

The internet, however, has forced a shift from a propaganda approach to a conversation approach. Media entities online are two-way communication channels. Social media potentially gives everyone a ‘scalable’ voice – scalable if the voice resonates with the public and takes on a viral nature.

Second, information access is far more universal, enabling easy ‘fact-checking’ of brand claims versus delivery. Thus, the paradigm of “markets as conversations” (as introduced in the classic *The Cluetrain Manifesto*) is here to stay. Finally, it is important to note that consumption on the web is user-directed, where hyperlinks can take a user to one of many potential paths.

In this context, it may help to step back and start with an updated working definition of what a brand fundamentally means in this new world view. A brand could be fundamentally defined as a package of values representing the values of the people behind it. Over time, this package also takes the nature of a covenant between the people affected by the brand (consumers) and the people behind the brand. In other words, with time, consumers also become stakeholders in what the brand means. Both the psychological impact of the brand, and the real world experience of the brand, therefore, need to flow from this package of values.

What might be some implications of a connected world for brands? A few are outlined below.

Radical transparency

In the post-internet world, the idea of creating a brand that is out of sync with the values of the people behind it is quite impractical. Consumers actively and easily call out integrity gaps at the first instance. A few Google searches can easily reveal the gap in the values communicated by a brand, with its actual conduct in the real world. Therefore, brands may need to adopt a radically transparent approach in dealing with stakeholders. This perhaps needs to be supported by consumers too, by being prepared to welcome such sharing by brands.

Brand humanisation

Traditional brands have operated in a spectrum ranging from the ‘unquestionable monolith’ that takes itself too seriously to ‘ironic kitsch’ bordering on absurdity. The internet perhaps calls for the middle path – which entails a certain amount of humanisation of the brand (following from the definition of brand outlined earlier). Elements that may form part of this humanisation may include acknowledgement of weaknesses, integrity in claims made, openness to change based on feedback, empathy, respect for the audience’s intelligence and so on.

Community ownership

Post-internet brands will also need to be open to being partly owned by users, in the sense that users will have a much stronger say in the direction a brand (and the underlying product) takes. When brand marketing increasingly depends on the idea of voluntary “sharing” by users on social media, it automatically follows that the brands have to be highly responsive to user opinion. A look at any app’s reviews in the app store will make it clear that consumers too increasingly feel a sense of ownership towards brands they use, and actively contribute to its improvement.

Marketing ethics

In the internet world, marketing ethics assume a far more significant role. This is because technology and analytics can make web-based marketing efforts extremely rich and personalised to the end consumer. This may, however, raise a variety of questions on ethics pertaining to invasion of privacy, data security, ethics around pricing and such.

The ethical challenges presented by analytics must be met through being vigilant about how customer information is being used. At every step the consumer needs to be reassured that information used by analytics is creating value for him.

‘Pure’ web paradigms

It appears that the initial period of transition to a web-centric brand world has been characterised by simply replicating old-world paradigms with a technology layer.

For instance, one encounters ads interspersed in online videos and banner ads that replicate ‘old media’ clichés. All this disregards a fundamental feature of online behaviour — namely that the consumer is the architect of his own experience, versus a passive receptor of ‘what’s on’.

Obstructing this journey with brand communication derives from the monolithic mindset. What are needed, therefore, are completely fresh, and ground-up paradigms based on how brands can make themselves useful in the consumer’s journey and add to his user experience.

In conclusion, the connected nature of the world has probably reached a point of no return.

Therefore the paradigms that brands adopt must resonate more deeply with this change, to meaningfully engage with the consumers whose lives they aim to improve. This process has already begun, and it will be interesting to see how brands evolve further along this path.

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