

Integrating advocacy

George Nimeh

Managing Director, Digital at Iris

george@iris-digital.com



Most people don't trust advertising.

In fact, as Yankelovich reported two years ago, 76 percent of people don't believe that companies tell the truth in advertising. That's a hard number for people in our business to look at, isn't it?

So, if people don't trust advertising, who *do* they trust? The answer is simple: over two thirds of people in the USA and half of people in Europe trust people "like themselves". That's the big revelation from the 2006 Edelman Trust Barometer, and those percentages have more than doubled in the last four years.

We live in an age where people are bombarded by messages in an increasingly fragmented media landscape. In urban environments, studies show that people are exposed to between three and five thousand messages a day. And you know what? People are getting tired of it and are beginning to feel much more hostile to advertising than they did in the past.

Continuous partial creativity

There's been a lot of talk about "continuous partial attention" – the latest version of what Alvin Toffler described as "information overload" in Future Shock back in 1970. Some in our industry have concluded that the only way to reach people whose attention is constantly shifting is to shout louder and faster than everyone else.

When Lord Saatchi wrote of the "strange death of modern advertising" in the FT last June, he concluded that the only way to break through the clutter was to reduce ideas and messages down to single words because "only brutally simple ideas get through."

Let's face it, for every brilliant piece of work by Jonathan Glazer or Daniel Kleinman there are 1000 pieces of crap shovelled down the throat of the modern consumer. Should it come as a surprise that people have learned how to quickly tune those messages out in favour of other, more interesting things to do? Is it any surprise that people don't talk about things they find completely uninteresting?

Why sit through a uninteresting ad when you can either fast forward through it with your PVR, or in those same 30 seconds text a friend, delete 12,000 pieces of spam, make a million friends on MySpace, or any of a number of other more worthwhile activities.

Does it really all boil down to simplicity, speed and brute force as Lord Saatchi suggests, or could it be more about creativity, expression, value and choice?

Along comes the internet

People have always talked about the things they love. They've always talked about things that interest and inspire them. People talk a lot about brands, and they will continue to talk about great advertising.

If the last fifteen years in this business have taught me anything, it is that conversations matter and people are increasingly in control of them.

The internet has changed the dynamic between people and brands. Today, there are fifteen million blogs out there inspiring conversations and engaging people in dialogue and debate, whether marketers like it or not.

Social media is evolving the way people learn about and interact with brands. Wikipedia articles, for example, consistently dominate the top search results for most brands. This collective "wisdom of the crowds" is slowly but surely overtaking the monolithic voice of the brand and will forever shift the control of brand authority and perception from a one-sided affair to a more shared experience.

It is time for marketers to give people reasons to talk about their brands and facilitate conversations rather than fight them. It is time for marketers to actively engage in digital reputation management and realise that they can either get involved or be relegated to the sidelines.

An integrated approach

Over seventy percent of word of mouth conversations occur face-to-face, but the internet remains the key to the successful growth and management of brand advocacy.

Word of mouth marketing leverages the inherent networking capability of the internet as well as its organizational and logistical benefits to make word of mouth marketing manageable. Digital enables offline communications by inspiring conversations and collective opinion amongst like-minded advocates which are then taken into the real world.

The internet provides a safe haven for advocates to come together and interact with each other. It provides the necessary tracking and measurement tools to enable campaigns of significant size as well as geographic diversity. It can also provide marketers with a controlled, secure environment for sensitive conversations or topics.

Moving from loyalty to advocacy

The easiest way to start developing a formalised advocacy programme is with existing customers. After all, they've already expressed interest in your brand. Instead of talking at customers, start a dialogue with them.

Too often, marketers miss the opportunity to create conversations with those people who would be natural advocates for their brand. They develop loyalty schemes and points-based rewards programmes, when what is needed are forums for expression

and the ability for people to feel that the brand they know is listening to what they have to say.

If there is a concern about privacy or the sensitivity of information, consider inviting a smaller group into a private space for a pilot project before expanding to larger audiences and geographies.

A few examples

South African winemaker Stormhoek has disrupted the traditional lines of beverage marketing by focusing on brand advocates. They eschewed traditional forms of marketing in favour of sponsoring a series of “geek dinners” targeted to online opinion leaders (not wine experts). Stormhoek’s true voice and transparent communications got the bloggers blogging and resulted in two incredibly successful campaigns with Threshers and doubled their sales in 12 months.

Virgin Mobile invited 1500 “insiders” to participate in a word of mouth campaign that topped TV for awareness and generated ten percent of their sales.

Volkswagen’s Alpha Drivers campaign created an online “walled garden” for six thousand enthusiasts to talk about their experiences with VW’s new model and to interact with each other. The turnout for those who had booked a test drive was over 90 percent, and 6 percent of the invitees bought or leased one of the cars.

Following a successful word of mouth campaign, sales of Dunkin’ Donuts Latte Lite in New York City were 13 percent higher than the control market when the product launched. After four weeks, New York City’s sales were 20 percent higher than the control market.

The critical success factor will be how transparent your efforts are judged by those interacting with you. Honest, open conversation works. People interested in your efforts will see through the rest.

We work in an industry that is showing signs of embracing the power of integrated digital advocacy. Given that 40 percent of brand-related conversations refer to brand marketing or media, it’s pretty clear that advertising can inspire people and positively impact word of mouth.

The people have spoken. And whatever we do, they’ll continue to talk. So, instead of shouting, let’s have conversations instead.