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Interactive brands

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Having a conversation with young consumers in their hyper-networked world can help corporates build their brands.

A corporate blog enables an organisation to communicate in an honest voice to the world at large. This would involve such former taboos as publicly acknowledging mistakes and promises on customer service levels. Customers can use this forum to openly talk to the company.

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SPEAK TO THEM in their language.

Today's young adult spends significant amounts of her time using the Internet. The Internet has become the dominant medium of keeping in touch, networking, sharing views with people all over the world, researching and getting work done (if you are a knowledge worker). The membership figures of prominent social networking sites such as Orkut and Facebook is indicative of this undeniable trend.

The young adult of today's world is hyper-networked, interlinked to many more people than before, and part of many more conversations than ever before. Marketers who are today selling their brands to a spectrum of target groups of which such hyper-networked individuals constitute a small but significant chunk will realise (as these individuals age) over the next 10 years that the entire marketplace has turned hyper-networked.

Are brick-and-mortar companies prepared for this change? I doubt it. The difficulty of `selling' to such hyper-networked

individuals is that they are highly sceptical of advertising, branding gimmicks and PR spiel. This group tends to form and create opinions through n-way conversations that take place on the Internet through blogs, social networking sites and e-mail. Such communication is not just text-based - it could even take place through videos (YouTube), images (Flickr) and voice (podcasts).

The important feature of these conversations is that the information they contain is viewed with much more trust, primarily because such conversations do not have a hidden profit motive. The equivalent to this global conversation is the `word of mouth' benefits that brands earlier enjoyed in the brick-and-mortar era.

Join the conversation

The solution that one foresees in such a scenario is for brands to turn interactive, and actually join the conversation. Interactive brands would be those that effectively conduct two-way conversations with their defined marketplace. The earlier era was one of uni-directional communication, which involved running advertisements and other branding initiatives on one-way communication media such as the television, radio and billboards. Potential customers were expected to passively absorb messages from such media, and consume the advertised product or service. Occasionally positive word-of-mouth contributed to brand choice in addition to the creative message. However, with the emergence of the Internet, word of mouth assumes a much more significant and globe-spanning role in brand choice.

Corporate blogs

How then do brands engage in two-way interactions with their defined marketplace? One effective way to do this is a

corporate blog, which incidentally finds itself in Bain Company's list of top 25 management tools of 2007. A key benefit of a corporate blog is that it enables an organisation to communicate in an honest, human voice to the world at large.

This honest voice would involve such former taboos as publicly acknowledging mistakes as and when they occur, honest promises on customer service levels, transparent communication on future product launches and internal thought processes. In addition to this, customers can use this forum to openly talk to the company, and about their experiences with the company's offering. A static corporate Web site can never create the kind of interactivity and richness that a corporate blog can offer.

Community of users

Another way for brands to get involved in the conversation is to create communities of users. Two examples come to mind - The Royal Enfield owners club of the UK, and closer to home, Sunsilk's `Gang of Girls' Web site. Such communities allow customers to interact with other users of a product or service, and have conversations that have the incidental benefit of providing inputs to product development initiatives. Additionally, they would also help companies observe the evolution of their customers, and respond much faster than ever before.

It appears that brands will have no choice but to be part of the conversation between users, or risk being left out completely. This is not to say that traditional brand building approaches are no longer valid. They still have a role to play, but that role is more likely to help in reinforcing the brand's message, rather than creating it from scratch. Additionally, smart brands will no longer view people as `target groups' but start viewing them as people whom they can best understand through conversations.

Iconic brands tend to tap into a customer's self-actualisation needs on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. People get emotionally involved with brands when they can relate to the brand in a manner that goes beyond mere price or quality. It is equally important for brands to get emotionally involved with their users by joining the conversation, or risk commoditisation. The choice is clear!

(The writer, an alumnus of XLRI, is with a multinational financial services firm.)

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