

Advice to brand managers: loosen up



Martin Thomas argues that managers are kidding themselves if they think they are in control of their brands. Today's more active, empowered consumers require a looser, more flexible approach.

BRAND MARKETERS would be forgiven for thinking that the world is out of control. Public scrutiny of brand behaviour is at an all-time high; protest movements are able to spread at startling speed; employees use Facebook to criticise their own customers; spoof versions of advertising campaigns are posted on YouTube; the opinions of complete strangers on product sites are trusted far more than official brand communication.

We only have to cast our minds back to the turn of the millennium and the launch of Naomi Klein's *No Logo* to see how things have changed in such a relatively short period of time. This manifesto of the anti-globalisation movement depicted a world in which consumer freedoms were under attack and in which brands were too powerful, too controlling. It is an image of the world that, in hindsight, seems almost charming in its naivety. Far from being too powerful, the 21st century has seen a weakening of the power and influence of brand owners in the face of a rising tide of consumer activism and empowerment.

New consumers – old processes

Much has been written about the concept of consumer empowerment. Its causes and implications have been debated in boardrooms, marketing departments and political campaign offices. For some commentators it represents the dawning of a new age, a revolution in the way that companies and other institutions communicate and collaborate with their stakeholders. Even if you discount the hyperbole, most companies accept that consumer empowerment has major implications for the way that they communicate and work with customers, employees and other key stakeholders.

However, when you analyse how the vast majority of companies manage their brands, it would appear that nothing has changed. Most of the processes and methodologies they use to develop a brand's identity and positioning, or plan brand communication, remain predicated on the notion of absolute control. They are underpinned by the naïve belief that a brand can, and should, be protected from any outside interference, and that a brand's communication will be treated by consumers with reverence and respect. Too many marketers are in danger of what Marshall McLuhan described as 'trying to

do today's job with yesterday's tools and yesterday's concepts'.

Current brand management theory and practice runs counter to what is actually happening in the wider world. Consumers have been emboldened and enthused by a new spirit of self-expression and collective action. They want to have a greater say in the look and behaviour of companies and brands. Why else would they spend time creating their own versions of brand advertising, customising brand logos, following brands on social media sites, or volunteering their ideas and opinions for new products and marketing initiatives?

If you want a simple dramatisation of the new reality, try typing McDonald's or MasterCard into Google Image and see what you get, although be warned, many of the images that appear towards the top of the rankings are not very pleasant. Two of the world's largest corporations – employing an army of design specialists and intellectual property lawyers – appear helpless in the face of consumer creativity.

Similarly, try a standard Google Search of any multinational corporation and you will find that a significant proportion of the highest-ranking sites have been created by activists, protesting about the company's activities. Researcher company, Forrester, undertook a simple Google Search on the world's 20 largest brands. This revealed that fewer than 20% of search results are linked to the companies themselves. The implications are compelling: the vast majority of the information about a brand's products and

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services online is not directly controlled by the owners or managers of the brand. It is a thought that terrifies many marketers who have spent years deluding themselves that they are the ones in control.

Next-generation thinking

Fortunately, a new generation of marketing professionals has started to work out a way of dealing with consumer empowerment. In our recent book* we coined the term 'crowd surfers' to describe them. They include people such as Procter & Gamble's former Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer, A.G. Lafley, who describes how we 'are operating in what is very much a "let go" world'. This is a view shared by Fallon's Robert Senior, one of the people behind the Cadbury's drumming gorilla and dancing eyebrows, who argues that 'the more you try to control it [the creative idea], the less you get back from it'.

Crowd surfers have a much looser, more flexible philosophy of brand management that celebrates the virtues of collaboration, dialogue and even criticism. Google 'Orange broadband' and pretty high up the rankings you will find the forum orangeproblems.co.uk. Rather than seeing this as a potential threat, Orange brand director Justin Billingsley believes that: 'We should realise this is a privilege. We can see what the problems are and if we solve them, thousands of people know about it.'

To use the vernacular of the software industry, crowd surfers 'live life in beta'. Alex Marks at Microsoft Advertising is clearly a devotee of this way of thinking. He talks about the importance of 'allowing your work to get "messed up"'. Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everyone*, is another proponent of a less rigid or polished view of brand management. He suggests that if something looks too perfect, such as the latest multi-million-pound advertising campaign, consumers won't touch it, as 'it leaves no space for me'. People don't want the glossy image of the company that appears in the brochure, they prefer to deal with something a bit ragged around the edges that they can adapt themselves.

Crowd surfing

Crowd surfing does not mean abdicating all control over the management of a brand, which is the view of some of the more evangelical proponents of open source thinking. But it does mean that the planning of brand identities, positioning and communication needs to be done with consumer empowerment in mind. Even the IPA recommended in a recent report that 'brands must appear more humble'. Rather than worrying about protecting the image and integrity of a brand at all costs, brand owners



need to adopt a more relaxed perspective and ask themselves a few simple questions. How malleable is my brand identity? To what extent am I encouraging participation and helping people use my brand as a vehicle for their own self-expression? Do I truly believe in open dialogue, even with my critics?

New patterns of consumer behaviour and new attitudes, brought about by a sense of empowerment, have created a new set of challenges for today's marketing and communications professionals, for which their training and experience have left them largely unprepared. We cling to the illusion of control, when, ironically, the best way to succeed is to relinquish absolute control. The consumer empowerment evangelists have long argued that brand managers may own trademarks, but ultimately the ownership of a brand resides with those consumers who talk about it, blog about it, attend its events, join social networks devoted to it, share and customise its creative messages. It is about time that this became reflected in the way that brands are managed. In the words of mental health pioneer, Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, 'You can't stop the waves but you can learn how to surf.'*

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