Editorial

So here we are, safely ensconced at last in the third millennium. At least we will be by the time you're reading this; or if we're not, you won't be reading it. It seems appropriate that the first piece in our first Y2K number (by Chris Macrae) should be concerned with looking forward to the interactive marketing challenges of the 21st century. Perhaps it may be equally appropriate to ask ourselves what, as marketers, we have learned in the 20th century that we can usefully carry forward into the new era: what are the firm principles on which we must build, and what is the excess baggage that we can discard.

The leading concept in marketing literature over recent years has been relationship marketing (one-to-one marketing and loyalty marketing being essentially variations on the same theme), while the leading technological innovation has been the Internet. Relationship marketing, as several authors have pointed out, seems like an attempt to recover some of the traditional values of the neighbourhood shop, whose owner knew each regular customer personally and sought to adapt service, and stock, to meet their individual needs. It seems ironic that we are today struggling to harness sophisticated data-mining software to vast consumer databases — in order to mimic the kind of service that every high-street grocer used to provide without thinking.

And, of course, 'mimic' is the right word, and as with all mimicry the pretence ultimately fools no one. It is possible to have a real relationship with one's butcher, one's baker, or one's candlestick-maker — but not with a supermarket chain. You might possibly feel a sense of loyalty to your local grocer, but hardly to WalMart. As for one-to-one, it's true that you can buy a one-off computer configuration from Dell, and that your multi-option Ford no longer has to be black — but the truly customised product will continue to be the exception rather than the rule, for your lifetime at least.

Relationships are between people. There is a commercial currently running on television for British Gas, in which a call centre operator is shown advising a customer on how to set her boiler controls for maximum efficiency: between operator and customer there is, momentarily, a relationship. But the chances of these two ever speaking to each other again are remote; that some details of the conversation may be recorded on a database, for retrieval by some other operator on some future occasion, is a very second-best alternative to a continuing one-to-one relationship.

But we don't have to spend the rest of our lives playing catch-up with our grandparents' experience of service. Modern technology, which is quite bad at mimicking human functions, does have some strengths of its own. Consider bookselling on the Internet. No one has a relationship with Amazon.com, such as they might with their local bookseller. But Amazon's website is a virtual meeting-place where its customers can initiate all sorts of real, genuinely one-to-one relationships with each other, of a kind and on a scale unrepeatable in a bookshop. Nobody is 'loyal' to Amazon, nor is Amazon selling one-to-one (computer-to-one perhaps). Its strength (beyond massive listings, quick despatch, and discounted price) is that it provides a facility hitherto unobtainable. Similarly, take 24-hour home banking, which is actually a denial of the one-to-one relationships I used to have with staff in my local branch. Technology can't replace those relationships, but it can give me something I value more — like access, speed, and control.

What we need to do in this new millennium is to take the technologies that the 20th century has bequeathed to us and, instead of using them to imitate a past world, to look for the things they can do which have not been possible before. There will be plenty of them.

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