

Wearing our Hearts on our Sleeves

SYSTEMS THINKING

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How new systems will make intimacy scalable. By Neil Redding

We're on the cusp of a revolution in computing as big as the Web, the personal computer and social networking. Maybe bigger. This revolution will be driven by wearable technology, but the reason it will be revolutionary is that it will redefine something that has always been at the heart of being human.

That something is conversation.

And since successful markets and marketing are conversations, this revolution will radically change what marketers and their agencies do and how we do it.

Content + Connections = Conversation

For nearly our entire existence as a species, most conversation has happened between people in the same physical space. Before there was spoken language, conversation consisted of body language – the gestures, facial expressions and stances that make conversation richer, more natural and more effective. Those of us who delivered these skills, and paid attention to them in others, have always had an advantage.

The problem is that, for some time now, we've traded away this knowledge in favor of communications systems built on reach. From the time we first discovered amplification – via public squares and cathedrals, then microphones and public address systems, then via radio and TV – we've allowed our attentiveness to personal communication to be drowned out by the power of scale. In the social media era, this applies not just to orators, broadcasters and advertisers, but to those of us who, obsessed with our phones and gadgets, prioritize our at-scale digital presence over the people physically surrounding us and the environments we inhabit. It's a numbers game, we say. But of course, our maneuverings bear little resemblance to conversation, since almost no one is listening.

What if we could actually combine the power of scale with the effectiveness of holistic, full-featured human interaction? This is the ultimate promise of wearable technology: to replicate our instinctive, expressive behaviors at scale and at a distance, and – beyond this – to bring previously inaccessible personal states and modes of expression into the conversation.

What if I know that your energy level is low and that you've been sitting for three hours straight when I approach you to chat? How would that change what I say and how I say it? What if I know your heart is racing? That you've spent the last several evenings on your own? That you're in a car stuck in traffic? That you've just completed the longest run of your life? That you've caught the flu and aren't showing symptoms yet? Or simply that you're sad or happy?

If you're finding it difficult to believe that we'd willingly share such intimate personal states,

consider this: passive sharing of your music preferences, how hard you exercised this morning, how many steps you took yesterday, and where you started and ended are all currently being shared by large contingents of Internet users, despite our initial resistance. The first Apple Watch, after all, is about to turn heart rate and stairs climbed into mainstream metrics. There is no doubt that the surfacing and sharing of additional intimate signals will be similarly thrilling and scary, with the thrill (or just weary acceptance) ultimately winning out.

Leaning In

There are certainly challenges ahead for brands that want in on this conversation. Unlike humans, brands have found it difficult to develop a coherent and complete picture of the actual person with whom they are trying to connect. In the case of retargeting, for example, we don't yet understand whether our target has already purchased what's being presented or is in a different part of the customer journey (where our message is less relevant). And even as we start to stitch together a view of each individual, we must still capture aspects of the conversation in algorithms so that we can achieve scale.

From Here to There

While these are early days, there is work we can do now to help make these at-scale conversations a reality. Number one on this list is transitioning to systems thinking in every area of our work (and even our own personal) lives. That may sound excessive, but it's really just about paying more attention to everything that makes up the experiences we have with other people. Try it out. The next time you're having coffee or dinner with someone, challenge yourself to consider three new factors that contribute to your companion's experience. Then think about how to optimize these factors so that you create conditions for maximum enjoyment and value during your time together. For starters, try to read as much body language as you can and respond in ways that generate measurable results. Is your companion happier and more relaxed when you are talking about your workplace, or less so? Have fun with this exercise, which will not only improve the way you work, but also deepen your human relationships and increase your conversational prowess.

The Tipping Point

Will there be a clear tipping point with wearable conversational technology, the way Facebook was for social networks and the iPhone was for smartphones? If these examples are any indication, the tipping point will come when adoption reaches sufficient scale, and this only happens when a “killer app” comes along: some product or service that’s irresistible to a massive number of people. We don’t seem to be there yet.

Still, we can see how all the pieces will ultimately be integrated into new, more personal communication systems in the near future. When that happens, brands will have the opportunity to enjoy richer, more personally meaningful conversations with every willing participant. Who knows? Maybe we’ll see a world in which interruptive advertising is a thing of the past. After all – when we know when someone is open and receptive to our message – why would we waste our time and money on someone who isn’t?

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