
Finding New Magic

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How can brands earn time in consumers' lives?
Innovator Faris Yakob explains how scale,
empowerment and technology can still deliver.

Advertisers are in a bind. Many fear they have too little to say to attract and hold consumer attention. In the past they could rely on traditional media owners to reach consumers. By advertising in commercial breaks around the edges of content they could take advantage of the audience that shows had aggregated.

Fragmentation has meant consumers are gathering in big numbers less and less and that the cost of taking advantage of the aggregation ability of others has become ever higher. The internet is the great disintermediator, connecting everything to everything, but this direct connection comes with a cost. Brands with little to say do not attract any attention in

a world where communications are spread by consumer networks rather than broadcast ones.

However, the challenge isn't simply about distribution, it's also about the means of production. Until very recently, the ability to make something public, to publish, to a mass audience, was a privileged act. The powers that be historically outlawed the ability to disseminate information – unlicensed printing presses were illegal, as they still are under certain modern regimes, such as in Malaysia under the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984. When the age of mass media arrived, only governments, the media industrial complex and the advertising industry were able to create and distribute culture. So when you saw such elements of culture, you couldn't help but be impressed.

The exponential impact of Moore's Law means that the computing power of a bespoke Silicon Graphics workstation, as used to create the special effects for Terminator 2 and Jurassic Park, can now be easily approximated on a consumer laptop. Digital technology has given every consumer the power to create content. The monetary power of brands no longer buys them uniqueness. We can all make films, we can all create web pages and we can all record our own music. The magic that exclusive access to this technology used to deliver has evaporated.

Content producers – the role traditionally taken by ad agencies in the marketing industry – no longer have exclusive access to the magic that is content creation. That isn't to say the quality of "consumer-generated content" [a tellingly oxymoronic term] is on par with Hollywood production. Rather, the gap between not being able to do something and being able to do it is infinite, but the gap between being bad and excellent is simply one of degree. It's hard to be amazed with any technical wizardry on film when you grow up with iMovie at your fingertips. But all is not doom and gloom for smart brands. They still have strategic advantages in the eternal quest for consumer attention: technology and scale.

Technology provides a canvas that is yet to be effectively colonised by the amateur and, as Arthur C. Clarke famously pointed out, any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. Thus, technology provides a medium to amaze and cut through the clutter of content.

Because technology companies often tout their latest tools to brands and media owners to help drive uptake, brands have first user advantages.

The Pepsi TEN project is an explicit manifestation of this advantage. The consumer packaged goods giant established a venture fund to support and partner with early stage technology start-ups in order to exclusively leverage the technologies for marketing. The problem with the blurring of the technology and the communications industries, however, is that they are divided by a common language. Words that should mean the same thing often mean something completely different to those on either side of the divide.

Take a simple word like platform. To a communications specialist it means an idea or theme that all messages fit into, but to a technology expert it means an underlying technology that enables other products or services to be built on it. This means that collaboration among disciplines can seem to be aligned when it isn't. At the extreme, creative directors trained in writing or graphic design find themselves being asked to review algorithms they can't understand, as code becomes a creative deliverable.

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