

DISNEY'S CUSTOMER-CENTRIC SPLIT PERSONALITY: PARKS VS. THE CORPORATION

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We've all heard the stories.

Disney cast members who rescue a lost stuffed animal and return it to a child with a photo album of its "adventures." Servers who quietly slip a birthday cupcake onto the table. Staff who transform a rain-soaked day into a memory guests will treasure for life.

These moments define Disney's theme parks. They're not random acts of kindness; they're the result of a carefully crafted playbook and constant orchestration behind the scenes. That's why the parks are often called the gold standard for customer experience.

The reality is this: Disney chooses not to export that magic beyond the parks.

While the parks focus on personal service and creating joy, other parts of Disney's business follow different rules. Subscription cancellations become legal battles. Merchandise divisions prioritize upselling and scarcity. Acquired brands operate under different systems and priorities, sometimes far removed from Disney's guest-first culture.

The result is a company with two personalities. One delivers delight. The other feels less magical and more like a machine driven by policies, fine print, and legal disclaimers.

Why the Magic Stays in the Parks

Much of Disney's modern empire wasn't built in-house. Instead, it came through acquisitions like Marvel Studios, Lucasfilm, Pixar, and 20th Century Studios.

These brands brought creative power and loyal audiences, but also different business models, leadership styles, missions and values, and ways of treating customers. Many of Disney's other businesses, especially those acquired, are allowed to run independently, even if their practices conflict with the parks' guest-first philosophy.

These other businesses don't have guests; they have customers. A single guest- or customer-focused approach across the entire company would

never work, so Disney has chosen to keep the magic concentrated within its parks. But that creates a problem: Disney's brand is so powerful that the name alone sparks strong emotions and high expectations—for magic, service, and being treated as a guest—that the rest of the company doesn't consistently deliver.

In the parks, employees engage face-to-face with guests. They're trusted to solve problems on the spot, creating personal connections and emotional moments that feel magical. Feedback is immediate—smiles, complaints, social media posts—and Disney responds quickly to protect its brand. This success comes from a clear set of principles known as the Four Keys: Safety, Courtesy, Show, and Efficiency. These shape every guest interaction and empower cast members to act without endless approvals. The parks aim to create feelings, not just transactions—a formula that has built a service culture admired across industries.

Outside the park, it's no longer a fairy tale; it's reality. Digital businesses rely on automated systems and scripted processes, where employees aren't free to act quickly and delight a customer. Customers become account numbers, and employees are no longer smiling cast members. What feels magical in person often feels cold and transactional online.

These differences create tough trade-offs for Disney's leaders. Inside the parks, delighting guests comes first. Outside the parks, protecting revenue takes priority, leading to practices like complex subscription cancellations. And while the parks follow one unified playbook, the non-park businesses often operate under their own creative rules and standards.

Consider:

- **Streaming vs. Parks – Account Management and Cancellation**
Disney's streaming services often use tactics to keep subscribers from leaving, such as making cancellation processes more complex. In contrast, the parks focus on helping guests with as little friction as possible.
- **Merchandise vs. Parks – Upselling and Scarcity**
Disney's merchandise businesses sometimes lean on upselling and limited-edition scarcity. Meanwhile, the parks often put creating memories first and sales second.
- **Acquired Brands – Customer Data and Marketing**
Some of Disney's acquired brands have different standards for customer data use and marketing, leading to customers experiencing Disney in very different ways.

This split explains why Disney's parks feel consistent and magical, while other parts of the company can feel fragmented and inconsistent, often falling short of the high expectations the Disney name inspires.

The Reality and the Opportunity

Disney's parks remain a masterclass in customer focus. But beyond the gates, Disney faces the same challenges as many large companies: different business models, acquisitions, and competing priorities.

The reality is this: Disney's customer-focused split personality isn't an accident. It's a choice.

The company has decided where to invest its magic, and where not to. For Disney, the parks are the crown jewel. Other businesses are allowed, even expected, to operate differently.

Is that the right choice? Maybe. Maybe not. But it's a reminder for every leader that customer focus isn't automatic. It's built, or sometimes, kept in a box.

Lessons for Business Leaders

Disney's story offers lessons for any organization wrestling with scale and complexity:

- **Trust People Closest to Customers**
The parks show what happens when employees are empowered to act quickly and create great experiences. That same trust is essential across all parts of a business, no matter the channel.
- **Design for Feelings, Not Just Efficiency**
Disney's parks succeed because they focus on creating feelings, not just moving people through lines. That lesson should guide decisions across every business, not just the ones with castles and fireworks.
- **Align Priorities Across Divisions**
Consistency only happens when every part of the business shares the same values and understands how to deliver them, whether in-person or online.
- **Integrate Acquisitions Thoughtfully**
Buying a business is easy. Ensuring it fits into the same customer experience and lives up to the brand promise is much harder.

The Bottom Line

Even the strongest brands must decide where, and how, to deliver their magic.

Disney has chosen to keep the magic inside the parks. And customers feel the difference.

Where's your magic hiding? If you're ready to uncover it—and ensure your customer experience drives real value—[let's connect.](#) 🍷

About the Author

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Ed has achieved a very successful career by building relationships and providing innovative solutions to meet clients' needs. With over thirty years as a global researcher, management consultant, and business leader, Ed brings his experience, expertise, and passion to every consulting assignment.

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