

Can consumers own the brand?

Marie Lena Tupot and **Tim Stock**, scenarioDNA, propose 5 ways for brands to become more integrated with their consumers and survive and prosper

EXACTLY WHO IS holding the reins on brands these days? Does it really matter? Or should branding be more about the way a campaign evolves, rather than from whom or where? With everyone talking about how much power the consumer wields, the advertising industry is in desperate need of embedded consumer insight.

Branding now requires a deeper process, yet the dilemma of unearthing consumer niches and their nuances calls for a major overhaul. It takes time to cultivate and invent the intangibles necessary to a brand's longevity. Keeping a brand cool and relevant means finding authentic sources of influence sooner than the influencers – like knowing biker culture is about to rock the world before Justin Timberlake is seen wearing a Von Dutch hat.

Quick returns, hard data

Unfortunately, agencies continue to be inhibited by demands for quick returns and bottom-line sales accountability. The fear of coming to the table without hard data has quelled instinct, resulting in fall-back techniques that make for safe (yet not inexpensive) marketing plans. These plans are sure to boost sales, yet are questionable in their long-term effects on brand value. And, in due time, such uninspired techniques will be lost on the emerging generation of consumers who are already too numb to respond to desperate ad bombardment.



Virgin mobile phones: evolution of style

Brands are more elusive today than ever before. Nonetheless, a brand is what it always has been: part of the consumer's perception or aspired perception of himself. That is the underlying reason why a well-executed brand becomes an appendage of a consumer. A great print campaign, a logo, a tagline, public relations or even a well-orchestrated special event does not define a brand.

The industry standard definition of branding refers to a set of associations that provides a distinct image and the basis for a loyal relationship. Is this enough in the age of new consumerism?

Backward-looking

Such a definition has us typically looking back to where a brand comes from to define where it is going. It keeps us focused within vertical silos comparing apples to apples, Coke to Pepsi, when we need to be looking at brands competing on more transcendent definitions of value – personal electronics versus fashion, for instance.

Virgin mobile phones have more to do with the evolution of style than they have to do with Motorola. The industry needs to be looking at case studies more holistically to gain real insight on true consumer emotion. In essence, all brands become entertainment brands. The question is: how can that be cultivated?

Following a well-managed Hollywood production model, forward-thinking ad agencies could easily become the new factories of innovation where brands are engineered to be more participatory, reflecting that set of associations. Developing concepts, like new content and audience niches, would remain separate, not contaminated by the corporate brand. Unaffected by the brand's corporate culture, the ad agency should be enabled to look objectively at how consumers connect with products and how brands leverage that relationship (or not).

Under the radar

Consider Pabst Blue Ribbon beer (PBR). Prior to centralising marketing efforts ►

5 ways to get consumers involved with your brand

1 Work with the familiar Online game publisher WildTangent recently released *24: Countdown*, a premium online game based on Fox Broadcasting Company's hit television series *24*. LG Mobile Phones signed on to sponsor the game. Available at <http://www.fox.com/24>, the graphically rich 3D game lets players assume the role of Jack Bauer and sends them on a high-speed chase to foil the plot of a rogue terrorist cell. Throughout the game, the player receives communications from CTU headquarters via the LG VX8000 multimedia-enabled cellphone. LG ads are integrated within the game environment.

2 Look for alternative ways to reach consumers Rather than just allow Electronic Arts to premier music from their new album in the *Urbz: Sims in the City* project, the band Black-Eyed Peas went back into the studio and remixed their music in Simlish, the game's off-kilter official language. Fans mourned the flexibility of *Sims 2* as compared to the slick *Urbz*, but cheered the musical genius.

3 Incorporate partnership venues that showcase synergies An Indian cellular operator screened a full-length Bollywood movie on mobile handsets for free to promote its video-streaming service. *Rok Sako To Rok Lo* (Stop, If You Can), was available to Bharti Tele-Ventures customers with EDGE-enabled handsets in 11 Indian cities.

4 Incite interaction in simple ways

When Snapple came out with a drink called The Wonder from Down Under, the company flipped the Snapple logo upside down to play off the Down Under theme. Die-hard Snapple drinkers called the company out of concern.

5 Know the consumer Starbucks just launched its own coffee liqueur, a natural brand extension that is eclipsing Kahlua. The move was perceived as a genuine tip of the hat to the customer, rather than yet another line extension.



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in 2000, PBR's reputation was only as good as its local distributor. When its new marketing team was brought on, it chose to capitalise on where localised efforts were working and, in tune with PBR's core attributes: a no-nonsense, down-to-earth \$2 brew. It found an ideal petri dish in downtown Manhattan, where the company sponsored events at under-the-radar watering holes like Max Fish.

Some might argue that Pabst called on its vintage history to move its audience, but a Lower East Side consumer is more about straight-shooting than provenance. Although certainly the epitome of retro-branding, the Pabst campaign called out the beer's longtime no-frills value, reversing the company's 20-year sales decline.

As in the Pabst case, naturally consumers could not say point blank what they wanted. Corporate is the expert at potentials, but corporate needs to see where the common ground is from brand to consumer. Now is the time to clean the slate, overlook department rivalries and get everyone from industrial designer to ad agency on the same page and think of how a brand can be its most fluid.

Without question, no one wants to get caught like the recording industry, which was infamously slow to take seriously the threat of peer-to-peer MP3 networks. The negative impact of coming in too late can be decimating. Music lived on as a consumer brand unto itself, leaving the

record companies in the dust. This brings us to the ultimate delivery tool for music: the iPod.

Think of the iPod in relation to the Palm Pilot. Who expected such a revolutionary device to take off so quickly when its digital datebook equivalent has yet to gain acceptance? The iPod is plug-and-play. The consumer transposes effortlessly from his CD player. And gets a better end result: music, how and when they want it. An iPod is immediately addictive. A Palm Pilot leaves a consumer synching and resynching and double-checking his or her written datebook.

Evolving conversation

Marketing needs to be an ever-evolving conversation with the consumer. At www.ipodlounge.com, users talk about their favourite device and discuss what they would like the next iPod to do and look like. They also post adaptations they have already created at home. Most recently, a high school teacher posted his home-made iPod ad, set to the Darling Buds' tune, 'Tiny Machine', with a 1970s-themed psychedelic look. In its first weeks the ad was viewed 64,000 times. Then there is iPod My Photo, which will turn any submitted photo into an iPod ad to be printed on a T-shirt. On other sites, they complain about the iPod's sub-par battery, yet devotion never falters.

The greatest testimony is a brand with

all its idiosyncracies that still maintains a loyal following. In sanding off the rough edges of authenticity, a brand could easily become mundane and irrelevant. Brands need to be looking at how they can replicate what we want to be able to do in real life: live fluidly, customise, socialise, connect and broadcast, and so on.

Evidence of the newest thinking arises from the gaming community. Not threatened by its challengers, it is not afraid to seek the most critical of influencers. Hackers, for instance, are viewed as a means of propulsion in some cases. When it comes to the development of the technology to enable DS gameplay over the internet, the official, authorised path to innovation is often not the fastest. According to an article in *Wired* magazine, '[Hackers] have already figured out how to communicate over the internet using two devices playing *Metroid Prime: Hunters*, a DS game by Nintendo.' What such hacker groups have achieved is testament to what will be mainstream in a matter of months.

Technology as key

With the state of traditional channels in flux and the 30-second TV commercial in a default position, technology holds the key. Consumers have embraced it. Technology has allowed them to take greater control of marketing channels. Weblogs, forums, online networks, ebay accounts and MP3s were initially seen as niche areas, but they are growing exponentially. Brand marketing should perform as effortlessly.

Giving consumers brand control is really not a total deferral to the consumer. It is a guided deference that calls for immersion of agency leaders into the culture of the brands they represent.

If you can get someone involved in your brand by doing what comes naturally, that is a step forward. ■



Snapple: incites interaction from consumers that really care about the brand

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