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Reviews

The M-bomb

Geoff Webb

Capstone Publishing; 2001; paperback 188pp; £15.99;
ISBN 1-84112-139-8

The new competitive challenge for companies is to reorganise themselves to touch existing and new customers in both traditional and online channels at a high level of efficiency. In this new book, Geoff Webb calls this the M-bomb, which represents the multi-channel challenge which is forcing businesses to equip themselves to deliver products and services efficiently to the home or high street, online or through traditional channels.

This is not a stunningly new concept. Since the demise of the young kids with their school satchels puffed with venture capitalists' monies, real businesses have begun to take over the Internet mantle. There is a general appreciation that the new economy is different and customers want access to a company through any channel at any time at any place in any currency. The Internet has spurred the streamlining of the supply chain (now demand chain) and the ability to personalise/customise products and services. CRM vendors and major consultancies have jumped on the customer relationship management bandwagon, but the problem has been that successful implementation of CRM systems has eluded most businesses. The technology is there, but often the end result of millions of dollars spent has not created the foreseen customer value and return on investment.

The author rightly argues that the key skills over the next three years will include the way a business drives its customer relationships, integrates its marketing (brand contacts across in-store, TV, online, telephone) and integrates its product innovation and service (managing partners and end-to-end delivery and performance).

Having pored through many tedious and poorly written CRM and Internet technology books, what is so refreshing about this book is that it is packed with practical experience. Not only is the text full of useful examples of those brands that have successfully ridden the 'multi-channel whirlwind' but it is written in a very readable and fast-paced style.

Central to the text is the premise that businesses must begin to build a set of efficient and convenient multi-channel operations and routes to market that blend of old economy skills of product innovation and retailing with the recent lessons of multi-channel Internet innovation. Rightly, the author believes the brand is king — that only a small number of the major brands will be able to secure 'share of voice' in the multi-channel world and survive independently over the next five years.

The text is conveniently divided into four parts. Part One, 'Hearing the M-bomb Ticking', encapsulates the overall philosophy of the book, with particular reference to examples of where partnerships between companies have supplemented specialist internal skills (such as Toys R

Us with Amazon, Ford with UPS). A major point made is that you do not necessarily have to compete with traditional channels. Personalised products and services through new online channels such as Unilever's website, Reflect.com, do not compete with their retailers. With Reflect.com, customers can select their own unique combination of cosmetics from 5,000 different combinations. The author also makes the point that customers are less loyal to niche or stand-alone products than was previously realised. If a number of different services are put together to provide a complete customer solution then customers tend to trust the quality of all the different suppliers of that combined service. CarPoint in the USA is an example of this.

Part Two covers 'Planning Your Multi-Channel Defences'. It starts with a useful health check on your current business and continues with a chapter on 'Building the Customer Operating Model'. The model revolves around customers, services, operations and systems and forms the heart of the book.

Part Three, 'Riding the Multi-Channel Tiger', concentrates on implementation. Once you have clearly identified your starting point the transition plan can be created with three end states (nine, 18 and 36 months) in mind. Each represents a snapshot of what the business should be like at that end stage. Milestones are clearly identified in the process. Part Four reprises most of the text, adds some checklists, and continues to challenge conventional thinking.

Finally, using his measures (which you will discover if you read the book) of business common sense, usefulness and customers, the author reckons 90 per cent of established businesses are out of touch. If you think you are one of the 90 per cent, read the book.

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Simplicity marketing — End brand complexity, clutter and confusion

Steven M. Cristol and Peter Sealey

Free Press (Simon & Schuster); 2000; hardback; 253pp; £17.99;
ISBN 0 68 4859181

Treadmill?

As your reviewer studied the jacket — with its clarion call to 'end brand complexity, clutter and confusion' and its assertion that marketing nirvana lay in four Rs (replace, repack, reposition and replenish) — that sinking feeling set in. Was this another on the treadmill of titles exploring familiar territory, seemingly revisited every time there is a '1' at the end of the year? Of course, there *are* markets where customers (both channel customers and end consumers) are confused by myriad choices and where the buying process does not involve spontaneous recall of simple brand differentiators. Just how many types of hair or oral product does P&G offer? Just how do they differ? But is consumer choice

Choice ^ stress?

stress inducing? Is there not infinite consumer capacity for the never-ending train of 'new', 'improved', 'slightly improved' and the 'ever-so slightly different' variant upon variants and line extensions?

Well, maybe not. The authors state 'this book hypothesises that, in the most developed economies of the twenty-first century, the next generation of positioning success will belong to those brands that relieve customer stress'. They promise an action-oriented handbook that will help the reader to rethink their company's fundamental relationship with its customers.

Proof of the hypothesis is set out in three chapters. The first offers an analysis of the buying and selling environment in the digital age — a complex and supposedly stressful marketplace for your average customer. The second presents brand strategies for this environment, labelled the '4 Rs for competitive advantage'. The authors conclude with perspectives on how to manage simplistic brand marketing in complex environments.

A flawed hypothesis

A key flaw in the hypothesis manifests itself early in Chapter One where, in part, complexity and choice are confused with customisation. Is the availability of '37 configurations of a Dodge Caravan' really proof of stress-inducing complexity? By the authors' standards, ordering breakfast in America would be every consumer's worst nightmare! (Just how many ways of cooking eggs and potatoes are there?) Indeed, the choices faced by a typical American consumer are described — from selecting one of 52 varieties of Crest toothpaste to investing in one of 7,000 possible funds. Amusingly, the authors also allude to the 'overchoice' of books advocating simplicity and reduction of choice now available on the bookshelves! But correlating the rapidly increasing number of stress-induced visits made by American consumers to physicians with overchoice of brands and products is erroneous. The link between this statistic and increasing consumer choice is tenuous and, in this case, poorly substantiated. Consumers are not, of course, faced with all these choices at every turn; although spare a thought for buyers at Tesco and Wal-Mart!

Simplicity is complex

The authors remind us that to achieve simplicity is frequently a complex task. Agreed. Achieving strong and clear brand positioning is tough in today's fragmented marketplace. So there is great merit in the many facets of brand management that are drawn into the discussion and loosely pulled together in 'templates for competitive success'. However, the authors' solution must be considered in context. If you are P&G with many thousands of lines, facing sometimes hundreds of brands and varieties in the marketplace (take 300+ types of salicylate acid, aka Aspirin, for instance), then the replace, repackage, reposition and replenish strategies may provide a useful approach to auditing your brand strategy. What is lacking, though, is anything really new.

For example, the concluding chart summarises the benefits ensuing from brand simplification: reduced choice and complexity leads to reduced customer stress, thereby creating increased brand loyalty and brand equity. This in turn leads to fewer SKUs, simplified ordering and shipping and billing, reduced promotional spend, less product ageing in the pipeline and increased inventory turnover. Is it that easy?

**Complexity, or
customisation?**

Of the four Rs, salad kits are cited as an example of the 'replace' strategy. The idea is to replace several closely related products with one simple alternative. Possibly quite relevant in today's detergent wars, yet mixing various vegetables and selling these as a kit has not removed lettuces, tomatoes and carrots from the shelves. This and other examples given are better proof of 'addition' strategies, further adding to choice, not reducing it. Salad kits have been successful because they are *convenient*.

Much to ponder

The complexity/choice versus customisation encounter in the early chapters brings comparison with Peppers and Rogers in *The One-to-One Future*. For many brand managers, this is still a more urgent read. It is a far more compelling call to review your relationship with your customers.

**Complexity/
simplicity cycle**

Notwithstanding these criticisms *Simplicity Marketing* offers some useful, albeit brief, reminders of how some of the big brand names have been coping recently. Despite the lack of real action, there is much for the brand manager to ponder within these pages.

That everything in life is contextual and cyclical is a truism. Marketing is no exception. Where there is complexity in the marketplace, then cogent simplicity may indeed win out. For some, this may be a logical, if transient, next step in evolving the brand. But if all follow suit, then the pendulum will swing back in favour of those who reintroduce choice.

The basic premise of the book *is* flawed. The micro-environment may swing back and forth between fashions for reduced and increased choice played out by the brand giants. But the macro environment marches inexorably onwards and upwards, with ever-increasing complexity and choice — surely by definition a necessity of growing consumer economies. The authors assert that we may have reached the limit of human capacity to deal with all the choices now available in the marketplace. Somehow I think your average consumer has capacity for a few more new products and line extensions yet!

In ten years' time, when again there is a '1' at the end of the year, will the marketplace and its constituent brands have become so simplified that we will be reviewing books advocating greater complexity and choice? Or will we still be reviewing books advocating simplicity?

Neil Morris M IDM

eve-olution: the 8 truths of marketing to women

Faith Popcorn and Lys Marigold

HarperCollins Business; 2000; 272pp; £8.99; ISBN: 0 00 7107153

Faith Popcorn's and Lys Marigold's book *eve-olution* looks at the way that brands market themselves to women, the most influential consumer force in history. It sets out to explain why companies should develop a specific female focus to their brand positioning, and offers and provides a step-by-step guide on how to do this. It is Faith Popcorn's third business book, following on from *The Popcorn Report* and *Clicking*, both of which sit on the Walledge Agency bookshelves. I bought them after seeing Faith

Marketing and sex

at the DMA in Dallas, but, unusually for me, I have not managed to finish either of them.

eve-olution puts forward the premise that women relate to brands in a different way to men. They have different communication needs and marketers must develop a new understanding of these requirements. It is a marketing version of *Men are from Mars — Women are from Venus*. As John Gray has probably made a fortune from his concept, why should not Faith get in on the ‘sex’ act?

Language problems

The book contains eight truths about marketing to women. But, before you get down to the truths, you have to learn Faith’s language, because in the world of BrainReserve, the New York-based consultancy which Faith started up in 1974, they use language in a very different way. So, you learn new words like blamestorming — a negative non-productive ideation session that prohibits creative thinking. Blamestorming is *never* employed at BrainReserve. Girlcott — like boycott, but done by girls, and mouse potato . . . you can work that one out for yourself. There are 41 definitions of newly created words like ‘blamestorming’ and another 17 concepts, like cocooning and down-aging, from the BrainReserve TrendBank that you have to understand before you read the book. It is no good thinking that you will infer the meaning as you go along, you will not — you have to understand it thoroughly first, and I do think that is a major drawback to the usefulness of this book.

Good ideas, pity about the writing

Certainly, for me, the biggest hurdle of reading and understanding *eve-olution* was simply the way in which it was written. The content is thought-provoking, but you have to fight your way through some highly convoluted American-English syntax. I also had a personal problem with the profligate use of adjectives — Faith will never use one when three will do! However, *eve-olution* does put forward lots of interesting ideas for improving products and services aimed at women with 99 lives (Faith’s definition: too fast a pace, too little time, causes societal schizophrenia and forces us to assume multiple roles). Each chapter, though, is well named and contains little insights, illustrated by short case studies punctuating the chapters, which are pin-sharp in their understanding of the way women think.

Sharp case studies

Overall, I found the book hard going, requiring an undue amount of effort to finish. If you buy it be prepared for a syntactical struggle — or just read the chapter headings!

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