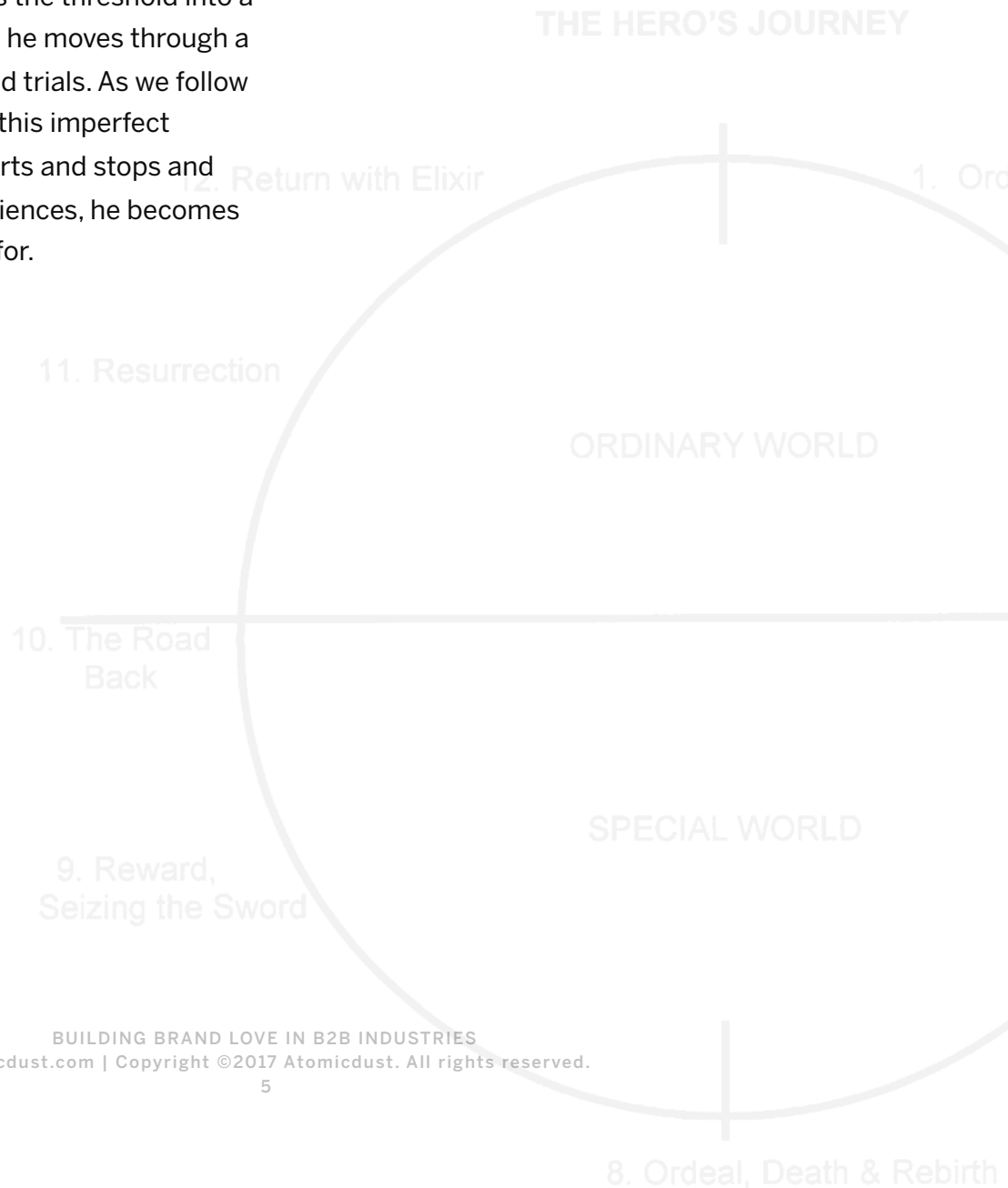
—Meg Wolitzer, *The Interestings*

In many ways, a B2B brand’s journey to “brand love” is a journey from a business-to-business mindset to a human-to-human one. It’s an exercise in showing vulnerability. In embracing perfectibility over perfection. In allowing for “moments of strangeness”: moments that create lifelong friends. (Or, in this case, lifelong customers.)



Think about Joseph Campbell's "The Hero's Journey," a classic framework for storytelling. Campbell noticed a pattern across novels, dramas and religious myths: a character begins in the "ordinary world" and receives a call to adventure, which he initially refuses. After meeting a mentor, the character crosses the threshold into a new world, where he moves through a series of tasks and trials. As we follow the character on this imperfect journey full of starts and stops and near-death experiences, he becomes the hero we root for.

For your brand to become the hero, it must let the customer in on this journey. It's the best way to create opportunities for those moments of strangeness and connection. It's a path to empathy and, ultimately, brand love.





What is ~~brand~~ love?

To understand brand love,
we have to understand



love.

From an evolutionary theory perspective, love is nature's way of keeping a species alive. It's a mechanism to promote mutual support for an extended period of time. A parent's love for their child compels them to use precious resources – time, energy, food – year after year after year, nurturing and teaching the child until he or she grows into a healthy, functioning adult.

other on and investing in each other. This is the kind of love that B2B brands should seek to build with their customers. Brand love creates a bond that's mutually beneficial – and long-term. And because it's significantly cheaper to retain an existing customer than to acquire a new one, "long-term" is nothing to sniff at. Brand love is your best strategy for creating brand loyalty.

Love is also reciprocal. It's about believing in each other, cheering each

Loved One

Believes in you.
Cheers you on.
Invests in you.
Advocates for you.
Teaches you new things.
Wants to see you succeed.

You

Believe in them.
Cheer them on.
Invest in them.
Advocate for them.
Teach them new things.
Want to see them succeed.

Brand

Believes in you.
Cheers you on.
Invests in you.
Advocates for you.
Teaches you new things.
Wants to see you succeed.

You

Believe in them.
Cheer them on.
Invest in them.
Advocate for them.
Teach them new things.
Want to see them succeed.

What are the benefits of brand love for a B2B brand?

Benefit #1

You're less likely to be perceived as a commodity.

Commoditization is a common challenge for B2B brands across industries such as manufacturing, telecommunications, financial services and healthcare. The sad truth is that only 14% of buyers perceive a real difference in B2B supplier offerings.¹ That means that no matter how many bullet points and features you throw at your audience, 86% of buyers can't tell the difference between you and your competitor.

B2B marketers tend to appeal to the brain over the heart, shaping their message around business value rather than personal value. On the surface, that seems logical. B2B brands are selling to someone who is making a purchase on behalf of their business.

Business Value

Financial performance

Customer retention

Efficiency

Growth

Personal Value

Admiration from colleagues

Confidence

Happiness

Contributing to society

¹"From Promotion to Emotion," a study conducted by CEB in partnership with Google, <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/articles/promotion-emotion-b2b.html>

But logic only goes so far. In B2B, personal value has twice the impact of business value across consideration, across a customer's willingness to pay a premium for your service, across advocacy and across purchase.² 68% of B2B buyers who see personal value will pay more for a service.³

The promise of personal value provides a foundation for empathy and brand love. An appeal to emotion

can be an important tool in the fight against commoditization, creating a stronger sense of differentiation and providing protection against competitor pricing, shiny promises, flashy redesigns, and superior products or services. Looking at this cynically, you could say that brand love allows you to get away with a little more. Or, you could argue that it gives you:

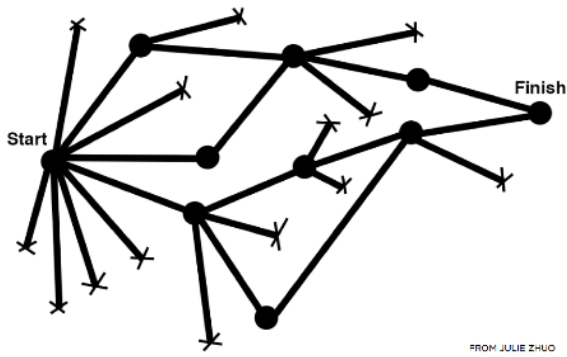
Benefit #2

Room to make mistakes (on the slow road to improvement).

“*As brands respond to [changing customer expectations], transformation takes time. Brands that are loved benefit from greater customer patience.*

—Kantar Millward Brown, from Brandz Top 100 Most Valuable Global Brands Report 2016

^{2,3} “From Promotion to Emotion,” a study conducted by CEB in partnership with Google, <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/articles/promotion-emotion-b2b.html>



Innovation is never a linear process, and it's rarely efficient. New territory is just that: new. There's no map, no guidebook. Some wandering is required. There are dead ends, dangerous cliffs, and sometimes you have to turn back and start all over again. The journey can be exhilarating, but it takes time.

A customer who loves your brand is more willing to stick around to see what happens. A loyal customer base gives a brand space to try new things, take risks and push forward in the quest to create new value – and create more distance from competitors.

Whether you're developing new and improved products, innovative subscription models, or more convenient online platforms, as a beloved brand you'll be afforded a little more leeway as you invest the time and money to get there.

Benefit #3

Word of mouth. (Kind of a big deal in B2B.)

Brand love isn't just a strategy for retaining customers. It's a strategy for obtaining new ones.

photographs of their grandchildren or beg their friends to watch their favorite TV shows.

Word of mouth is huge in B2B. 84% of B2B decision-makers start the buying process with a referral.⁴

Build a brand people love, and they'll share it. It's that simple – and that important in B2B, where referrals are a critical driver of new business.

So where does brand love come in? People love to talk about things that they love. It's the reason people share

⁴ "What You Should Know About B2B Referrals (But Probably Don't)," Influitive and Heinz Marketing, <http://info.influitive.com/what-you-should-know-about-b2b-referrals-but-probably-dont.html>

Alternatives to brand love.

If brand love seems like too tall an order, there are a few (imperfect) alternatives.

Be the cheapest.

Pros: Win on price, a clear differentiator that doesn't need much explanation.

Cons: Razor-thin margins can become a constant source of anxiety, negatively impacting product or service quality, internal culture, and, ultimately, customer satisfaction.

Disrupt the category.

(like Casper, Netflix or Airbnb)

Pros: Offer a new solution to an old problem. Be so unique that you have no peers to compete with over bullet points or price.

Cons: Category disruption is enormously difficult, and ultimately the copycats will catch up with you or innovate beyond your model. Back to the differentiation drawing board.

Create an unstoppable sales force.

Pros: Sales reps can build personal, one-on-one relationships with clients over steak dinners and happy hours. They're creating bonds that can't be easily broken by competitors.

Cons: Clients form an emotional attachment to the salesperson, and not necessarily the brand. When the salesperson jumps ship, the client often goes with them.

What makes a brand **lovable**?



All lovable brands have one thing in common: **lovable brands bring people closer to who they want to be and what they want their world to look like.**

Joan Khoury of Oppenheimer & Co. Inc. wrote, “Good branding should always assert the perfectibility of all things. A good brand is a door to what ought to be from what is.”

Note that Khoury says *perfectibility*, not perfection. People want to believe they can have a role in improving themselves and their world, moving closer to the way things ought to be. This is true even in B2B. *People crave purpose, especially at work. A lovable brand gives these people a sense of shared purpose, promoting a “we can do this together” mentality.*

When a customer loves a brand and believes that there is a shared purpose, mechanical business transactions – placing an order, making a call to customer service – can become, instead, collaborative steps toward “better,” infused with meaning. Customers will look forward to interacting with the brand, because they see the interaction as an extension of themselves and their larger purpose.



Good branding should always assert the perfectibility of all things. A good brand is a door to what ought to be from what is.

— Joan Khoury of Oppenheimer & Co. Inc.



**questions
to ask.**

There are five questions that we think any business, regardless of industry, should ask when working to build a more lovable brand.

1

How does my brand represent the promise of a better world?

“A better world” is a cliché. But set that aside for a moment. What we’re really talking about is improvement: making the world safer, healthier, more comfortable, more convenient, more beautiful, some combination of these, or something else entirely. It’s about carving out your own space in the world where you can make an impact.

The sweet spot is somewhere between “Our mission is to provide great customer service,” because that’s too low a bar, and “We are literally saving the world with our product.” Few brands can make that claim, and even when they can, the statement lacks specificity.



A world where life at work is simpler, more pleasant and more productive



Blackboard

A more educated world, where people have a lifelong passion for learning



A world where people always know their private information is secure

2

Does our vision for a better world line up with the vision of our clients and our employees?

If no one sees themselves in your story, what's the point? Your brand's vision for a better world should reflect your internal culture, your target audiences and other key stakeholders. The values have to align.

3

Is our vision (fairly) consistent?

If your vision changes every month, every quarter or every year in response to competitors, other external forces or just pure restlessness, customers won't be able to latch on. **A lovable brand has conviction in its own values and story.**

Additionally, a clear, consistent vision will lead to a more recognizable brand. If you reinvent the story with every marketing execution – every ad, every white paper, every email – you'll muddle your identity.

4

Do we provide something to our customers beyond our product or our service?

Beloved brands surprise and delight their customers outside of transactions. They return favors again and again, keeping themselves top of mind, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship and ensuring it's all in line with the shared vision.

Think about this in terms of measurable items. REI, for example, celebrates the sense of community that outdoor adventures can provide, and understands that caring for the environment is essential to keeping that sense of community alive. Building on this vision of community, the REI Co-op program provides members with a share of its annual profits. On average, the company provides 10% back on REI purchases and allows members to donate their share to the REI Foundation, which supports environmental initiatives.

You can also think of this in terms of abstract items, like providing customers with tips and tricks, or simply feelings of well-being.

5

Do we deserve our clients' trust? Do we deserve our employees' trust?

An internal culture characterized by trust is a sign of a healthy brand. Trust radiates outward from your employees as they communicate with customers. It lends credibility to your vision for the world, your products and services, and your commitment to doing what's best for your customers.

It's always better to ask "Do we deserve trust?" than "Do our clients and employees trust us?" Lovable brands go beyond appearances.

You can cover your corporate office's walls with posters that say "respect" and "sincerity," but the words mean nothing if integrity isn't woven throughout the fabric of everything that you do. People won't buy into a vision that seems superficial or cosmetic, and they won't love a brand that doesn't have their back.

Brand Love Checklist

- Our brand has a vision for a better world.
- Our audiences see themselves in the brand's vision.
- Our vision is consistent.
- We express our vision outside of what we sell.
- We deserve the trust of clients and employees.

**Tie your
vision**

**to every
touch-
point.**

As you communicate your vision, remember that no touchpoint is too small. Tell your story across the platforms with the biggest reach and impact – web, social, trade advertising – but don't stop there.

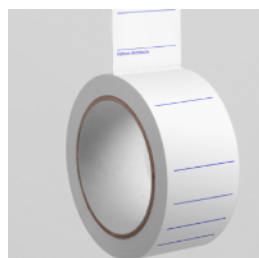
How could your shipping boxes or packing tape tell your story? Not just with words or design, but with physical materials or form?

How can an invoice become more than an invoice? Can an improved design create clarity for your customer? How might that reflect your brand's commitment to convenience? How will a more positive billing experience reflect on your brand as a whole?

How can a tech support call become more than transactional? How can everyday tasks become opportunities to connect, create empathy and build love for the brand?



Fuzzco / MailChimp



DN&CO / Fathom Architects



Heavenly / Green Energy

Next steps.

Ask yourself, your colleagues and your clients the five questions.

Be honest.

Find your brand vision and express it creatively.

Throughout it all, remember:

**be visionary,
be relevant,
be consistent,
be trustworthy
and be transparent.**

Let customers in. Invite them to join your brand's "hero's journey."



Want to build a brand your audiences will love?

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About Atomicdust

Atomicdust is a brand and design consultancy. We're dedicated to solving business problems through strategies, identities, experiences and environments that are as purposeful as they are beautiful.

IDENTITY EXPERIENCE DIGITAL COACHING

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To know truth. To make beauty. To do good.