

TOM

The Marketing Times Are A-Changin'

ASACKER

Warning: A plethora of metaphors ahead.

Come gather 'round marketers wherever you roam. And admit that the waters around you have grown. And accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone. If your job to you is worth savin.' Then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone. For the marketing times they are a-changin'. (My most sincere apologies to Mr. Zimmerman).

So how *does* it feel? To be on your own? With no direction home? Like a complete unknown? Like a rolling stone? How does it feel to have consumers in charge of what, how, and when they watch, read, listen and click? I realize that you may not be feeling the significant marketplace changes taking place all around you. You may be in denial: *"C'mon. This isn't a sea-change. It's a little downpour of Web 2.0 hype. Have you already forgotten the irrational exuberance that was the dot-com boom and bust?"* Trust me, those heady days are burned into my subconscious mind. But there's a big difference today. And all you have to do to understand that difference is to read the business headlines.

Not Your Father's Headlines (Not Even Your Brother's)

At the turn of the century, the business news highlighted the digital doings of new-school, dot-com companies like Amazon, AOL, DoubleClick, and Lycos. Recent headlines are dramatically different. Here's a smattering from the past few weeks: "Anheuser-Busch to Produce Own Content for Web, Mobile," "ABC News Sells Content on iTunes," "BBH Viral Video for Smirnoff Raw Tea Takes Off," "Fox Streams Primetime Shows on Local MyFox Sites," "P&G's Secret Deodorant Recruited Participants on the Product's ShareYourSecret.com Website," "Cadillac Drives into Xbox 360/Live Racing Game." Alcoholic beverages, television, deodorant, and Cadillac: it doesn't get much more old-school than that. Or more revealing.

Let's assume for a moment that, like those aforementioned brands, you are selling stuff that the buying public finds of value. And by "of value," I'm not referring to "purple cow," "Blue Ocean," over the top, word-of-mouth value. Just "of value," like deodorant that doesn't stain your shirt; a restaurant that serves a hearty breakfast at a fair price; a car that gets decent gas mileage and rarely needs repairs; or an ice cold

pint of beer on a hot August day. *“Hey, Jim. Have you tasted how refreshing this brew is? Wow! Can I borrow your Blackberry? I want to ping my friends.”* Face it; most purchases are for “good enough” products and services, which compete against other “good enough” products and services.

So what attracts consumers to these “good enough” products and services? Great marketing. That’s right; consumers will, and do, exchange their attention, time and money for great marketing. They purchase and carry around with them—albeit in their subconscious minds—various associations, and the subsequent identity, created with emotionally relevant information, designs, experiences, and advertisements. They find those associations “of value.” A marketer’s job, therefore, is a simple, two step process:

1. Attract attention; and
2. Deliver value.

Alas, most marketers fall short even of step one.

The Elephant(s) in the Room

As the story goes, John Wanamaker, the father of the department store, is said to have grumbled that he knew that half of his spending on advertising was wasted, but didn’t know which half. Today, for most marketers, that squandered portion is likely much higher than fifty percent. The media landscape has splintered into a plethora of platforms, sophisticated consumers are spending less time with traditional media, and the few marketing messages consumers do receive are suspect, at best. The funny thing is most marketers, and their agencies, know this. So why do they continue to pour large sums of money down the traditional media drain, and in that traditional top-of-mind-awareness way? Why do they stop so far short of step one, well aware that the holy grail of marketing requires both steps of the two step process (awareness + value = engagement). Here’s why: most marketers and their agencies, like most human beings, spend most of their time and money . . . staying comfortable; preserving the status quo.

“I’m not going to try that. How do I know it will work? How do I defend it? What’s the CPM? What’s the ROI?” Instead of trusting their innate knowledge of an audience (their habits, connections, sensibilities, and proclivities) and defending a unique marketing approach with a coherent, persuasive appeal, it’s much easier, efficient, and, at the end of the day, profitable (in the short term) to simply tow the line and toss out the numbers. That’s the truth; the elephant in the room. And it’s also true that those risk-averse advertisers and agencies rarely know for sure who sees their ads, let alone whether the ads influence anyone (the other elephant). So why not try something new?

The Masses Have Left the Tree

The marketplace of old resembled a mass of caterpillars hanging around the tree of traditional media, venturing down the branches of mass distribution, and consuming the offshoots of brand advertisers. No more. The masses have escaped their pupae, spread their distinctive wings, and are fluttering around fields blossoming with an abundance of colorful and succulent offerings. A fleeting glimpse is all one usually gets of them. So what's a marketer to do in this chaotic environment of abundant products and services, fast-flying consumers, and a rapidly changing landscape?

Will Rogers once remarked, "Chaotic action is preferable to orderly inaction." Orderly inaction describes today's ineffectual, status quo marketing. Chaotic action is the new marketing imperative; to wit:

1. Be wherever and whenever your audience is most receptive to your message (verifiable metrics be damned). Like butterflies (okay, enough with the metaphors), consumers are best observed when they are "feeding." With some experience, you'll quickly learn to find "hot-spots" of butterfly activity;
2. Get their attention by being unique, relevant, and authentic. Bright, plastic flowers may attract butterflies from a distance. But once they get close enough, if it's the wrong species or devoid of aroma and taste, they'll quickly flit away to something worth engaging with;
3. Deliver value in exchange for their time, since the key to long-term marketing success (read: ROI) is to get them to come back for more, and to bring all of their friends; and
4. Keep notes on what you observe regarding the habitat, the offering, the way the butterfly moves and communicates, and other matters of interest. And you can leave your nets at home. You're not trying to *capture* anything.

The marketing times, they certainly are a-changin'. Unfortunately for us marketers, that's about the only thing we can be certain of today.

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Tom Asacker writes, teaches, and speaks about radically new practices and ideas for marketplace success in chaotic times. He is a brand adviser and author of critically acclaimed books including his latest, *A Clear Eye for Branding*, published by Paramount Market Publishing, New York. Visit acleareye.com to learn more.