

Preparing for the consumer journey of the future

BLINK BRANDS OF THE FUTURE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP



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The consumer journey of the future will refocus marketing from awareness to experience. Doreen Wang, Global Head of BrandZ at Kantar Millward Brown, explains how the journey will evolve.

Marketing is about to make a fundamental shift. Brand awareness, many marketers' primary goal, is rapidly being replaced by the need to deliver a consumer experience of their product or service. In the future, that means the power of consumer reviews will become as impactful as advertising campaigns.

This dramatic evolution is being driven by a number of structural shifts in the way consumers shop and marketers work. Simply put, there's greater emphasis on extending online to offline. Even Amazon, the original e-commerce giant, is moving into offline with its

\$13.7bn purchase of Whole Foods.

There's also more emphasis on reducing the friction on the path to purchase. Alibaba in China, for example, now runs 4S stores where you can rent or buy a car using a smartphone, without interacting with another human. Make your selection and the car will be delivered to the forecourt, without human involvement. Moreover, app-powered real-world shopping, as tested by Amazon's pre- Whole Foods retail experiments, will become increasingly common.

Then there's the whole ecosystem experience that sees key players, such as Amazon, Apple, Alibaba and Tencent, taking a bigger role in the places and ways consumers interact with brands.

As they expand across different areas (like delivery, hardware, media, video and music), and encourage consumers to make the last mile of purchase, their role will only increase.

Facebook is also seeking to go down this path, offering integrated calls to action from its mobile pages that enable consumers to schedule, order or buy without leaving the company's page.

The goal is to make everything as simple as possible for consumers. By being everywhere their consumers are, brand marketers can make their relationships as seamless as possible, online and offline. Getting it right means ensuring there are no differences in how consumers experience their brand in the offline or digital world.

Collectively, these changes create a new reality where purchase decisions are increasingly made on the basis of consumer reviews. If I want to buy a new face cream, for example, on Amazon, I am presented with a list of heritage brands as well as new niche players with far less history to fall back on.

All products are presented with equal prominence, and the only difference is the consumer reviews. Whereas the likes of Lancôme might be able to exploit their established power in

other media channels and department store environments, on ecosystem platforms, the differentiator is the number of positive comments.

We may not trust niche brands before we try them, but we trust Amazon and its users to tell it like it is. Four thousand or more reviews can't be wrong and they might even encourage us to sample something new (and allow brands with vastly different resources to compete).

Marketing's experience evolution

The growing power of the experience economy changes the role that marketing needs to play. The relationship between consumer and brand changes when it becomes all about the experience rather than just building awareness and pushing people down the purchase funnel.

That's why brands and businesses are rightly putting so much emphasis on their Trustpilot or TripAdvisor scores, and why an increasing amount of creative now features consumer reviews or tweets.

The starting point of this journey is understanding how the interaction between the product and brand communications – in all its forms – can strengthen the brand experience and the peer consumer experience.

Offline stores have already become part of that journey for online brands such as Amazon, and retail is changing for offline brands too. Companies like Nordstrom are turning its mini-department store outlets into entertainment centers that allow consumers to step into a brand's world, and get manicures and advice from stylists before having goods delivered to their homes.

The risk is that this strategy could turn the retailer into another Toys R Us – a kid's playground where no one buys anything. In 2017, Toys R Us had to file for bankruptcy in the US and Canada.

Ultimately, alongside this shift to retail experiences, brands also need to form digital

partnerships, not just with Amazon but everywhere. A brand that is strongly positioned on multiple digital platforms is best placed to survive and thrive. Toys R Us famously refused to collaborate with Amazon, but others, such as Nike, have not been so blind. In 2017, the brand started selling products on the world's largest e-commerce platform.

What to do now

The focus on the customer experience, combined with the merger of marketing and technology, creates a challenge for marketers. In most companies, marketing currently has limited ability to directly influence the key factor – experience – that drives business success.

So, to demonstrate what they can add, marketers need to focus on three key areas:

Firstly, they need to be mindful of their key competency of consumer insight and understanding. This insight will be essential in helping their business deliver experiences that consumers desire, and orchestrating their colleagues in different departments to meet those needs. Marketers need to become Chief Experience Officers for their brand.

Secondly, marketers and their colleagues need to consider whether the marketing role needs to be given additional areas of responsibility to tie in more closely to the operational side of their business. At Amazon, for example, sales and marketing are one seamless department. At Visa, the CMO and the CIO are a single role.

Thirdly, marketers need to expand their digital partnerships to ensure they reach consumers wherever they shop. While digital-first brands are generally better attuned to the experience economy, others, such as Nike (whose new Amazon deal is giving it better control of its brand) and Starbucks (which has prioritized digital partnerships like its relationship with Tencent in China), are making the right moves.

The experience revolution is coming and it's coming fast. The consumer journey of the future is already being established and it's up to marketers and their brands to adapt. Let's

make it an experience to remember.

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