

Thinking Like a Start-Up: A Few Lessons from our Trip to Silicon Valley

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Silicon Valley: a place where techno-dreams become reality. Home to some of the brightest digital minds in the industry, it's also a place that can offer marketers some important lessons about innovation, process and culture.

On a recent fact-finding mission to Silicon Valley, innovators from Apple, Facebook, Google and Twitter offered tips for brands looking to take their digital strategies to the next level. Below are a few highlights, along with some ideas that marketers can act upon right now.

FIVE THINGS TO LEARN FROM DIGITAL START-UPS

1. Be innovative... but also productive

Innovation is about delivering productive ideas in new or existing areas of your business. Start by identifying the white space where technology can add value for both your target audiences, then strike fast. Silicon Valley companies assume turn-around times of 12 weeks, not 12 months. Companies can't afford to let their ideas stall behind cautious, process-driven strategies.

2. Apply test-and-learn techniques

Looking at every new idea and technology can add stress to already-pressured product development and IT queues. Allow space in your processes to take a chance and experiment. Many companies in Silicon Valley run "test-and-learn" projects on the side; this gives them the option to experiment and follow up on opportunities without impacting major initiatives.

3. Make talent want to work for you

Many start-ups compete not on salaries and titles, but on the basis of corporate culture. One of the most important factors in a successful culture appears to be instilling a sense that employees can easily spread and absorb new ideas. What's also essential is an environment where employees can think big, think fresh and think new.

4. Ignore structures and focus on connections

Traditional businesses like placing things in boxes: mobile vs. desktop, online vs. offline and creation vs. distribution. These organizational models don't exist in Silicon Valley. Instead, companies are focusing on creating a complementary user experience across all devices, with mobile as the first screen. To gain similar business advantages, agencies and marketing departments must find ways to integrate specialists into silo-free structures.

5. Understand data and how it can drive your business

In Silicon Valley, the gods are the programmers and engineers. Everyone is focused on the product and delivering a connected experience. The successful marketer of the future will need to learn how to “speak tech” like everyone else. This means investing in analytics capabilities and training to sort through big data and uncover insights that deliver real business advantages.

ACT ON THESE FIVE THINGS RIGHT NOW

1. Be mobile first

The age of the PC is over; mobile is king. Forrester Research predicts that, by 2017, US mobile users will spend \$90 billion via mobile payments – a 48 percent increase from 2012. Google and Facebook are already building for mobile devices first and the Web second, but too many brands are still focused on the Web. This has to change.

2. Think native advertising

The old forms of interruption and forced viewing are toast. Advertising is going to need to adapt to be as relevant and targeted as the personal content consumers share on Facebook, Twitter and elsewhere. Ads also need to be useful, interesting or entertaining, with the same focus on feedback and sharing.

3. Be more personal

Personalization is an art and science that all brands must master. Brands need to create hundreds (or thousands) of ads and micro-target them, testing which combinations work best. In addition, brands must help consumers manage the mass of content that is created every second, and learn how to use data to personalize this content. Consumers want relevant content, filtered through smarter algorithms.

4. Data+tech content=success

All brands should be aiming for a virtually perfect union of data, technology and content: this is the success metric of the future. In addition, data planning, attribution modelling and personalized messaging will become as important as the creative and strategic skills agencies have taken decades to develop.

5. Remember to “dual screen”

Marketers need to assume that individuals are multi-processing via multiple screens at all times. The relationship between Twitter and Shazam is a good example of this dynamic. Twitter is for amplification of the “moment,” and the tool of choice for people to talk about TV content. Shazam connects TV with the mobile web; people recognize the music/sound of a show or ad, and are linked to a mobile website or a full mobile experience via the Shazam app. Adding the Shazam logo brings three times the engagement and double the word-of-mouth.

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