

Joining the Conversation



In this age of uninhibited self-expression, when almost everyone has something to say or share, marketing must modernize its communication model to have any chance of joining the conversation.

Forty thousand years ago, when our early ancestors used cave walls to draw pictures of the world around them, they were acting on a deep primal urge.

Those primitive drawings are a reminder of what makes us human: an overwhelming compulsion to express ourselves. This irrepressible desire to communicate accounts for our progress as a civilization. It has allowed us to imagine new possibilities; to continually learn from each other; to form broad networks of cooperation.



Every epoch in history has seen revolutionary changes in the way we communicate. Each advancement has made the spread of stories, ideas and knowledge easier and broader in reach. The printing press ushered in mass literacy. The telegraph and telephone made the world a smaller place. The Internet made it smaller still. Each leap forward has opened up richer avenues of expression – while compressing the time to create and send messages. We once slaved over manuscripts by hand. Today, with a single click, a message can ricochet around the globe, creating vast ripples of conversation.

In this new era of uninhibited self-expression, we use our devices every waking hour of every day, chatting, messaging, playing, transacting and creating. The combination of interconnectedness and hyper-sharing has changed the way we relate to each other. It has affected our use of language. It has thrown open the

doors of knowledge, and tilted the world toward a culture of immediacy and transparency. But what has not changed – nor will it, ever – is that prehistoric yearning for expression: the urge to describe the world as it is, and how it should be. Today social media has become the metaphorical equivalent of those cave walls – a way for people to leave their mark.

Yet for many marketers, still devoted to push messaging even as mass media collapses around them, the only communication goal that really matters is persuasion. Much of what passes for market conversation remains either top-of-funnel advertising or social fluff, which is why people are no longer paying much attention to what brands have to say anymore. To have any chance at all of having a true conversation with customers, in the 8 seconds available to hold their attention, marketers must scrap their ready-aim-fire communication model, which has outlived its usefulness.

Making People Care

The arrival of broadcast media more than half a century ago made short form messaging (read: ad copy) the default marketing tactic. It forced a split in the advertising business along channel lines, starting in the 1950s when Proctor and Gamble elected to make a distinction between “above the line” (mass advertising) and “below the line” (promotion). Each channel was assigned a specific role in a media caste system, dictated by audience size and reach, affordability and prestige. Brand budgets usually got swallowed up by TV and print advertising, with the rest of the dollars doled out reluctantly to more proletarian media.

Ever since those halcyon days of mass media advertising, the marketing communication model has been structured around funnel messaging, with most of the dollars directed toward awareness building. It is only now, when audiences can no longer be found moving in large herds,



that marketers are being forced to confront a crisis of their own making: people are weary of being chased. They are ignoring ads, skipping them, blocking them, or just disconnecting themselves from broadcast media.

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In response to this rapidly cooling ad climate, the idea of “content marketing” has gone from being a buzzword to a budget line. Interest has heated up considerably in the past year, especially with ad blocking and dubious viewability claims casting a doomsday shadow over the entire digital media business (which now accounts for almost one third of total ad spending). But quality content is rare, mainly because it is so hard to produce. As Seth Godin says, “Real content marketing isn’t repurposed advertising: it is something worth talking about”.

Marketers are not schooled to be publishers. Their line of sight extends to the bill of sale. Creating meaningful content requires marketers to have the patience to work the long end of the conversational tail, counting on soft measures such as “social shares” to serve as a proxy for audience reach. Instead of manufacturing content to suit their media choices, marketers find themselves in an inverse position: trying to find the best distribution channels for their branded content so that it can be found. Which explains why social media networks are now morphing into publishing platforms. But ultimately brands must build their own audiences through organic search. And that will only happen if marketers shift their attention from making people buy to making people care.

For people to care, they must believe the brand cares about something other than market share. So marketers need to ask themselves: What role does the brand play in the lives of customers? In what ways can it be more socially significant? How can it be seen by people as their champion? If marketers can connect with the passions, concerns, interests and belief systems of customers, they can find the right entrance point to start a conversation. A compelling brand narrative can be created, shaped around a humanistic theme. But first

marketers must define the core pillars of that thematic platform, and set their sights on unifying all forms of customer communication, not just branded content.

New Storytelling Tools

It has become a viral marketing catchphrase – Simon Synek’s theory that customers don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it (“Start with Why”). That simple insight immediately resonated with brand marketers, wrestling with the Catch 22 of content marketing: How do you give up bragging about your brand when your job depends on selling more products? But if a brand can figure out its purpose - why it matters to the world at large - it might lead to a more inspiring narrative: one that people can actually get excited about. However, it can’t be a parlor trick. It has to come from the heart – be seen by customers as a genuine expression of the Brand ethos. It has to be motivational – a rallying cry (“Just Do It”, “Think Different”). It has to be transformative (“Smarter Planet”). Most of all, to have any credibility whatsoever, it has to be voiced with conviction.

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People recoil at propaganda – at artifice – at hyperbole. They roll their eyes, more than ever, at vanity advertising. They much prefer to be told redemptive stories: morality tales, parables, rags-to-riches accounts, Homeric sagas of voyage and self-discovery. These are the emotional ignition switches which evangelists have always relied upon to lift people out of their seats cheering and applauding. The arc of that narrative – adversity, despair, hope, epiphany, resolution, joy – is tried and true. It lends itself to theatrical presentation. To transmedia storytelling. To serial publishing. To evergreen content. These are the new storytelling tools of our time: they command sustained attention even in an age of perpetual distraction. Whereas ad copywriting, characterized by clever headlines and promotional offers (“Act Now!”), is easy to turn your back on. Instead, the storyline needs to be centered around Big Ideas, bold predictions, emerging trends,



innovative thinking, even iconoclastic points of view – the type of thought-provoking content found in journalism. The product is no longer the hero of the story: instead the focus is on conveying an eternal truth, exposing a social malaise, or imagining a better way, told preferably through the dramatic struggles and triumphs of real people.

What's critical is to avoid random acts of content. A brand must figure out its editorial plan and define the types of stories it is best positioned to tell, taking its cue from the Brand Purpose which serves as the thematic anchor. The classic examples of that today are IBM (smarter systems), Kraft (healthy meals), Apple (creative exploration), Google (satisfying curiosity), Patagonia (environmental sustainability) and Red Bull (free spirit), each brand investing massively in original content and owned media channels, wrapped around healthier lifestyles, personal well-being, social advocacy and other topics that matter to people.

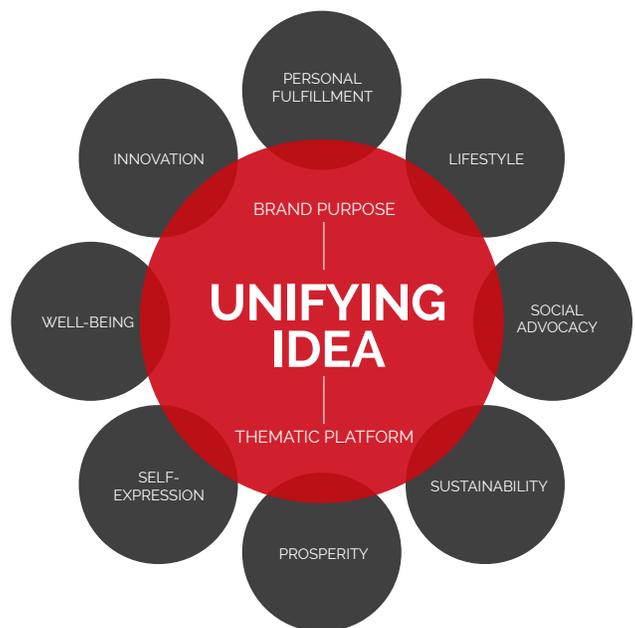
How do you give up bragging about your brand when your job depends on selling more products?

Typically, an editorial plan is organized into distinct content zones: Inspirational Content, intended to demonstrate thought leadership by editorializing on subjects of interest and concern to customers; Informational Content, which is designed to help customers progress through each stage of the relationship lifecycle, from initial orientation to continuing support and education; and Transactional Content, which spans all operational communications (such as billing statements and service notifications), all of which keep the customer continuously connected and engaged. Producing and delivering all of this content demands a radically different approach to communications management, along with the platforms and systems to regulate the origination, modification and flow of content across various touchpoints. The trouble is that most businesses are handcuffed by stovepipe systems operated by different content owners who rule over their own data siloes. Naturally this content fragmentation

results in confused and frustrated customers. Before any real progress can be made in transforming the communication model, all content must be liberated and stored centrally where it can be tagged and controlled. Even more importantly, the unification of all customer communications must be a corporate-wide priority, with marketing in charge, given its role as the chief architect of the brand experience.

Taming the Chaos

Most content ecosystems today are an overgrown jungle of standalone interfaces, portals, digital experience platforms, customer engagement systems (CRM, marketing automation, voice of customer) and other point solutions, used to create and manage different content types. These include: structured content, primarily back-office forms (such as billing statements);



variable content (like personalized e-mail); and triggered notifications (for instance, order confirmations). To provide the best possible customer experience, all of this content should be interactive (with links, drill-downs, animations), accessible on any device and contextually relevant, taking into account explicit communication preferences, geolocation, prior interaction history and point-in-time needs (e.g., price look-up).

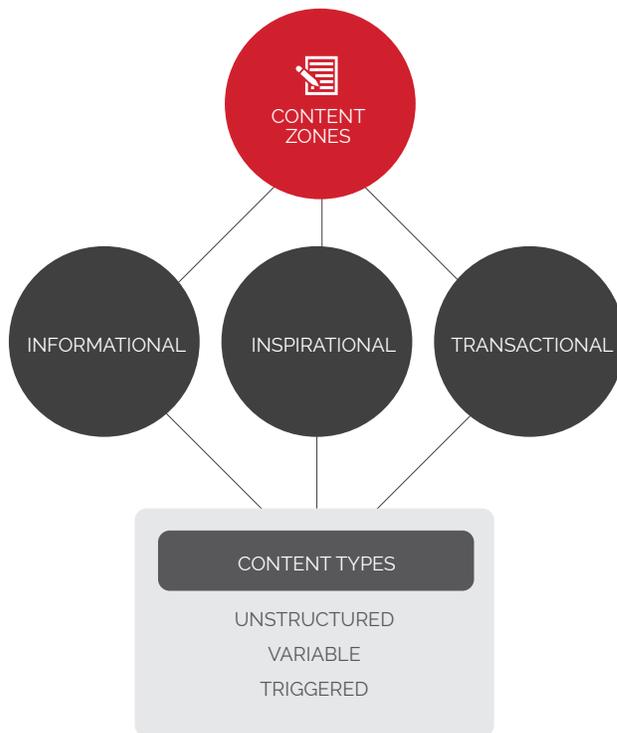
To tame the chaos marketing must first define what an ideal communication experience looks like (ideally,

by customer segment, mapped to the relationship lifecycle). The guiding principle is to add value with every interaction, while avoiding information overload. Of course, it also means personalizing the content so that it speaks directly to individual needs. All of the content must be designed so that it is recognized by customers as coming from one company, in the familiar voice of

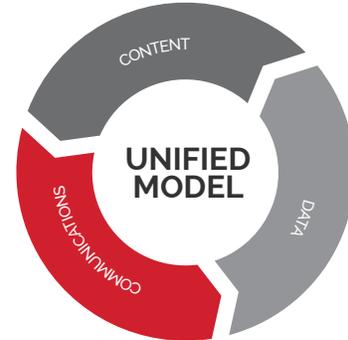
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the brand. Anything less undermines faith in the brand: “Why did I get an unintelligible service message when I am supposed to be a valued customer?” Finally, the content must be adaptable to capitalize on the strengths of different touchpoints.

Ultimately, customers will force companies to accelerate the unification of all communications, since they are increasingly dictating the terms of engagement through preference centers, in-box filters and ad avoidance tools.



Brands will be selectively invited by customers into their conversational circle based on the value of their total communication experience. And they will be quick to banish spammers who abuse their access privileges.



The time when marketers controlled the flow of information to customers is over. Thanks to social media and the pervasive use of mobile devices, a flood of content, most of it generated by people anxious to say what’s on their mind, has washed away any advantage brands once had. In the face of this uprising, marketing has a responsibility to modernize its communication model. The quality of branded content, and the speed at which it is delivered, have now become preconditions to joining the customer conversation.

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