

How to market brands in a people economy

By Tim Stock and Marie Lena Tupot, scenarioDNA

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Tim Stock and Marie Lena Tupot, scenarioDNA, argue that, as advertising becomes less effective, marketers must find new ways to keep their brands in front

BRAND MARKETERS ARE in the midst of a fundamental shift in human behaviour and consumption. Getting increasingly more elusive and enabled by networked personal technology, consumers are moving from mass market to multiplying custom markets. Today's emerging demographic segments and affinities devalue traditional consumer market boxes.

Take, for example, the ubiquitous metrosexual man or the enigmatic NASCAR dad. There is an unmistakable call to embed a brand within the fabric of their culture if you wish to reach these market segments. We cannot take behaviour for granted. It is constantly evolving in response to a variety of forces that can only be understood by being right there. To function properly in context, embedded brands must demonstrate a pronounced knowledge and communication of the nuances of social context that drive attitudes and access. The challenge for brands is to rebuild the factory of innovation and break out of the conventional ways of communicating.

The implication of this rapid shift in consumer identity and expression has not yet fully sunk in. This is not a technology-driven revolution. Technology is only important so far as it has affected the way people do things. As we move from push media to pull media, the real revolution is within people.

We are just beginning to see flickers of attempts at embed branding (see box), albeit over-steps and mis-steps for various

reasons. Whether successful or not, brands are striving for change as much as consumers are demanding change.

Not stealthy

Embed marketing differs from undercover or stealth marketing in that it evolves organically with customers. Stealth marketing follows more of a push model. Take the Sony Ericsson campaign for 2002. Sony Ericsson hired 60 actors and actresses to play tourists and ask passers-by to take their picture using Sony Ericsson's cell phone model with a digital camera attachment. Another 60 actresses and female models were sent to trendy bars and lounges, armed with the cell phone. The technique was considered to be deceptive. It goes against the idea of people as participant and places them in the position of victim. The campaigns, while inventive, are no different from spam in the inbox.

At the tail end of these campaigns, CRM tools are often expected to mend ideas gone wrong. These are powerful tools, but are too often disconnected from the core of what customers value most in the brand. The true power of CRM is still not realised because it typically regulates only the most superficial tangible brand assets, such as price and service. The typical CRM relationship is a vicious and costly cycle of buying back lost customers – customers who are not plugged in to the intangibles of the brand. Imagine the relationships we could build if we included intangibles in the CRM process. Imagine the ROI if we could avert a lost customer with a potent reconnection with the brand – rather than throwing cash at them to change perception.

Planning for the people

ACNielsen recently notified TV executives that men aged 18–34, a demographic group coveted by advertisers, are watching between 8% and 12% less prime-time TV than they did last year – a sharp decline. The battleground over TV's shifting ad landscape demonstrates the

culmination of an industrial era that has ended. In the TV era people sat at the end of the value chain; brands were pushed to them. Now we have networked consumers in search of 15 minutes of privacy rather than 15 minutes of fame. They are channelling off email spam and fast-forwarding through TV commercials. They need to be reached 'in the moment', as they are moving through their day.

Outdoor advertising is moving in that direction, with billboards that change messages based on the demographics of drivers passing by or what time of day it is. Smart Sign Media uses a technology that taps into the radio signals in cars to determine the predominant income and product preferences of passers-by and then adjusts the billboard message accordingly.

Beyond advertising

From the GI generation to the silent generation, to boomers, to Gen X and Gen Y, the 30-second spot is clearly losing ground to increasing pressures from the social forces of the New Economy. The drivers of choice have less to do with product than with a view of how we see ourselves living. What was once a decision between Brand A or Brand B now becomes a deeper question of how we wish to express our place in the culture: an affirmation that we make good choices – cool choices.

The makers of Tylenol are promoting a new idea: pain is cool. Company executives believe there's a whole group of young, able-bodied enthusiasts out there for whom pain is proof of their devotion. As such, they have launched 'ouch', promoting Tylenol as the pain reliever of choice for extreme sports athletes. The campaign includes a website (www.ouchthewebsite.com) featuring people and topics related to pain, a 3D comic book and a quarterly newsletter glued into magazines including *Anthem*, *Giant Robot*, *Fader*, *Tokion* and *Transworld Skateboarding*. Ouch is also a sponsor of events that relate to modern-day lifestyles

What is embed branding?

It is an approach to marketing a brand that aims to embed it in the target audience's lives, so that it becomes part of their whole way of life and thinking. This requires unconventional approaches to what kind of advertising (if any) to use, and where to place it, and the overt use of the brand as a facilitator or participant in consumers' lifestyles. The ideal is for the brand to become a constant – but welcome – presence in their lives.



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that involve pain. Critics are concerned that if marketers are not careful in their approach, consumers will get a whiff of campaign posers. With all the new forms of experiential marketing emerging, consumers will quickly sniff out the charlatans touting their false promises.

Bringing the edge back

Advertising no longer penetrates at face value – marketers need to dig deeper and surprise the consumer to get their attention. We need transcendent ideas. Ideas that seduce. For example, Fallon's Web films for BMW reached consumers in a more divergent way than previous media campaigns. Consider too LG Mobile Phones' Text in the City campaign, a search for the best phone flirts and their most successful text-message pick-up lines of the year. Although differing in complexity, these require ideas to be shaped to offer freedom from conventional media approaches.

Bringing new experiences to new channels is helped by leading with a believable metaphor that rings true to the Zeitgeist of the consumer, not just

something unique you can do digitally. The most powerful experiences are measured by their ability to connect with the cultural pulse.

It is critical to know the right place for a brand in each exchange. Will the brand disrupt or propel the exchange? Will it effectively stitch itself to the language of the scenario? Knowing the elements that constitute the value drivers of the experience is key to establishing the brand's place and effectively embedding the message.

That raises questions such as: Can we jump too far ahead? Can multiple channels dilute the brand? In short, brands must evolve to become as mobile as the people they serve. They need to be where their consumers are and that diversity of channels (be it print, retail, internet, wireless, you name it) necessitates a centralised, all-encompassing view of the consumer. The mutability of these channels requires effective seeding of the nucleus of brand value into each experience, to ensure that the brand moves and mutates along with the realities of human scenarios.

A campaign is intertextual: not simply

the product of a single team, but of its relationship to other campaigns and to the structures of marketing. Once that's understood, we can begin to deconstruct the brand and work towards establishing a language of signs to bridge the gap from planning to creative execution.

New economy research

To uncover those intangible qualities that need to be relayed through campaigns, we need to be looking at real people. The key failure of old-economy research is that it lumps as many people into the same bucket as possible. Focus groups do not suffice, either. They typically only look at attitudes as they relate to the product in question, leaving marketers on the outside looking in. Such narrow methods curb innovation when used as the centre-point for planning insight.

We need to observe more than we ask. Technology keeps that landscape shifting – an even more compelling reason to get ahead of where consumers will be. It's more about what they could be doing, not just what they habitually do. The goal is to get beyond questions we already ►



Vodka on ice: as a venture partner of the Ice Hotel in Canada, Absolut promotes its own brand values

7 rules for embed marketing account planning

1. Kill the focus group and start observing
2. Create a structure that unifies planning and creative
3. Develop a flexible process of idea innovation
4. Support ideas that unify campaigns
5. Seek ideas that transcend channels
6. Engineer brands for participation
7. Allow brands to evolve

know the answers to and get to the point of knowing consumers so well that we honestly earn the privilege of talking to them.

Looking at customers in their natural state offers much deeper hypotheses for the planning and creative process. Techniques such as street interviews, message boards, blogs and chat room observation, and simple passive observation in social arenas are key to finding ideas for embedding the brand.

The power of observation has been lost in the planning process for some time. Planning research needs to follow a solid hypothesis shaped by the ongoing diligence of tracking every nook and cranny of a culture.

Mapping the language of signs

The tradition of account planning turns to semiotics to decode the language of desire. Semiotics can be applied to everything that has meaning within a culture. The task is to reveal the pattern of functional signs and connect behavioural actions to these signs.

Ask: 'What makes one love skateboarding?' Signs could be communicating edginess, social interaction, belonging or identity. These experiential drivers communicate the desirability of the experience. For brands to embed, they need to synchronise themselves to these signs. It is the difference between speaking in the jargon of Gen Y and speaking in the social actions that resonate with these consumers. It's about walking the walk, not just talking the talk.

This means finding more than sponsorships. It's too easy to 'buy' the experiences. It's stronger to contribute to the scene in a meaningful way. This is

about supplying the ingredients that transform a culture into a community. Contribute to the fabric with language and actions that resonate to the nucleus of the experience. Get into the nomenclature of the experience being targeted.

Take, for example, the case of Virgin Mobile, known for its pay-as-you-go plans. What if the company's term 'Top Up' became synonymous with adding minutes and as ubiquitous as Scotch tape or Kleenex? Brands have an opportunity to live as experiences with consumers if they can identify the right place to occupy and the signs that define the brand's intrinsic value.

Arranging the brand's *mise-en-scène*

The signs we uncover consequently become part of the brand's *mise-en-scène* (to borrow a film concept). The *mise-en-scène* paints a vivid picture of the real world that the campaign must live in and the buttons the brand must push. Ultimately, the *mise-en-scène* forms the framework for a more embed-driven creative brief, setting the stage for creative brainstorming where we can begin modelling experiences.

Where things appear and what they're surrounded by can play a big part in how you receive a brand emotionally. Imagine, for a moment, if Absolut simply partnered with a luxury hotel chain rather than building the Ice Hotel. Certainly, the

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impact would not be the same. Gone would be the brand values of the unexpected and Absolut's uniquely stylish aesthetics. More brands need to make more connections like this, in ways that affect not only the showcase experience but the everyday.

Businesses should not invent reasons why people need products and services. If we work to make the product part of the core of what people already desire, the brand will evolve with the consumer. Like a good film director, marketers need to penetrate the nucleus of consumer desire, to effectively ebb and flow with consumers as they morph and modulate channels in their daily path.

The successful brand will live in a world with its consumers as a seamless series of actions. Consumers may be aware of the presence of brand messages, but the messages are believable and speak the language of the scenario. Messages that ignore this mandate will be shut out and banished from the consumer's world.

Building a better planning process

To get where we need to be requires a framework conducive to innovation. The relationship between planners and creatives needs to be an evolving dialogue that keeps messages on point and offers the greatest opportunity for truly groundbreaking ideas.

Planners need to live up to their role as people advocates, in order for creatives to get the scene right for embedding the brand. That means going beyond the typical regurgitation of data points that do little to inspire and, instead, establishing a vibrant picture of the consumer in motion. Hybrid observational research methods need to be merged with traditional methods to get into the minds of consumers. Additionally, planning briefs need to be clearly defined and shaped by scenarios and experience models that ensure an embedded take on the brand.

TV is moving beyond the 30-second spot and the web is evolving to tune the clarity of brand on all channels. When moving into this new era in advertising it is important to remember the critical driving force – people. The winners in this new age of advertising will be those who passionately deliver on that reality. ■

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