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Strategies for driving traffic to your site

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Abstract

Farmers drive cows and sheep across fields, parents drive their kids to school, and the common denominator here is that those parties being driven have no choice in the matter. Consumers and particularly digital consumers who navigate their way through interactive space do not fit this 'driving' model. It is consumers who sit in the digital driving seat and, by exercising their almost limitless choice, control the direction they move in.

The first rule to observe regarding the approach to developing effective strategies for interactive marketing is: we do not push (or drive) consumers around.

So, if you have not already done so, drop the thought of 'driving traffic to your site'. Digital consumers pick up on this marketing mindset very quickly, and you end up alienating the audience with whom you are trying to create a bond. Digital marketers have to think in terms of improving the experience of the digital consumer, whoever they may be and whatever they are interested in. We think of it in terms of 'human insight and customer service' at the heart of digital marketing strategy. In return, consumers may respond and engage in a dialogue. At the moment the dialogue begins a transaction occurs. The consumer offers information about their intentions (and they know this information has inherent value) and an understanding is created in which they are looking for a value transaction and the currency they are looking for is 'service'.

Introduction

Tracking this data flow is fundamental if further transactions are to occur. The data are on loan. The interactive marketing task has just begun, and managing that 'customer understanding and service' is the ultimate marketing challenge. Consumers know that the moment they turn their backs on you, those data are worthless, and the dialogue is over.

And it is not as if customers walk away alone when you have failed to meet their needs. Jeff Bezos of Amazon talks about the 'word-of-mouth' effect online.

'Every Internet customer has a big megaphone, and if we make a customer unhappy, they don't tell five friends, they tell 5,000. The reverse is also true: you also create evangelists. If you do a great job they tell 5,000 friends, in newsgroups and list servers and chat areas.'

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Adding value to the consumer digital experience is only possible if you understand their needs at the point you engage them. Knowing your customers is hardly a new thought in business, but the digital world is well placed in many respects to allow marketers to go even further in building consumer understanding.

Behind the tracks of every digital consumer there is a trail of information which defines their content interests. Consumers know this and expect marketers to use this information to their (the consumer's) benefit. Abuse the use of this information and they easily demonstrate their contempt by walking in the opposite direction.

Amazon is only able to position itself as the definitive 'customer service' online brand because of the data it accumulates on its customers and its insightful analysis of this information. Its early investment in collaborative filtering technologies allows it to enhance the experience of any customer who offers loyalty and chooses to 'buy again'. They know the books or music you have bought and what purchases have been made by people with similar tastes. With their large data pool, the company is in an excellent position to make suggestions about the sort of products you might like, but have not bought. Yet.

The site morphs or customises its content to reflect your individual tastes. If you have never bought sci-fi novels or David Bowie then Amazon does not clutter your views with them. If you have shown a propensity towards romance novels and Marvin Gaye then they tilt the store towards literary romance and Motown.

Their focus on understanding the 'customer flow' and improving the customer service led them to develop applications such as the 'one-click' shopping process, in which customers dispense with the repetitive question answering that usually characterises online buying.

They are a company which continues to redefine the concept of customer service as they scrutinise every inefficiency in the customer experience, try to find an answer to it, and thereby stay one step ahead of consumer expectations. If they lose this attention to customer insight, their business will soon show signs of running out of steam.

So the strategic challenge for interactive marketing is enhancing the customer experience in the digital space. Forget about the hard sell. In the digital space you sell customer service, and in return they buy your products.

This involves both improving 'customer service' at the point you first engage the dialogue and improving the customer service as you maintain the relationship. We must ask ourselves every time we attempt to interact with a consumer: 'How will this really help them?' If it does not help, you have to stop and think again.

The focus of this paper revolves around developing strategies at the point you first engage the consumer in a dialogue, but in truth it cannot be split from the thought of maintaining that relationship. Because effective interactive marketing strategies are not about herding animals from one destination to another. Those marketing days have long gone.

Customisation to reflect individual tastes

Understanding the consumer flow

There are a number of criteria that affect the development of effective digital communication strategies. We must start with an analysis of the consumer flow to understand our consumers' content and utility interests. Anticipating user needs and providing solutions engages dialogue.

It has become clear that despite the continuing explosion in new Web-based businesses, media owners and corporate sites, there is an unmistakable trend towards rationalisation of user behaviour online.

During a recent period when Internet adoption increased by around 50 per cent in the UK, traffic to established access-providing portal sites (such as AOL and Freeserve) increased by an average of 200–300 per cent.

The biggest issue here is not the much-vaunted 'stickiness' but a much simpler appeal to users' needs for convenience. It appears paradoxical at first in a medium which proclaimed the 'end of geography' that the closer you place your service to the audience's point of access, the more they are likely to use it.

In this way, Microsoft have leveraged their ownership of the PC desktop into new areas of revenue: Internet Explorer links directly to MSN, MSN links directly to Expedia, Carpoint and Hotmail. Outlook Express links the desktop to Hotmail. New Web-enabled Office 2000 products weave tighter relationships with these products, and open new opportunities for business extension.

New digital mobile and TV devices only serve to increase the trend in the rationalisation of audience activity online. The winners of this trend will be the digital shopping malls and prime digital retail space of the new media.

It seems clear, therefore, that fighting against the flow to 'drive' an audience to your site will never be as efficient as taking your business and message to your consumer.

Part of understanding the digital consumer flow is understanding the content owners who meet the majority of their needs. The success of the new media barons who own much of the current prime digital space is in their 'aggregation of quality content'. It is important to understand this characteristic of the current Internet media landscape, as it is the principle reason for the growing gap in audience size among Internet publishers. The Internet user is spending less time online per user session as they are drawn to content that interests them and is accessed conveniently.

How can we be sure about this? Internet sessions have fallen from 16.5 minutes to 12.5 minutes in the past year in the UK.¹ However, frequency of accessing the Internet has increased (on average two times a week during 1998 moving to four times a week during 1999²). The companies highlighted have utilised the technology that the Internet allows to understand the depth and range of information and services that the UK Internet consumer requires. They have then acquired the range and depth of content to satisfy their user base, thus ensuring that their customers spend less time on the Web sourcing information.

Aggregation of quality content

The principle sources of their information have been the well-known and trusted brand names in the publishing world, such as *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, Reuters, Sky and PA to name just a few of the news providers. This has allowed them to become the new media barons and own a greater share of consumers online to develop commercial opportunities. In the case of America Online their subscribers (over 1 million) spend over 70 per cent of their time on the Internet inside their own service, making them an extremely difficult audience to engage.

Figures 1 and 2 show the growth of these new media barons, and therefore the importance of developing Internet strategies that work with these platforms/media owners when thinking of reaching potential customers online.

The figures show that most niche and company sites find themselves at the bottom end of the pyramid. The Internet has no recognition of

Figure 1: Consumer flow, June 1998

Growth of new media barons

Figure 2: Consumer flow, June 2000

Developing online strategies

traditional brand expertise. In order to move into the high-audience media owners a company must either spend on marketing to generate 'traffic', become an Internet service provider (which is now too late!) or work closely with the PC (or other Internet access points such as iTV or PDA) manufacturers to allow them access to their desktop. The last 12 months endorses this thinking, as the growth of the new media barons has become significant (Figure 2).

The traffic from companies such as AOL has increased by 276 per cent compared with an overall Internet growth during the same period of 47 per cent. The traditional media owners such as the Electronic Telegraph have increased their traffic figures and therefore audience by 27 per cent.

By observing these sorts of macro trends about consumer behaviour in the digital environment, and by using other varied sources of data (consumer research, log file analysis, registration data etc) which indicates a particular individual's likely consumer flow, many different online strategies can be developed to 'engage the dialogue'.

New 'engagement' digital marketing models are evolving all the time. Some of the tried and tested methods are listed below.

- *Banner advertising* is where most people start, and can be as simple as placing an ad on a Web page. Users click on it (rarely more than one in 100) and are taken through to the advertiser's site. Banner ads tend to be a relatively low-cost, basic form of advertising. Their success depends on the relevance of the placement and the quality of the communication. Nothing new here.
- *Rich media* is the term given to more engaging online communication; more engaging because it integrates audio, video and animation into interactive advertising (sometimes within the banner or larger-format interstitials and sometimes in attachments on e-mail marketing).
- *Affiliate marketing* is used to create partnerships and distribute services across the Web to gain broad coverage and exposure to a chosen target audience.
- *Tenancy distribution* agreements tend to be longer-term commitments with relevant portals (one year or more with the likes of Yahoo!), and give some form of prominence or exclusivity for a brand within one of their content categories. By doing so the theory is they provide access to a significant proportion of the relevant Internet user base.
- *Online sponsorships* tend to revolve around events, often major sports events, and give brands access to the spikes in Internet traffic around major real-world occasions.

These are only a few of the current means to engage consumers online. By the time this paper is published, the list will be longer and the models will have changed.

The following case studies explore different 'engagement' online strategies that have been used to enhance the consumer digital experience

by taking the brand and its respective service to the consumer. By the time this paper is published there will be better models which will have redefined our understanding of 'customer service' driven digital marketing. But these case studies explain the thought none the less.

Compaq

This is a simple but highly effective example of engaging consumers by understanding their consumer flow and meeting their needs by adding to the navigation of relevant content.

Compaq's brief to Tribal DDB London was to engage SME IT decision makers with information on Compaq equipment during the crucial research phase of the purchase cycle. In the consumer flow analysis, third-party research³ and common sense suggested that at least a quarter of all users searched the Internet for computer-related information.

Among the very few good sources for this information in the UK, with sufficient reach to establish an effective campaign, ZDNet (with content sourced from all Ziff Davis magazines) was a clear target.

However, all the test banner campaigns on this site demonstrated disappointing results: fewer than one in a thousand impressions resulted in click-through. Here was an audience who were clearly more likely to be in the market for new computers, reading the most recent hardware reviews and benchmark tests, and yet clearly not interested in visiting the manufacturers' sites.

This apparent paradox (more qualified audience leading to more limited response) was not as surprising as it might appear. After all, having chosen ZDNet on the strength of its unbiased third-party reviews, why would anyone visit the manufacturers' sites by clicking on banner ads? In what way would their information be superior?

Indeed, Ziff Davis's own research⁵ suggested that 'Time sensitive users need an immediate cue to read — understand — respond', and that their users were unlikely to respond to banners as they were 'unwilling to lose [the] strand of research and waste time'.

The strategy

Tribal DDB London agreed with Ziff Davis to add a hyperlink line at the foot of all reviews of competitors' hardware. The hyperlink simply read: 'To learn about an alternative Compaq product, click here.'

When the user clicked on the hyperlinked text, they were taken to a list of ZDNet reviews of equivalent Compaq products. This strategy in effect renavigated consumers to information that they would find useful, that was already available on the site but that they may not think to look at.

Amazon does this with collaborative filtering. Compaq did this through anticipating the consumer flow and negotiating an addition to the order of content on their site. Not only would this increase the number of reviews of Compaq machines read by ZDNet users, it would also communicate relevant brand messages:

- Compaq is an industry benchmark
- Compaq is open and honest
- Compaq has total confidence in its products.

Sustainable Web presence as part of communications plan

The result was that 10 per cent of all people who read a review of a competitive product also clicked on the hyperlink and went on to read a review of a Compaq computer.

Pepsi

The second case study focuses on a more complex engagement strategy for Pepsi in the UK. Pepsi set out clear marketing objectives: to create a sustainable Web presence for Pepsi which adds a further dimension to their communications plan. The online solution must collect information on its audience (for use in customer relationship marketing programmes), and place music at the heart of the brand's offering. By doing so, the activity had to position Pepsi as credible and innovative with its 12–24-year-old core target audience.

Strategy

The key focus was to position Pepsi as a 'facilitator', providing a utility or service, not a product-centric destination website. The strategy concentrated on taking the brand and service to the audience, not attempting to drive the audience to the brand. Acknowledging that Pepsi is an FMCG advertiser, not a publisher, the strategy looked to alleviate costly content provision, both initial generation and its refreshment. With music being at the heart of a 17-year-old's lifestyle habits, Pepsi's presence had to empower its users to find a depth of information on their favourite artists/bands with ease. Rather than create new music content, Tribal DDB London leveraged Pepsi's association with music to develop the first permanent content packaging deal with competitive music brands.

The strategy drew together services and content from the premier music publishers and service providers in the UK: they included Lycos, Music 365, Aloud.com, Q Online, WENN, dotMusic (Miller Freeman's *Music Week*), with Tribal DDB negotiating a content distribution deal with Lycos UK's Music Guide, making Pepsi the largest 'virtual music site' in the UK.

Pepsi recruits content providers to promote music

Pepsi had traditionally aligned itself with popular music on a global basis, including sponsorship deals with individual artists from the UK and Ireland, such as the Spice Girls and the Corrs. They did this to appeal to the largest mass audience of music lovers within their target market. To replicate this strategy online would have limited their appeal.

Tribal DDB identified that 'music' generated 61 million (1999 data) searches per month on the five major UK search engines/directories, and this figure was growing every day. Pepsi's potential audience was not interested in one particular genre of music, but there was no place online in the UK that provided a starting point to look for anything to do with 'your taste in music'.

The Pepsi Music portal was designed to meet this need and allow Internet users to access all their music information needs from a single source, and to reinforce the brand's links with popular music among consumers.

Instead of investing the marketing budget in original content development, Tribal DDB negotiated the aggregation of interactive content and services from established online media properties. The budget was spent on developing the website design, consumer database infrastructure and marketing. The content was negotiated through a complex set of contra-deals with five key content partners.

Exclusive editorial content was secured from Q Online and dotMusic, the online versions of *Q Magazine* and *Music Week* respectively. Both publications would provide reviews of new release and back catalogue music titles. Music 365 and the WENN news wire service provided daily music industry news and celebrity gossip updates. Concert and venue information, along with an online ticket purchasing facility, was provided by Aloud.com.

The site's Internet search facility was supported by Lycos UK, and allowed users to search for music information by genre (such as books, sounds and pictures). This agreement also involved supplying Lycos's own UK website with the aggregated music content to feed its 'music' content channel. This was branded 'Powered by Pepsi', and was a significant anchor tenancy deal which was responsible for engaging a large proportion of UK music lovers and drawing them to www.pepsi.co.uk (see www.uk.lycos.de/webguides/music).

Consumer flow

As the Pepsi-Lycos campaign shows, FMCG brands with no real digital content application need continually to think 'outside the box' when asking themselves 'What do online consumers want?' One thing they do not want is corporate information about the company behind the brand — that is what annual reports are for! Advertisers should ask how they can leverage their brand awareness in ways that reinforce positive consumer associations and ultimately provide a service which meets a relevant digital need.

Pepsi keeps the content — and revenue — coming

The seamless delivery of editorial content taken from multiple sources is crucial not only to the site's success with Internet users, but also to ensure that the content providers could maximise their own revenue-generating opportunities.

The Pepsi Music portal is automated to sort each day's headlines and associated stories into their relevant categories. These are presented to users as hypertext links. When a user clicks on a news headline, the full article is served up by the relevant content provider (eg Q Online, dotMusic) in a standardised Pepsi-branded template (Figure 3). A Pepsi template format was developed, ensuring consistent Pepsi branding with each downloaded story, as well as providing an accurate means of measuring the number of pages served.

The Pepsi template was also designed to include space for a 468 x 60 banner ad spot, which participating content providers sell as advertising space. External advertisers who were in direct competition

**Think 'outside
the box'**

Figure 3: Pepsi-branded template

with Pepsi and Britvic brands were excluded from advertising within the Pepsi-branded areas, by agreement with the content providers.

The site has hosted a number of internally generated promotions, such as CD giveaways and music-oriented merchandise offered in exchange for Pepsi can ring-pulls. This allows Pepsi to engage the audience in a dialogue and capture relevant data to ensure the service is refined to meet consumer interest. Offline promotions included the Pepsi Music URL featured on all Pepsi products and packaging, television and print advertising, and associated promotional materials.

Since July 1999, the Pepsi website has generated over 5 million page impressions, and has received over 300,000 user sessions during that time. A significant database of online 'music lovers' has been created, which allows Pepsi to maintain their digital dialogue through other channels such as e-mail marketing.

The benefit of this approach to customer engagement, rather than other established online advertising techniques such as banner ads or pop-up boxes, is that Pepsi created its own destination/digital property, with content supplied by established music magazines, and sponsorship of the Lycos music search category. This approach delivered a unique marketing proposition which ensured heavy search engine traffic, but guaranteed that their target market would arrive at a website filled with compelling content that met their information needs.

Capturing consumer attention only gets harder — richer creative communication offers one solution

When most marketers first start thinking about online marketing they think of banner advertising. Understandably, most are not overwhelmed by the marketing opportunity. Banners are a limiting size for anything but the simplest message, and as more Internet consumers are exposed

'banner blindness'

to banner advertising they clearly notice fewer — a trend referred to as 'banner blindness'.

The answer to this conundrum is in your approach to the medium. The first thing to remember is that current GIF banners are merely the first mass communication benchmark in online marketing. The possibilities opened up by 'richer media' are perhaps the beginning of stage two, and are a better indication of things to come.

The only way to engage consumers online is to continue to surprise them with relevant communications. It is impossible to describe fully and give justice to the interactivity available with rich media.⁵

A word of caution

These are still early days for online marketing. You have to ensure a focus on humanity lies at the heart of your digital marketing strategy. Rich-media marketing does not always benefit the consumer and improve customer service. In fact, with average user connectivity speeds still being relatively slow and the lack of consistency in plug-ins on the PC, richer creative work can disappoint the end user. If a piece of communication takes ten to 15 minutes to download you will find your consumer long gone.

On the Internet, time really is money — irrespective of free Internet service provision, consumers are still paying telephone charges when online in the UK and most of Europe. People will not pay to be kept waiting. Impatience and high delivery expectations are ever-increasing characteristics of the Internet audience.

So, it is a balancing act of engaging consumers in a relevant but surprising way. Meeting their needs 100 per cent is a good target when you develop an interactive marketing strategy. The difficulty in realising this goal should not hold back innovation.

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