Do things, tell people

How to behave in a world of infinite content

If content is no longer sufficient – what should brands do?

Previously, the ability to make things public, to publish, was a privileged act. It was expensive and hard and, in many cases, illegal. When the printing press emerged it was viewed by the status quo as a tool that should be used to support the status quo, somewhat unsurprisingly. Unlicensed printing presses were illegal in England until the end of the 17th century, as they still are in Malaysia today. When the age of mass media arrived, only governments, the media-industrial complex and the advertising industry were able to create mass culture. So, when you saw these pieces of culture, you couldn't help but be impressed.

The exponential impact of Moore's Law means that the computing power of a bespoke Silicon Graphics workstation, such as was used to create the special effects for *Terminator 2* and *Jurassic Park*, can be approximated on a laptop. In 2009, a filmmaker in Uruguay made a five-minute short called *Panic Attack* with a US $500 budget and uploaded it to YouTube.[1] It features animated robots attacking a city – and got him noticed by a Hollywood production company. No doubt there was an element of luck in this dandelion spore attracting enough attention to do so, but the fact remains that digital technology has given every consumer the power to create content. And it's getting easier. As media author Clay Shirky has pointed out, what once

took an industry – publishing – now takes the press of a button on a blogging platform. The monetary power of brands no longer buys them *that* uniqueness. We can all make films and we can all create web pages. The magic that exclusive access to this technology used to deliver has evaporated.

'Content' producers – the role traditionally taken by ad agencies in the marketing industry – no longer have exclusive access to content creation. That is not to say that the quality of 'consumer generated content' (a tellingly oxymoronic term) is usually on par with Hollywood or Madison Avenue. Rather, the gap between not being able to do something and being able to do it is infinite, but the gap between being bad and excellent is simply one of degree.

It is hard to be amazed with any technical wizardry on film when you grow up with iMovie at your fingertips. The web provides a mechanism that can absorb the cost of distribution. Advertising, or even content, as the sole tool in the marketing box, is simply no longer sufficient to earn attention since it now competes with practically infinite volumes of content created by people. The mass media has been forced to make room for the media of the masses in the attention market.

Some advertising agencies have attempted to reposition themselves in the new world, shunning the word advertising, expanding their remit to become purveyors of ideas providing solutions to business problems. And indeed, they could and perhaps even should be, as we will discuss later in this chapter, but expanding this definition of advertising needs different skills and, perhaps, a different lens through which to understand the world.

Historically, the function of an advertising agency was seen as expressing, through art and copy, truths about the product or the company in the most compelling way. Brand informs the advertising (Figure 6.1). As the most visible aspect of a company, it was only mistrusted when it directly contravened a customer's personal experience of the said company. As we have seen, this is no longer the case. Any dissonance between promises and delivery experienced by anyone – and then shared – erodes trust in the brand in totality. Cumulatively, this has eroded trust in brands and advertising overall.

FIGURE 6.1   Traditional brand platform informs advertising

Traditional Brand Platform
INFORMS ADVERTISING

ADVERTISING

BRAND

SERVICES
PRODUCTS
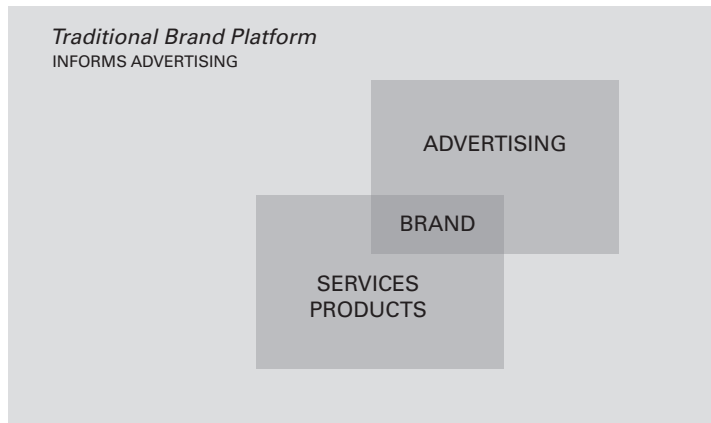
This dissonance is equally exposed through social media, as every employee of the company becomes a hole in the semi-permeable membrane of the corporate communication department, and content, as brands look to find things to talk about beyond endless exhortations to buy.

Douglas Rushkoff suggests this requires the abandoning of communications 'as some separate task, and instead just doing all the right things that you want talked about'.[2] Brands will be built by behaviour... and content that communicates that behaviour.

Behaviour, actions at scale, can be a continuing role for marketing and their agency partners. Brands must become behavioural templates, driving the action of the company, which should be expressed through actions and initiatives designed to earn attention.

There are things that corporations and their agencies partners can do that cannot be easily replicated by individuals, which do not rely on them being vertically integrated. They still have strategic advantages in the quest for attention: technology and scale. In a world of infinite content, actions created at scale can become content engines. Do things in the world, then tell people.

Technology is a medium

Technology provides a canvas that is yet to be effectively colonized by the amateur and, as Arthur C. Clarke famously pointed out, any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. Technology provides a medium to amaze and cut through the clutter of content. Technology speaks by doing, it can be utilized to create utilities, tools, services and ideas that earn attention (Figure 6.2).

Technology companies often tout their latest tools to brands and media owners to help drive uptake, so brands have first user advantages. The Pepsi TEN project is an explicit manifestation of this advantage. The consumer-packaged goods giant established a venture fund to support and partner with early stage technology start-ups in order to exclusively leverage the technologies for marketing.

There are problems with the blurring of the technology and the communications industries. They are divided by a common language. Words that should mean the same thing can mean something completely different to those on either side of the divide.

F I G U R E   6.2   Integrative brand platform
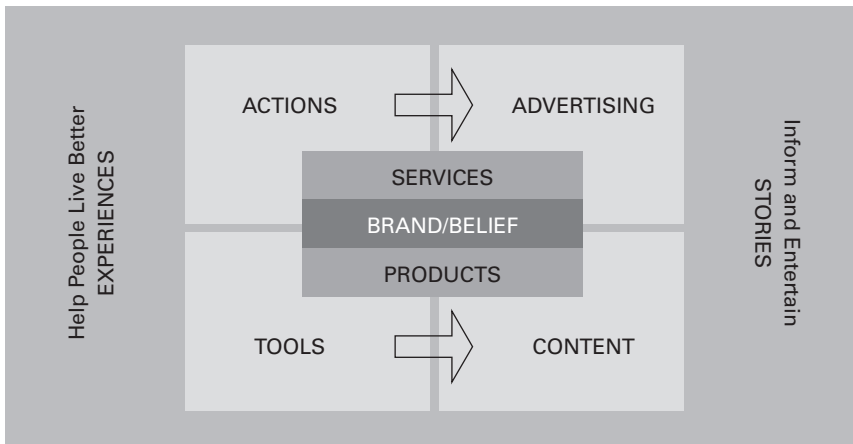
SOURCE: Genius Steals

Take a simple word like *platform*. To a communications specialist it means an idea or theme that all messages fit into, but to a technologist it means an underlying technology that enables other products or services to be built on it. This means that collaboration among disciplines can seem to be aligned when it isn't.

In practice, creative directors trained in writing or design find themselves being asked to review algorithms and concepts they cannot understand, as code becomes a creative deliverable.

CASE STUDY

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) briefed their agency for a campaign to promote the saving of trees by being more cautious about office printing – the paperless office never having emerged. Jung Von Matt realized pretty quickly that a traditional ad campaign – especially a print campaign, for obvious reasons – wasn't the right solution. Instead they worked for years to develop a bespoke file format, similar to the popular Adobe pdf format, which simply could not be printed. Technology here speaks volumes. The idea is a tool, something people can use, which makes the brand idea useful to its audience.

For brands to take advantage of technology and their first-access rights to new developments, they and their agents need to develop common understanding.

Often it is the role of the strategist to translate business language into creative inspiration. Increasingly, additional translations are necessary, evinced by the formation of new agency roles, reverse mentoring, and the demand for management training from groups such as the HyperIsland digital school.

There have been significant difficulties in merging the culture of advertising and digital agencies. Dare was named the digital agency of the decade in the UK by *Campaign* magazine. Advertising agency MCBD was named Effectiveness Agency of the year by the IPA. In 2010 they merged and it was heralded as an excellent idea, creating

a new model agency that understood the narrative of advertising with the participatory and technology nous required for innovative interactive work. Unfortunately, it faltered and became emblematic of 'the story of an industry that knew it had to change, but didn't really know how; or, for that matter, what to change into'.[3]

The newly formed agency struggled with developing an appropriate process to manage such disparate outputs. It struggled to convince clients that a full service offering was feasible or desirable. But it struggled most with one of the key problems of all mergers, the integration of culture. John Owen, head of strategy at Dare, later went on to write that he had come to believe that this sort of cultural fusion was impossible, because: 'when it comes to culture, the choice is binary: you can be digital or you can be advertising'. He goes on to explain how traditional advertising agencies so often still think and how it differs from digitally born agencies:

> So what do I mean by a digital culture?
>
> I mean not insisting on creative director sign-off for everything and elevating the role of the creative team above all other disciplines in the idea-generation phase. I mean empowering multidisciplinary teams to work in fast, fluid ways, with different people taking the lead depending on the nature of the brief.[4]

This cultural mismatch is not just about process. It leads to endless, pointless, arguments about the death of advertising, or the impact of digital, or who owns the idea, or who is lead agency – each agency defending their own business model and place at the table. It moves the industry further away from the integrative marketing communications planning that is needed in this environment. The fragmentation of marketing solutions is why, according to a survey of chief marketing officers, integration is the most important thing they want from their agencies and among the top reasons that they pick or dismiss them.[5]

The field of user experience design looks at enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty by improving the usability and pleasure in the interactions between customers and products or services. Some see this as bridging the gap between product design and traditional marketing. Mapping a consumer journey, their step-by-step

experience of a product or service, is a tool that has been adopted by communication planners dealing with the complexity of the modern landscape.

CASE STUDY

Airline Virgin America revamped its web storefront to make using it more intuitive across different devices, with a focus on making the arduous task of booking travel easier and faster. Booking travel is increasingly complex, due to the number of options available and the dynamic pricing models of the industry. Research by the Boston Consulting Group suggests that a customer spends, on average, 42 hours online to research, plan and book a four-day trip, which is both staggering and unpleasant.[6] So, faster and easier is a huge boon and the Virgin brand is further bolstered by its other stated ambition for the site: to make every task 'fun-erer'.[7]

Actions at scale

Brands still have an advantage over empowered consumers – their ability to deliver scale. Ironically this can be most powerful when delivered in traditional broadcast media environments because consumers cannot access them directly, as they can with online environments.

Digital channels may now deliver massive reach but the almost infinite nature of the web means that individual elements can lack the cultural impact of television and the associated media that reports on it. Fragmentation leads to the counter-intuitive fact that things can be incredibly popular on the internet and yet you and I may never hear about them.

CASE STUDY

Doritos' Crash the Super Bowl campaign is a classic example of using scale. Leveraging the consumer's ability to make films Doritos then incentivizes them to participate by giving them the opportunity to see their ad in the biggest TV event of the year. The campaign has been running for seven years. (Longevity is another sign of a powerful idea in a world of accelerating news cycles and diminished attention spans.)

Scale can be delivered via access. Tablets and laptops, for all their ability to democratize the creation of content, will not get you close to the big stars, although Twitter disrupts even this advantage. Brands can leverage their corporate might to provide access to things that an individual's money cannot buy. Coca-Cola experimented with this when they sponsored a live online recording session with the band Maroon 5. The band composed and recorded a track, aided by feedback and suggestions from people in real time.

In the age of the empowered consumer, brands need to identify what they can do that consumers cannot, how they can add something to their lives. Technology may be part of the answer, if brands and technologists can learn to speak the same language, but it could also be via the appropriate actions at scale that gives consumers something that even the latest laptop, tablet or mobile cannot offer.

Scale can be utilized to do things so far beyond the scope of individuals that it generates content that is truly awe inspiring. In October 2012, energy drink Red Bull created one of the greatest marketing actions of all time. It was called Stratos,[8] and consisted of skydiver Felix Baumgartner breaking the world free-fall record by jumping out of a capsule suspended 24 miles above the surface of the earth. A project seven years in the making, it captured the attention of the world. As he plummeted earthward, reaching speeds in excess of 800 miles an hour, the jump was broadcast on more than 40 television stations across 50 countries. A record 8 million people watched it live on YouTube. It organically created more than 2.5 million social media mentions, front page news worth millions of dollars and immediately became a cultural object. It has been suggested that it is the 'most successful marketing campaign of all time', indelibly linked to the Red Bull brand and its long-running slogan 'Red Bull Gives You Wings'. On the one-year anniversary of the jump, Red Bull released a secondary burst of content, including a powerful point-of-view video of Felix's experience.