

The mass uprising by workers was impressive, but something more profound was going on. In an age when fickle consumers flit from company to company, this was a rare display in the modern marketplace of customer allegiance to a brand.

Brand names once carried a lot of currency because impartial information about products and services was limited. My father bought only Buicks most of his life. He trusted Buick. Today, consumers take a “trust but verify” approach. They “can read reams of research about whatever they want to buy,” James Surowiecki wrote in a *New Yorker* piece earlier this year titled “Twilight of the Brands.” The Internet, he wrote, “has given ordinary consumers easy access to expert reviews, user reviews, and detailed product data.”

Consumer surveys reflect the erosion of loyalty. According to a 2012 Ernst & Young report, only 25 percent of Americans said they base buying decisions on brand, and a recent poll conducted for Capital One found just 9 percent of travelers factor in brand loyalty when booking a trip — they’re more keen on a bargain.

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The problem is even more pronounced in supermarkets. Only 3 percent of shoppers visit one or two outlets for groceries, according to a 2012 study; 76 percent of us divide our food spending among five or more types of outlets, often several supermarket chains, plus places like CVS, dollar stores, and specialty markets.

Market Basket, however, bucks that trend with a cult-like following. The company built its enviable reputation in several ways, says supermarket analyst John Rand of Kantar Retail in Boston. The prices often undercut even Walmart, the stores have more employees on the floor than many competitors (so there’s always help nearby), and the stock turns over incredibly quickly (so food is always fresh).

But here’s a surprising lesson from this summer: Brand loyalty can also be a double-edged sword. When a beloved brand gets something wrong — like sacking a beloved president — the backlash will be brutal. “Consumers expect to be able to influence organizations to behave in a way that suits them,” the Ernst & Young study said.

“Organizations must deliver a positive experience across every customer touch point, including all consumer communications.” Market Basket’s walled-off leaders seemed oblivious to the power loyal consumers wield.

In a full-page ad in the *Globe*, the company’s new co-chief executives appealed to customers, saying some workers had “lost sight of the top priority — taking care of you — and instead have engaged in actions that harm Market Basket’s reputation and prevent us from meeting our obligations to you.” Could they have been more off the mark? Anyone could see it was the anonymous executives — not checkout clerks and shelf stockers — whose priorities had gone astray. While corporate lawyers cooked up parsed statements, rank-and-file employees who had often spent decades building relationships with customers told the Market Basket story convincingly through personal, relatable stories.

Through the employees, customers knew what was at stake — preserving a business model the owners seemed bent on wrecking. I’d call that brand-name recognition.

> *Mark Pothier is the Globe’s business editor.*

The summer’s top tweets about Market Basket

I promise to spend at least \$100, at #marketbasket competitor, for each employee that is fired. Who is with me . . .

Raymond Santos

July 30

4,900 retweets