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Your thoughts on 'Time for a story'

'It's important to recognise that fragmentation isn't only occurring in media channels – it's occurring in production processes too. The growth of outsourcing and extended supply-chains means it's harder and harder to tell true stories.'

Karen Davies

'Authenticity has been a buzzword of the noughties but until recently generated little real activity. Then in the last year we have witnessed McCain's efforts to use only British potatoes or Ribena's efforts with British blueberries and Heinz's efforts to guarantee the source of its tomatoes.'

Product provenance is set to increase as a marketing asset.'

Bob James

'The emergence of corporate marketing is one of the untold stories of the last decade. Reputation is replacing brand as the buzzword in many boardrooms, and Marketing is not always responsible for its development.'

Simon Moore

'The death of television is exaggerated. The rise of the internet is exaggerated. What is actually happening is the merging of interactive content. Smart marketers need to see television as part of a much bigger conversation – on and offline.'

Laurie Morgan

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How to get ahead in marketing: Time for a story

As media fragmentation drives consumers online, brands require a new breed of marketing leader. In the last of our series on career development, Jonathan Turner and Lindsay Leslie-Miller examine how marketers must shape up

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Modern marketers must tackle structural changes in customer empowerment, branding and accountability, yet the most fundamental change affecting the industry has been the splintering of traditional communication channels between brands and individuals. After all, it is no use talking if no one is listening any more.

The term media fragmentation describes a transformation in the channels and rules of conversation between individuals and brands. At one level, the breadth of content of traditional communications has increased through the extension of media conglomerates, from the BBC, BSkyB and Clear Channel in broadcast to companies such as Trinity Mirror in print. But simultaneously a much more important structural transformation has occurred through the growth of new media. The emergence of Google, social networks such as Facebook and peer-to-peer visual media such as Joost are changing media consumption. Increasingly, consumers make the media; in the case of Facebook, you could argue that they are the medium.

Yet the fundamental challenge of branding has not changed. It is a valued part of customers' lives with as much intimacy and bonding as possible. At one time, great advertising could create this bond by fuelling word-of-mouth discussion – think of

Smash, Cadbury's Flake, Nescafé Gold Blend, British Airways, Tango, Carlsberg and Budweiser. But now brands must assemble a coherent story from a broader set of tools and channels.

Three major competencies can help break through this fragmentation trap. The first is the return to storytelling. Good stories have several qualities that make them right for the modern era: they are personal, which makes them well suited to our individualistic age; they can be retold – the ability to be passed on quickly is critical in social networks; and they have currency over time. Like Chinese whispers, stories can maintain personal relevance even as they are distorted. This makes them as valuable for raising internal morale as for engaging customers.

The second ingredient is authenticity. For upstream marketers this can be narrowly interpreted as holistic brand management – maintaining a consistent brand experience along the customer journey. For downstream marketers it manifests itself as a drive toward integrated marketing. But authenticity also works at a deeper level: it reflects the ability of a brand, and the organisation that creates it, to build a joined-up sense of values and beliefs over time – to tell true stories.

The final necessary element required to break through in a fragmented media environment is relentless experimentation.

While familiarity and trust will always be crucial to brand success, the need to reinvent has never been more important. Today's social media thrives on the 'cult of cool'. Originally a social network exclusively for Harvard students, Facebook is now aggressively challenging MySpace for market dominance in the general social-networking arena, based on a public perception of it as having greater authenticity and feature innovation. Bear all this in mind as you navigate your career path.

What sort of organisation should I choose?

The principal effect of media fragmentation is on mass-market brands, which need to be able to speak to the world at low cost. So for B2B environments, dominated as they are by tight-knit influence networks and relationship-based selling, fragmentation is less of an issue. Consumer-facing organisations are the place to start to experience fragmentation in the raw.

Within the world's mass-market brands, the segments most likely to embrace innovative conversational approaches are those that are frequently purchased but traditionally hold moderate involvement, such as food and drink or domestic-cleaning products. These present an arena ripe for modern storytelling by brands, with the chance for frequent engagement and the latitude to tolerate a certain playfulness. Procter & Gamble is among those experimenting in this arena through sites such as www.shespeaks.com and www.vocalpoint.com. 'Most brands simply don't have enough depth to present a compelling-enough story,' says Tony Roberts, head of strategy at OMD. 'The rule is to be genuinely interesting, or shut up.'

Categories that find it easiest to conquer the reputation-age blues will include natural cosmetics, specialist performance clothing, wine, chocolate, homeopathic remedies or new media themselves – for example 'conversation platforms' such as Skype. High-involvement decisions such as car purchase are too emotionally charged to rely on these modern channels, and low-involvement categories like soap powder cannot maintain users' interest for long enough to engage in an extended conversation. Traditional interruption advertising will remain critical in these categories.

What sort of culture is best?

Culturally, fragmentation-age brands are those that naturally embrace a culture of openness and public conversation.

When it comes to authenticity, look for somewhere that espouses strong internal values and is home to satisfied employees. Maintaining authenticity is much easier within a company of believers. Equally, examples of that open culture in practice, such as allowing staff to maintain blogs or the presence of junior staff on conference platforms, can be a good indicator of an authentic company.

Also look at how the company treats errors. Working in modern media means mistakes are made, so search for a culture that is genuinely experimental and embraces constructive disagreement and dialogue from staff and customers alike.

Another good indicator is how a company deals with a crisis. Crunch points can provide a window on the organisation's soul, forcing it to return to deeply-embedded values when it has to decide how to act. Look for a strong moral compass that is consistently and transparently applied.

Finally, hunt for a culture of conversation. If employees enjoy socialising together, the chances are that stories will emerge and get passed on. If there's a clear boundary between work and play, storytelling will never be native to the culture, and it will always have to be manufactured.

What sort of skills do I need?

Just because storytelling and experimentation are becoming more important, it doesn't mean that every brand manager has to become a poet or performance artist. But one unavoidable requirement is a nose for authenticity. Consumers will be able to spot a fake a mile off; you have to be able to do the same.

The critical fragmentation-age skill is to understand how the entire brand reputation is built – from brand identity, through customer experience and, increasingly, through supply-chain and management behaviour. This will help you develop a 'sixth sense', enabling you to anticipate how customers will interpret your actions. As Nick Allen, head of fuels and forecourt marketing at Shell, says: 'Marketing is about crunching the

Essentials Advice from the top



Jim Hytner is the new commercial director of Top Up TV and a media industry veteran, having worked at Sky, ITV and Channel 5

Q What has changed in media fragmentation over the course of your career?

A The slow realisation that the internet turned out to be not just another channel, but a different environment.

For marketers, the internet is a market-education space, a product-delivery location, a customer-collaboration space and an awareness-raising tool. And even that definition is changing all the time. Understanding how to build a consistent web presence on these multiple levels is a real challenge.

Q What does this fragmentation mean for your business?

A The flip-side of the internet is that we can spend of a lot of money driving people into a purchase channel, where they then choose a rival's product based on distorted search findings. As an industry, we have to move beyond being search-junkies to build brands online.

Q What advice do you have for young marketers today?

A Despite the web's importance, I wouldn't advocate growing up in that environment. It's more important to be rounded. You need to be a generalist, but understand every part of the mix.



Ian Cairns is business director of media agency OMD UK

Q What has changed in media fragmentation over the course of your career?

A The internet increased fragmentation, but we should look at it positively as it gives us a lot more opportunities to conduct targeted interactive marketing with discrete audiences. It also acts as

a conduit for other channels like TV and radio. Long term it might even come full circle and actually reduce fragmentation again, particularly if distribution is controlled by a few media owners.

Q What does this fragmentation mean for your business?

A Today's marketers need to get in a position where they are as comfortable understanding online consumer behaviour as they are offline. They need to be able to evaluate online creative work as well as TV, print and radio.

Q What advice would you give to young marketers today?

A Probably the biggest change they could make is to spend more time online doing the things their customers are, such as buy themselves a mobile handset and watch some telly on it. Getting exposed to what people in their target audience are doing in these areas will help more than any amount of conferences or press articles.

challenge of how you connect with customers in a noisy world. It's about delivering it simply.'

Building this rounded sense of a brand requires exposure to the entire customer journey, its context, such as the partnerships and alliances that create it, and the reputation legacy that lives after it. Early exposure to, and control of, the customer experience is vital, but equally important is early exposure to the downsides of branding. There's nothing like a PR crisis to help you reappraise brand integrity.

What sort of brand should I pick?

The fragmentation-age agenda presents a very real challenge to the FMCG conglomerates. It is hard for 'manufactured' brands such as Crunchie, Maltesers or Häagen-Dazs to replicate the perceived authenticity of a genuine founder-created brand such as Green & Black's or Ben & Jerry's. It is harder still for a manufactured brand to tell stories that will have sufficient richness to spread across social networks. When you have a multibillion-dollar brand and attentive stockholders, it is also difficult to sanction the experimentation necessary to keep pushing the boundaries of brand meaning and stay current.

To learn the lessons of such channel-beating strategies ideally means working with one of the leaders; Virgin was an early pioneer, along with The Body Shop. More self-conscious imitators, such as Starbucks, Timberland and Skype, followed and were no less successful. The current bellwether is Innocent Drinks, whose relentless experimentation (this summer's Village Fete events and Fruitstock before them), founding storytelling (the 'Should we give up our jobs to make these smoothies?' legend) and emerging authenticity (a gradual but intensifying environmental engagement, with cornstarch bottles and recommended daily allowances for carbon emissions) give it strong word-of-mouth power and brand flexibility. Less

'Marketing is about the challenge of how you connect with customers in a noisy world. It's about delivering it simply'

Nick Allen
Shell

well-known brands are also following a similar pattern, from Gü desserts to the niche grooming brand, King of Shaves.

Aspiring marketers should seek out fragmentation-age leaders to work with. Look for charismatic storytellers, believers in the importance of incremental innovation, and individuals with strong personal integrity and resilience. A strong dose of bloody-mindedness is a key personality trait, too.

Best practice: King of Shaves

Former ad salesman Will King founded King of Shaves in 1992. Having started the brand at the tender age of 26, and in the absence of heavyweight backing, he has been a staunch advocate of the power of storytelling, experimentation and authenticity throughout the brand's growth.

The company launched with a dramatically different proposition. When other brands were foams, King of Shaves was an oil. When other brands' preferred packaging was big cans or tubes, King of Shaves launched as a small bottle. When traditional entry-points were through specialist retailers, King of Shaves was rolled out in Boots.

King of Shaves exploited storytelling from the outset, its gestation coming from King's own experimentation – shaving with baby oil as a cure for his own beard rash. The brand has retained strong authenticity, and has broken through the media fragmentation barrier – King of Shaves bought the website domain name www.shave.com in 1995 for \$35 and launched immediately online. It now uses a variety of first-person blogs to share insights or thoughts that interest the founder.

The brand's core retail sales have broken the £15m barrier and a variety of innovations are in the pipeline as King builds a boutique 'P&G 2.0', which will manage a portfolio from shaving equipment to niche lifestyle products such as 'nutraceuticals' – pharmaceutical products with nutritional value. ■