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Marketing Evolution: What Doesn't Change

I was daydreaming about what some smart person from hundreds or even thousands of years ago would make of our modern world. While much of it would seem strange, it got me thinking about what he or she might recognize--what hasn't changed.

It's not that we don't have to stay up-to-date with the new, new thing, especially in the marketing business, but I think it is too easy to get caught up in the excitement of innovation. That's because the things that truly impact our customers, what makes the difference between success and failure, are still the basics. These are the truths that we want to touch when we craft our marketing stories--not just the grand, archetypal stories, but the everyday stories of your spring sale, new product launch, or customer service. The secret is to find the timeless humanity that inhabits even the mundane. Great marketing is built on these stories and, even though we live in a new age, the art of the story teller hasn't changed since we sat around the ancient campfire.

But today we have new digital campfires around which we share the experience of the story. The architecture of these stories and how they look may be different, with Web sites, email, mobile apps, Facebook, and the like, but the underlying structures are the same. As brand storytellers, our first job is to hold the interest and attention of the audience. The next is to let go, to let our brand exist on its own.

This is still very scary stuff, of course. Releasing control--giving up the attempt to manipulate every perception and nuance about your brand--requires an act of faith in the integrity of your product, and faith in the self-regulating truth of the social market. Many brands are dipping their toes in the social media waters, but their instinct is still to try and control everything, which is why these forays into the unfiltered world are often really only lip service to the pressure to be on top of the new, new thing.

That said, in many ways it's more possible to build a really valuable brand today than it has ever been. That's because the audience is more personally involved. In our digital world, the audience participates in the story, so it naturally becomes much more about them. The web of human connections, the opportunity to make the story their own, and the confidence they have in the truth of the cooperatively told brand story is leading to brands that have more authenticity and, thus, more resonance. These dynamics are stirring up what hasn't changed: feelings and emotions down there in the archetypal soup that create more meaningful bonds. This is new in marketing, but not new in life.

In fact, we have always shared stories about what's important to us. The digital world just makes it easier to do so and weave into other stories that we care about. For brands, each of our experiences becomes part of the bigger story and, like a quilt made by many, it is stronger than that made by one. All of the moments of a person's experience with a brand form a personal story, and all of those personal stories then come together to make the global brand story—an overarching narrative of what the brand is doing and, more important, why it is doing it.

But for that to happen effectively, a brand (and its agency) first must lay out a map of how all the pieces will connect to one another, and how they will align to the cycle of discovery, evaluation, conversion, and loyalty. Then they must study each interaction in order to understand the psychology of people at that particular point and how it contributes to the greater idea. The idea is to know not just what someone is trying to accomplish, but why--to get at what is really driving that person to hunt for insurance, a new car, or a vacation in Florida. The mission is to reveal the essential human drivers, not just for TV or print copy, but to shape the design of each consumer interaction at every touch point in the brand ecosystem.



There is science and process, as well as art, to building a new brand ecosystem this way. First, one must recognize that, like Rome, it cannot be built in a day. So like any good urban planner, a brand must create a strategy that sets priorities, telling what to build in what order and how to anticipate growth. The strategy outlines a vision for what the city will look like, how each part will connect to another, and how to integrate the functional values of each interaction point with the emotional values of the greater brand story. It uses user experience (UX) sciences to take the complexity of all these seemingly competitive dynamics and transform them into intuitive, effortless experiences that reinforce the emotional values of the brand.

While the opportunity to connect with the consumer is greater than before, telling the brand story is much more demanding. Uber-connected and informed consumers take their cues not just from your competition, but also from every other brand experience they have. Best-in-class brands in every category set the bar for expectations across the board. The challenge for us on the brand side is that, as a result, it's getting harder to win with back-room basics like we used to. The game today is about the part that touches consumers. To paraphrase Donald Norman in his book "Emotional Design," winning or losing the consumer is a result of his visceral, behavioral, and reflective experience at every brand interaction. In other words, it's not just about what you say any longer--it's about the experience of what you do and how you do it.