

Putting the Brand into Branded Content

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We should focus on the “Brand” element of branded content and reward attention instead of interruption.

Branded Content. Yes, it’s a buzzword. Well, a buzzword preceded by an adjective. As an industry, we’re still grappling with a definition of the aforementioned buzzword, although common consensus is that it refers to communications that people choose to consume (vs interruptive advertising).

But it’s not the buzzword that interests me. It’s the adjective. Because it’s an oft-forgotten qualification that has to be the filter for everything we do.

We’re in the business of marketing. The business of helping brands sell more stuff. So the most important thing we can do is understand how people perceive and react to brands as

well as the role that brands play in people's lives.

Brands as a means to an end

Let's be very clear. People react to brands in a very specific way. Professor Carolyn Yoon from the University of Michigan proved this in a paper titled "Neural Dissociations between Brand and Person Judgments". She found that people activate a part of the brain called the medial prefrontal cortex while brands activate an area (the left inferior prefrontal cortex) known to react to physical objects.

Human beings use brands to meet certain goals they have. Be that explicit ("I need refreshment") or implicit ("I want to be perceived as creative"). Brands that fit most highly with the expected fulfillment of that goal win out. Cue Coca-Cola and Apple, respectively.

The challenge of the attention economy

We've learned that the relationship between a customer and a brand is not an emotional relationship, but one based on goal fulfillment. We also know more about how people respond to brands.

But in spite of seemingly limitless data points, we know less than ever about how best to capture consumers' attention and persuade them to respond to explicit or implicit marketing messages. This is the ultimate challenge of the "attention economy", whose underlying principle is where the attention goes, the money will follow.

On-demand consumption

The transformation of the communications industry is all-encompassing. Consumers are being diverted from traditional content and information channels to new platforms, tools and technology.

But the most striking aspect about this change is that it's primarily about expectation — the expectation that I am in control of everything. From on-demand content (YouTube, Netflix, Spotify) to on-demand transport (Uber) to the slightly more terrifying subtle trend for on-demand human interaction.

Have you ever outrightly cursed the fact someone had the barefaced nerve to call your mobile phone? Be honest. It's because someone is trying to reach you on their terms, not yours. Haven't we all thought, "Why didn't she/he text me and I can respond when I'm good and ready?"

We've all heard that the surge in ad blocking is a symptom of bad ads. That's only part of the story. It's a symptom of our obsession with access on our terms. Time is our most finite resource and the ability to command attention during that time is a marketer's biggest challenge.

Getting attention

Content is designed to be communications that people choose to consume or, perhaps to be more realistic, communications that people don't ignore. This isn't about buzzwords like "storytelling", "emotion" or "cultural ambition". It's about the craft of creating marketing messages that warrant consumer attention.

And let's face facts: that attention might not be comparable with what marketers were able to command previously. Just as we had to readjust our sights when audiences no longer crowded around radios or anticipated TV commercials more entertaining than TV programming, we will have to readjust our sights once again to conclude that 10 seconds of attention in the newsfeed is the best we can expect. Interestingly, Facebook and Nielsen have demonstrated that nearly 75% of branding impact will occur in ten seconds — so maybe that is enough.

The true consumer interest

Unfortunately, the biggest lie the advertising industry ever sold — that people wanted "engagement" and "dialogue" with our brands — juxtaposes harshly with the reality of attention deficit and apathy. While the industry promised us more, the reality is less.

A recent example was a proposal by a British government agency [to let the internet suggest a name](#) for its new \$287 million polar research ship. Online voters overwhelmingly chose, in

jest, “Boaty McBoatface”. According to branding expert and marketing professor Mark Ritson from the Melbourne Business School, “the public would rather humiliate your brand than engage with it.”

Exaggerated, but probably closer to the truth than a deep brand-consumer relationship.

In our current reality, time is the most valuable resource. The ad-supported reach platforms of the future (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) reward attention, not interruption. When you remove all the bull%\$*&, the premise of “Content” is to craft something that people won’t ignore.

But the real trick is to remember the “Brand” in “Branded Content”. While the platforms and devices we use to communicate with audiences will come and go, the role of brands in people’s lives and the requirement of our industry to market them is much more enduring.

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