

Social E's

To be successful at marketing you need to be a little bit of a control freak. Marketing, by its very nature, is a relatively subjective discipline in which we are required to be confident, strong in our convictions, and provide laser-like focus to make our vision a reality.

It is no surprise, then, that relinquishing some control of a brand's identity—whether it is taking the plunge into social media or subordinating a brand's identity to a retailer's brand in the name of partnership—is causing more than a little angst for marketing professionals.

At the keynote address for the Shop.org Annual Summit, Macy's CEO Terry Lundgren and Sucharita Mulpuru of Forrester Research noted that social media represent a fundamental shift in the way we

result. The fear is that digital engagement sets a brand up for criticism and negative comments. Well, of course it does. But engaging, learning, and adapting a brand to address the criticism (assuming its validity and salience) is one of the key benefits of social media.

How better to create an emotional connection than by listening to consumers and being willing to adjust? A 2009 *Global Web Index* study by Lightspeed Research noted that listening to comments that people make on forums or social networks is the best way for companies to improve users' opinions about their brands. So what's a marketer to do? How do we control a brand's identity in a world where control appears to be fleeting?

The one thing that marketers most control is the ability to stand for something that really matters to consumers and shoppers. Let's face it, most products within a category segment offer similar—if not the same—quality, features and benefits. The need to be distinctive is therefore imperative. Without such distinctions, a brand becomes an interchangeable commodity, winning or losing as a result of price-based competition.

It is the challenge of really standing for something that matters that bridges the uncontrollable and the controllable. Brand identity that is rooted in a shopper's self-identification creates the passion that marketers strive to foster. The opportunity is to find an original "voice" for our brands and contemporize them through digital engagement.

The following are just a few examples of what I call the "social e's" of engage, educate, excite and evangelize, that enable brands to transcend their functional roles to create true partnership with consumers.

Engage. Walgreens teamed up with Oprah.com to develop the *O Dream Board*, a desktop application that combines photos, quotes and words, to motivate and inspire consumers to turn their life's goals into reality. Once consumers create a board, they can

The digital path to engage, educate, excite and evangelize.

communicate. Indeed, more than 1.5 million pieces of content are shared on Facebook daily. In the near future, we will no longer search for products and services; they will find us via social media.

However, a fear of the unknown, and the possibility that there will be conflicts and inconsistencies in how our consumers and customers will represent our brands when we are not the final decision maker and steward, gives us pause.

Given this relatively new reality, it is no surprise that many marketers are conflicted between wanting to engage with these media while at the same time fearing the control that they must relinquish as a

print them out at a local Walgreens to serve as a daily reminder. This successfully transitioned Walgreens' photo processing from a transactional department to an advocate supporting shoppers' personal transformation.

Educate. Would you believe that toilet paper could drive a public bathroom revolution? Charmin's *SitorSquat* app helps consumers find clean public restrooms away from home. Approximately 52,000 public toilets in 10 countries worldwide have been reviewed! Charmin has solved a true problem for consumers and raised its profile as the toilet paper that brings you the best bathroom experience, whether at home or away from home.

Excite. The Pepsi *Refresh Project* (see *The Hub*, May/June, 2010) is driven by a \$20 million social-media investment to drive excitement throughout the global community to nominate and vote for local community projects to receive funding from \$5,000-\$250,000 each month.

Looking to close the gap between Pepsi's 250,000 actively engaged Facebook fans and Coke's 4 million, this campaign creates an emotional connection in the most personally relevant way, crossing the range of categories connected to people's passions: health, arts & culture, the planet, neighborhoods, and education.

Evangelize. Target has a longstanding corporate commitment to supporting educational programming. This past February, they identified one more way to get consumers involved in helping the cause. Taking advantage of the fact that Super Bowl and Valentine's Day were one week apart, they created a Facebook application called *Super Love Sender*.

Consumers were encouraged to create and send up to 10 video cards a day and with each card they voted for one of five worthy charities. Target offered real-time tracking of how the charities were faring against each other for portions of Target's \$1 million donation.

BUILDING A DIGITAL IDENTITY

When plotting the path for emotional connection via social media, another area that deserves consideration is the e-commerce environment that is beginning to gain some traction with Procter & Gamble's e-store, Amazon.com storefronts and Alice.com. Marketers should begin to manage their brand's identity to ensure that it is being presented in the best light.

A recent survey of e-commerce sites for a range of packaged-goods brands highlighted an eye-opening level of mislabeled product lines and SKUs, outdated packaging and confusing price/value offerings. Of

course, at the most basic level, ensuring accuracy is critical. However, it is just as important to develop and maintain a brand's identity through online advertising, merchandising, adjacencies, social campaigns, and so forth.

It is true that you cannot control it all, but all is not lost. Consumers will choose when, how, and why to engage with brands. But you can strengthen your brand's identity in the digital space by connecting with consumers at a truly deep level through breakthrough, creative programming.

This requires that you re-train your thinking and develop the skill set necessary to engage consumers in a distinctive, breakthrough, and relevant style. It can never be about overt selling. It has to be about active engagement, education, and problem solving. Your brand may need to be fun, funny, or personal to break through. The explosion of digital and the coming explosion in mobile is about personal utility, not brand push.

Google, for example, delivered something that consumers ultimately desired—and the functional utility was so high it translated into a strong emotional connection. That's when Google moved from being a website to a brand/destination.

How can you transform your brand to own the solution that is of the utmost utility for the consumer? Kraft has been on that path with its *iFood Assistant* iPhone app. They created something so useful for their consumer segment that these same consumers who buy Kraft products are willing to purchase a subscription to the magazine or buy the app.

Then the challenge becomes how to continue to delight these shoppers who have now paid for your solution—in addition to the brand. The stakes are higher, but the reward is higher too.

As with all good marketing, your digital efforts need to make sense within your integrated marketing campaign. Your brand must have a sustained, long-term commitment to those influencers, connectors, and thought-leaders so that they will continue to act on your brand's behalf and make your brand's vision a reality. ■



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