

Marketing in a networked world

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It is universally acknowledged that the Internet will be an important force driving the future of marketing. India presents an even more unique scenario as one of the demographically youngest countries in the world, with a well developed mobile market, and rapidly growing mobile data and broadband market. However, the toolkit of traditional marketing continues to be used predominantly without taking into account fundamental shifts in consumer behaviour resulting from all the possibilities opened up by the Web.

The Internet inverts the traditional monolithic edifice of controlled, one-way communication between content producers and consumers (and by extension marketers and consumers), and creates a world where the ability to consume, respond to, and produce content has been democratised.

To use an economic metaphor, what once was a socialist world where products (books, films, articles, music) were centrally produced and distributed, has become a true free market devoid of even capital constraints (given that most applications on the Web are free). In such a world, marketing, at least the 'above the line' variety, which has occupied the hard-to-miss space between creative content and the consumer, needs to evolve. Additionally, linkages between people have been mapped out on a worldwide scale through social media, allowing an unparalleled level of peer to peer interaction, and sharing of content.

From a marketing perspective therefore, the transition to the digital world needs to be not just fine-tuned, but fundamentally re-imagined. Some key areas where such a re-imagination may be required are highlighted below.

FROM INTRUSION TO ENGAGEMENT

Traditional marketing and advertising have relied primarily on occupying hard-to-miss spaces in the midst of content (the 'commercial break'). This is fine in traditional media, where choices are limited and the consumer does not necessarily have real time access to alternative content that serves the same need. For instance, in the traditional world of broadcasting, shows are aired only at specific times and not on demand. Thus the viewer is somewhat captive to the marketer's message.

Extending this to the world of digital is a bad idea given that the audience is no longer captive, and has a small attention span.

In other words, if a brand intrudes into the consumption of a piece of content, the viewer may simply move instantly onto another piece of content serving the same need. After all, the supply of content on the Internet is infinite, and not bound by any schedule.

However, digital marketing continues to assume that the user has no choice. It is not uncommon to come across sites where the advertising is constantly interfering with the content and testing the user's patience. What will be required is a shift from intrusion to engagement. Marketers will need to support the customer's engagement with the content on offer and not be a nuisance. One simple way in which this can be done is for marketers to create 'branded' applications that support the customer experience on a site, or sponsor such applications.

FROM IMPRESSION TO AUTHENTICITY

The entire arena of brand management has traditionally focused on impression management as its primary vehicle to create brands. Thus, sophisticated, emotionally engaging creative material has often taken place of any authentic underlying brand reality or promise. However, in the digital world, consumers are completely interconnected with each other, and even the smallest failure on the part of

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a brand to deliver on its promise gets highlighted, and magnified many times over on social media, in the comments section of Web pages, in the review sections of e-commerce portals and so on, depending on the brand under consideration. This applies not just to consumer brands, but even political brands, and individual brands such as celebrities.

The Internet, therefore, places a very high premium on authenticity and transparency. The implication for marketers is to look at how brands can now humanise themselves. Part of this humanisation will require an acknowledgement that brands are not flawless, sanitised entities, but actually imperfect in many ways, and thus open to engaging in a discussion with consumers. This is reflected in how a Facebook page is set up to promote a brand, and users, instead of merely viewing the promotional material, begin to use it air their grievances.

BROADCASTING TO 'PRECISION' CASTING

The non-digital world offered limited scope to precisely send a marketing message to a specific customer segment. This led to the creation of a lot of noise (versus signal), and a mindset to just ignore marketing messages on the part of the viewer.

Marketers in the digital world have far more sophisticated tools to reach their desired customer segments, and are already leveraging them. One area where more can be done is to identify small communities of passionate users of a brand, and leverage the power of the social Web to make them 'human' brand ambassadors (as opposite to traditional notion of 'superhuman' celebrity brand ambassadors).

The fundamental existential issue that the field of marketing must examine is what the role of a brand is in a new world where everyone is linked up, and everyone is a producer and consumer albeit at different scales of visibility.

This examination is likely to reveal that in a hyperconnected world, brands must step down from their glitzy pulpits and meet the customer in a far more human, and peer-to-peer manner than before. This process of 'humanisation' may mark an important step for capitalism as a whole, as it addresses the criticism of being too far removed from some of its stakeholders it impacts in its quest for value creation.

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