
Opinion Piece

Chartering interactive marketing's 21st century

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Abstract

This paper charters the human value mega-trends which I expect to see shaping interactive marketing's 21st century. The millennial generation has an extraordinary opportunity to transport our human qualities and needs through the new media. The perspective taken focuses on what we will need to edit into the integrity of the two main corporate intangible assets — brand and knowledge — if the human race is to grow e-business and e-society in a way that turns information age networking into the most magically imaginative time in the history of human enterprise.

Introduction to the author's mega-trend perspective and working assumptions

My first experience of the power of computer-assisted communications was in experiments in computer-assisted learning in the 1970s with my first employer, the University of Leeds. This led me to co-author *The 2024 Report*¹ with my futurist father, Norman Macrae, then *The Economist's* deputy editor. Our 1984 book was, in part, a goodbye celebration to Orwell's gloomy vision. Its main mega-trend scenario was that through the 1990s progress on the internetting advantage of computers would be made, and then revolutionise business and society in the fastest growth period known to humankind. Today we are all on such a privileged learning track. As our book charted, we are experiencing the death of distance — both as a cost in distributing knowledge and as a geographical prison which hitherto prevented humans with a common expertise and learning passion to create and network.

Mega-trends, provided you root them deeply in human needs, are the opposite of fortune telling. They are states waiting to be created because the human need is there, and usually they are already emerging somewhere if you link up to (or benchmark) the right place at the right time. If you had been a marketing practitioner born to make your mark in circa 1950, you could have helped to shape how TV media and indeed all TV programming worked. Quite an exciting charge. If you are a marketing practitioner circa 2000, you can now shape what e-business and e-society become. Probably the most exciting charge in the history or the future of communications! Certainly the most exciting one that I can imagine writing about.

Death of distance

The Internet changes every market

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Understanding today's bifocal vision of business leaders and demanding consumers

Keep on asking where your eyes and mouse should link to next. Don't do this in private or even in tangible academic cloisters. Do it on electronic conference boards like those now sprouting at such famous 20th century publishers as the website of *Harvard Business Review*, or at such adventurous new builders of community as bright-future.com or brandknowledge.com (where I must declare an editorial interest).

Join the revolution ...

Having made a start on such interactive searches, you might also benefit from some of these places which have refreshed my mind and browser the most this year. Enjoy the constructive tensions that come from linking the following two sites in close proximity.

- 1) *The Economist's* June survey on the Internet² and in particular quotes like this from IBM CEO Lou Gerstner:

... in organisation,

'The new "dot-com" companies (eg Amazon.com, Netscape.com) are fireflies before the storm — all stirred up, throwing off sparks. The storm that's arriving — the real disturbance in the force — is when thousands and thousands of institutions that exist today seize the power of this global computing and communications infrastructure and use it to transform themselves.'

... in consumerism

- 2) The 95 clauses appearing at Cluetrain.com, which read to me like a 21st century Magna Carta of consumerism.

... in media

Next apply the advice that Bill Gates³ gives to any boardroom which asks how to get started in e-business. Go surf the Net for interesting business or social models. I would love to be e-mailed by journal readers with details of any three websites which are guaranteed eye-openers because they reveal Web experiences of not doing business as usual in the 20th century (e-mail wcbn007@easynet.co.uk and I'll put all decent observations up as a growing register at www.brandknowledge.com/eyeopeners.html)

Applying this exercise to my consuming self, three sites I commend to you are:

<http://www.expedia.com>

<http://www.schwab.com>

<http://www.autobytel.com>

Old world's wake-up call

One of my few complaints about these sites is that they are biased towards the American consumer, but then (West Coast) America is the epicentre of interactive marketing models until we all catch up. (Whether dot-coms have an unfair first-comer's advantage to market new business models to the world is an intriguing question but beyond the scope of this paper.)

I love [expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com) as an infomediary which reduces all the 20th century hassles of booking an exotic holiday through travel agents who haven't been where you want to go. These old-fashioned agents provoke in me the peculiar hatred of being forced to pay for professional advice

The right to self-service knowledge

from an 'expert' who turns out to have less knowledge than I already possess. Call this the right to self-service knowledge, if you will. I love schwab.com because it links to all sorts of personalised newspapers (the urgent need that stock-market traders have has many parallels we all can learn from), and when I'm in America, Schwab's internetting bank account reminds me how much I hate being a traditional bank customer in the UK. I expect that if I ever buy a new car in the USA I will use an infomediary such as autobytel.com and get a transparently best deal. Notice I have a passionate relationship with dot-com brands which I long since lost⁴ with most who mass marketed at me. Early research⁵ reveals that once you become a member of the Net generation, no mass marketer, however powerful, will get you to look back.

A reassuring vision from history: Rediscovering marketing as a company-wide action learning process

I also have a hypothesis that great websites will remain great only if they perpetuate rediscovery of what marketing's discipline was originally expected to be about when the word was coined by Peter Drucker^{6,7} and others in the mid 20th century; namely, the pan-company learning process focused on what information outside the company employees needed most to action innovation and better service. In this context, a great website is also a company's brand intranet.⁸ It needs to be designed so that every knowledge and service worker inside the company or across a value networking web of suppliers simply keeps their eye on what their dot-com brand is promising to be best in the world at delivering. Once this natural force is systematically harnessed, Lou Gertsner's storm could indeed be looked back on with hindsight as the sea change of interactive marketing.

Intranet will be core of interactive marketing

Looking forward to interactive marketing's 21st century my expectations are as follows.

- Ninety-nine per cent of the creative best practices of the interactive marketing multidiscipline are still to be discovered — so it's good that a journal like this can cover them from the year dot!
- There's no reason why we shouldn't start to discuss what revolutionary management models are needed to keep good track of interactive marketing principles. The best candidate for this I have seen is the fractal marketing code advocated by Mazda's UK chairman, David Heslop.⁹ (Fractal marketing urges leaders to make the one simple DNA code 'value in, cost out' paramount across the company's interfacing business units and wherever globally and locally the company makes partners in delivering the value exchange network to end consumers. Making this for real requires that many business units unlearn their existing business cases, but if you don't do this soon you'll have no future in the cost-transparent world that e-business demands.)
- We should also survey people on what human values they want new media to resonate with — an early exercise for this sort of imagineering is illustrated in the next section.

The top five human values of interactive brand websites and how to make most common sense of them

An interesting design exercise is to ask yourself what human common senses dot-com brands and interactive marketers should resonate with. These are my current top five, and again I would be delighted to keep an interactive opinion poll running (e-mail wcbn007@easynet.co.uk and I'll update the survey at <http://www.brandknowledge.com/humansenses.html>).

- Promise.
- Trust.
- Knowledge-for-action.
- Community.
- Interactivity.

I have a simpleminded way of advocating these values, and a more complex table of connecting organisational issues to share with you.

If the people contributions to a brand are not aligned and their communications not integrated by one heroic *promise*,¹⁰ then in an interactive consumer world I expect that I will detect service gaps. I will be frustrated by their inconsistencies until I no longer *trust* their brand offer, or in other cases quickly switch to a place which is simply better value.

If Drucker's hypothesis that the core of marketing — as a discipline and a culture — is the outside *knowledge-for-action* that employees and networkers need consistently to improve, then this is a value which interactive marketing organisations can seize on as their unique competitive advantage over current mass-marketing mediocrity.

Knowledge-for-action doesn't mobilise groups of people — be these departments of a company, partners across a network, or interactions between marketing channels and consumer groups — unless there are *community* senses of sharing and of practice.¹¹ The best thing a brand identity can do for community sharing is to demonstrate transparently that it shares the wealth it grows fairly with all its stakeholders. The best thing a brand identity can do to motivate communities of practice is to appeal to the passions¹² (individually) and prides (communally) that energise human behaviours in the direction of 'best in the world'.

Interactivity, as a revolutionary system dynamic, creates newly imaginative avenues for how we perceive information and how we connect all our human senses to be more than the sum of their parts.

Table 1 compiles some of the multidisciplinary terms that I find myself exploring as I debate the organisational meanings of interactive marketing and brand knowledge with different experts. You may quickly see that there is a lot of jargon to be simplified — the multidiscipline difficulty being that one discipline's hottest and most obvious construct may be everyone else's most obtuse one. Organising knowledge-for-action demands that we all work to make these linkages seamless.

I suggest to every kind of marketer that it is now worthwhile taking up the hobby of networking with people outside your professional discipline and evolving a jargon-free language for shared understanding.¹³

E-business and networking depend on transparency of values

Table 1: Five human senses connect architects of 21st century brand knowledge

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>1 Promise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">* alignment = positioning* brand UOP = unique organising purpose* design begins in culture and value drivers* employee passion (by action learning)* high productivity = commitment, true buzz | <p>3 Knowledge-for-action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">* connecting strategic intangibles – eg people and brands* innovation focus and time efficiency* unlearning/change leadership* 'hyperarchy' decision making via intranet and transparent info systems* corporate IQ of company and seamless fit of partner networks/units* 21st century DNA fitness: 'value in, cost out' |
| <p>2 Trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">* reputation among stakeholders* value exchange network<ul style="list-style-type: none">— interact lead qualities and common standard* profit zones by renewing business cases* measurement/metrics work back from identifying promise vision and missions | <p>4 Community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">* brand image => brand relationship => brand community (win-wins)* value chain => value web* knowledge workers' 'community of practice' |
| <p>5 Interactivity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">* e-business, e-society, 'nets' => the defining 21st century growth dynamic* system dynamics of stakeholders who know how to challenge each other to get better and do so at electronic speed | |

Conclusion

In ten years' time, we could look back at the 20th century as an archaic time where human beings' communications freedoms to innovate ideas at work¹⁴ were similar to the driver of a car who found that every road turned out to be an interactive cul-de-sac. The idea of business at the speed of thought was thus a sick joke, and one which had a most imprisoning effect on the people who should be at the two VIP ends of any brand-knowledge enterprise: end consumers, and employees who willingly promise to serve people and advance their own competences given trust in belonging to a productively consistent organisational network where you feel proud of the worldwide unique value delivered. Every informed person now bears some responsibility in how we shape new media. But those who already have insights into the power of interactive marketing and brand knowledge must take the greatest responsibility if marketing is to be professionally reborn as every company's chief communicating organ. Not to do so would be the first (and greatest?) missed opportunity of the promise of third millennium business, and a cruel blow to the imaginative workspaces that your children should inherit.

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