

Customer
first
thinking.



Context Marketing

An Interview with Mathew Sweezey, Director of Market Strategy at Salesforce

Mathew Sweezey:

Mathew Sweezey is the Director of Market Strategy at Salesforce and the author of “The Context Marketing Evolution”.



Marketers have always been on the front lines of change. Each technological leap forward, each cultural inflection point, each seismic shift in the market, brought a new set of existential challenges. Embattled marketers have always figured out a way to stay relevant – whether it was the changeover from analogue to digital in the early web era; the rise of the omnichannel consumer over the past decade; or more recently, the rapid ascent of mobile commerce and streaming video. But now, in the face of a global pandemic, marketers face their greatest challenge ever. Now they truly have to think differently. Otherwise they’ll be of little use to businesses digging out from under the rubble.

The answer to every market opportunity can no longer be an ad. The brand experience can no longer be thought of separately from the customer experience. They are one and the same. Today experiences trump messaging. Which means marketing must operate with a new mandate: to lead innovation in the interest of creating value for customers.

In his new book, “The Context Marketing Revolution”, Mathew Sweezey says that we’ve entered a new era of “infinite media” which marketers have no chance of harnessing. The only way for marketers to break through the suffocating volume of media noise is to stop thinking they can. Instead, marketing has to pivot from its constant obsession with brand communications to creating experiences for customers that help them in the context of the moment.

As head of Marketing Strategy at Salesforce, Mathew is in a unique position to ponder the future of marketing. He oversees the always much anticipated and oft-quoted Salesforce State of Marketing study. Plus, his work allows him to explore the frontier of marketing, learning from top performing organizations. He channels that learning into the talks he gives around the world.

SS

Stephen Shaw (SS): Your first book, “Marketing Automation for Dummies”, is still a top seller seven years after it was published. How do you explain its continued success?

MS

Mathew Sweezey (MS): One of the reasons the book remains relevant is because I didn’t write it about technology. I wrote about what the technology allows marketers to do. Otherwise it would have been irrelevant in six months. So, I focused more on how the technology changes the role of marketing. That’s why my message still resonates all these years later.

SS

A lot has happened since you wrote that book. Is there a need for an updated edition?

MS

You do hit on a very good point. Since 2011, there are now 50 times more marketing technologies available. It's just a radical, massive change, right? It's become a complicated landscape to navigate. But I don't know that it needs another book. I would like to see the vendors being more helpful. Their approach today is, "Here's why you need to buy my product. If you don't buy my product now my sales rep will call you five times and send you six emails". So, it's a very difficult process for marketing people to buy technology.

SS

What's your perspective on the state of martech today? Are we in a technology bubble? Scott Galloway says it feels a lot like 1999.

MS

Yeah, I definitely agree with Scott and I've been saying the exact same thing. We've got a massive technology glut right now. Marketers are probably going to have to drop tools or ask for more budget. And it's going to be easier to drop tools that really aren't providing much value. So, yes, I agree with Scott.

SS

Let's move on to your current book, "The Context Marketing Revolution." What's behind your core idea of "infinite media"?

MS

A massive amount of research as well as 11,000 interviews over four years finding out what high performing marketing organizations are doing differently. What I was able to prove through this research is that we have actually entered a new media era, one I call "infinite media". It's not just TV shows and Twitter: it's all forms of media. What that means, simply, is our old idea of marketing, based on stealing somebody's attention to get them to do what we want them to do, was a game that we could only play in a more limited media environment. So, all those old ideas - such as "sex sells," "right message, right person, right time," "no such thing as bad press," all those truisms - they're no longer true. We have to give up those old ideas and do a reset. The question then becomes, how? And I say it's very simple: it's this idea of context. We need to think about how we grow our businesses with our marketplace, not how we force our messages and our products into the marketplace. And that's exactly what the high performers are doing. This entails a new business model, a new definition of marketing, new

executive leadership, new tools and technologies, new ways of thinking, new tactics. It's an entire reworking of this word we call marketing.

SS

By context, do you mean providing customers with the assistance they need at a moment in time?

MS

Yeah, totally. It's helping somebody. The old idea was that a brand can push out a creative message and get a person to think or do something. But today the only way you can get anything in front of somebody is through a contextual feed. If you look at any newsfeed or any social media feed, check the timestamps. These are not chronological feeds. These are contextual feeds. A Google search result page is a contextual feed. It's using all of your personal data, plus what other people have found interesting and important. That's what makes the contextual result page so powerful. That's why we choose to engage. So, it's this idea of helping somebody achieve their goal in any given moment.

SS

But how do publishers avoid the clickbait trap - only producing content that is popular or "sharable"?

MS

The "Washington Post" did some research showing we like to share content that validates our self-image. In fact, 60% of the time articles are shared without ever being read. And they're shared because the headline suggests something about the individual that they want other people to associate with them. That's how fake news spreads so quickly. It's enough that the headline validates their point of view. But will clickbait take over if we just leave it to the algorithms? I honestly can't answer that. We're still in a very nascent stage of social media. We're still trying to figure these things out. The challenge we have is that the major platforms make their money based on keeping people engaged. Their business models are still based on ad buying. And as long as people are staying engaged longer, they don't care what people share. They just want to sell more ads.

SS

Does marketing need to do a better job of defining the content experience?

MS

When marketers think, "I must make content, I must distribute content," that's just saying, "let's do what we know worked in the past". And in the past that consisted

of magazines, TV, branded promotion. It was all about centralized content creation and distribution. With social media, the real value for marketers is not in free distribution. It's in personal engagement. Consider this: Because of this ability to share content, a person with a social network of 135 people has exactly the same influence as a brand with a million followers. Marketers need to ask themselves: "How do I engage my audience by fulfilling their goals?" Only by thinking that way can marketers create better content.

SS

Let's talk then, more broadly, about the marketing function itself. Marketing still answers to a corporate imperative to drive growth and sales, not to make customers the happiest people on earth. Is what you're describing an impossible leap without first figuring out a new corporate purpose and organizational model?

MS

Yeah, you're correct in that, but that's not the first step. When we look at the data, the number one difference between a high performing marketing organization - which is only 16% of all organizations globally - and everyone else is executive buy-in to a new idea of marketing. That is the number one trait of a high performing marketing organization. In those organizations the new mandate of marketing is to be the owner of all experiences.

SS

Getting that top-down blessing is the challenge, isn't it? Because the markets reward growth, not virtue. Your boss, Marc Benioff, recently wrote in "The New York Times" that businesses have to value purpose as much as profit. He goes so far as to say that capitalism as we know it is dead. What did he mean by that?

MS

The simple answer is that brands must have a goal other than a strict financial one. And that's not a new concept - E. F. Schumacher's "Small is Beautiful" is probably the seminal book on economics that proves this theory out. Then you have "The Experience Economy," which came out in 1999, by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, which talks about experiences being the highest form of economic value a firm can create. It's about creating a better society and a better world. And those brands with a purpose beyond profits are able to think about things differently: they're more sustainable, they have greater retention of employees - I mean, there are just so many positive

outcomes. When I did some research with the Economist Group, we found that purpose-driven brands are two-and-a-half times more profitable than those that are not.

SS

Benioff also said that Facebook is the new cigarettes. We just talked about social media helping to shape the conversation. How do you see this tension playing out over the next few years - between what Facebook represents today, an ad-supported engagement platform, versus what you think it should be?

MS

I've always said that social media is the modern-day smoke break. It's simply a way to take a break from the rest of your day. How do I see things moving forward? The platforms are going to have to ask themselves, "How do we create better communities? How do we monetize those communities?", rather than just be a newsfeed selling ads. Look at China and how WeChat functions. It is an entire ecosystem inside of a social application where all goods and services are able to be bought and sold. It's not just an ad-serving platform.

SS

If you look at the big players now, Apple, Google, obviously Amazon, Facebook, who do you see being closest to offering that kind of fully integrated ecosystem?

MS

None of those are close to it. For example, Google is mostly a search engine. They don't really have a social network. They tried one, Google+, that failed. Facebook is a social network, doesn't necessarily have a search engine like Google. It's all over the place. A lot of the bigger questions will probably be answered through regulation. I fully believe we are one more Facebook debacle away from massive federal privacy regulations. Does the consumer own the data? Do they know what data on them even exists? Can they port it from one place to another? All of these platforms we've talked about are walled gardens. So that's another question: in future, will they remain walled gardens, and will that be regulated?

SS

You referred earlier to a "post-ad world". What does that look like?

MS

Ads are not a bad thing in themselves. They're bad when they're used the wrong way. An ad is simply a way to make an impression on people at a moment in time. How that

Interview

moment is used determines if it's a positive or negative experience. Traditionally, how we utilize ads is interruptive. But in future we could use ads in a very different way.

SS

Back to your point earlier about privacy laws becoming more stringent. Presumably there's a trade-off between what people are prepared to give up in terms of privacy, and the value they get back from their experience.

MS

Eighty percent of businesses actually believe they create a great experience for their customers. But when you actually ask those customers, just 8% agree. And to your point, consumers are very happy to give up their data as long as they receive something of value in exchange. And that value is not monetary. To help them, in some way, shape, or form, you have to give them a better experience.



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