

Digital Utility

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Let's face it—digital marketing peeps haven't been terribly successful at selling in brand ideas to marketers. Outside of a handful of well-publicized digital wins—for example, Nike's recent World Cup online video comes to mind—most brand marketers still consider digital marketing to be an add-on to “real” brand-building efforts.

Injecting digital into your brand's DNA.

Despite a lot of press hyperventilation (sometimes it feels like we're back in the dot-com boom days), digital marketing is still often consigned as a nice accoutrement to a more substantial and traditional brand-building tool—namely television. Not that I'm complaining. It could be much worse. As a digital strategist, I (finally) have a seat at the table... although I won't be carving the turkey anytime soon, if you know what I mean.

As such, digital marketing stalwarts like me have long lived in a world of “take my print ad/TV spot/brand tagline and make it digital.” Today, it's not much different from the early days of digital marketing; only the requests have been augmented

with the requirement *du jour*, “Can you make it social?”

I understand: Digital marketing practitioners have yet to fully articulate the power of digital media to build brands as effectively as so-called traditional media. As a dyed-in-the-wool Believer, I'd like to change that.

And, yet, skeptics might say, why change? Television does the brand-building job. Television works just fine, thank you very much. But as Forrester Research reported a while back, more than 43 percent of media viewing time now occurs online, while brands still only allocate about eight percent of budgets to digital marketing. To be sure, television (still) works—but it needs help in today's increasingly media-fragmented world. Plus, digital is everywhere: On your computer, on your smart phone, in out-of-home ... why, digital is even on your television. ;-)

So what's the issue? Why haven't marketers moved more brand budgets into digital? Seriously, what's the hold up, people?

Media consultant and writer Frederic Filloux recently weighed in on the topic with a thoughtful article in *The Washington Post*. Filloux lamented, “*Why is digital advertising so lousy? [The] industry is too smug to innovate.*” He pointed out, quite bluntly, that the essential problems with digital advertising are bad design and a lack of innovation. While there's some truth in Filloux's indictment, I suggest that the real problem is actually much deeper.

Could it be that the problem with digital marketing is emotion (or, the lack thereof)? Brand marketers don't see digital as delivering the emotional goods.

“Digital sells but it doesn’t tell” is a prevalent thought.

Even Steve Jobs is now touting Apple’s new iAds mobile advertising platform as the answer to *finally* delivering emotion to marketing on the web: “Emotion + Interactivity.” (With due respect, Mr. Jobs, from what I’ve seen, those iAds look a lot like standard-issue micro-sites. I’m just sayin’.)

Here’s a contrarian thought: Good digital marketing is not about emotion; it’s all about utility. Sure, you can tell an emotional story online — and we’ve seen terrific examples of this, dating all the way back to 2001’s (admittedly overhyped) BMWFilms.com. Where the digital medium really sings is when it solves problems for people, when it provides instant answers to our burning questions, when it helps us manage an increasingly chaotic and information overloaded world.

So, here’s my advice: When thinking digital, think “make it useful.” I suggest that you start to look at digital as a complement to your brand’s emotional story and begin to build out the functional benefit of your brand’s purpose and promise.

And here’s the good news: This is not uncharted territory. Smart brands are already there, making hay by providing true value and not just messaging. All you have to do is look at Johnson & Johnson’s Baby Center to see one example of what digital success looks like.

J&J—undoubtedly a smart marketer— understood that new moms (and dads, of course) don’t need a website about diapers. They need a tool to help them prepare for one of the biggest events in their lives; they need a plan, not an ad. Four-and-a-half-million monthly unique visitors later, J&J has cornered the market on new parents and, I’m sure, they’re also selling a ton of baby stuff along the way.

How can you make your brand useful? I’d like to offer a new way of thinking about building brands in the digital space.

The brand-advertising-in-the-digital-space problem is a simple one: We’re trying to fit some 69 years of brand-building practice (read, making television ads) that has a singular focus on saying something clever and original (the square peg) into a brave new digital consumer world (the round hole) that really doesn’t care what you have to say.

Today, the immutable laws of brand building fall down when faced with all of the things we’ve learned to love about the digital world: Freedom of choice, the power to filter, multiple opinions, and often, the

New Media Words

Admittedly, it’s a bit of an overstatement to say that good digital marketing is not about emotion. Certainly, emotion is critical in marketing.

Perhaps the issue of emotion is really about marketers seeing the messages as the expressions of emotion. Digital *can* deliver emotion; we simply need to tweak the way we talk about it.

Then	Now
Positioning	Experience
Messaging	Design
Reason to Believe	Value

This language shift highlights how brand marketers can start to (re)think building brands, digitally.

This rethinking also would fundamentally change the way that agencies and client partners brief creative for digital work.

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authority to say, “I’m just not that into you.”

And therein lies the rub: We’re slowly learning that brand taglines alone do not solve 21st century business problems or build brands. What’s a brand to do?

Here’s a simple solution: Construct a plan (digital strategy) that informs brand assets (digital products), which in turn gives brands a new platform on the web, in mobile, out-of-home, you name it; a new platform to build brand commitment through providing branded utility to people.

Digital Strategy: The intersection of brands, participants (not customers) and technology. It’s in the middle where the magic happens. Here you can develop a new way to market, communicate and make stuff that is useful, that solves problems and builds value in people’s minds. Think of it as “value positioning.”

Digital Products: Branded content, features, apps — you name it — that provide utility around a brand’s promise. Kraft’s iPhone assistant — that’s a digital product. So is the Nike+ running chip and community. The aforementioned J&J’s Baby Center — that’s a digital product.

An essential truism online is, “Provide me value first, then I’ll listen to your pitch.”

Want to get in on the game? Here’s a simple four-step plan for building your digital brand:

1. Think: digital ≠ channel. This is the fundamental rule of digital strategy. If you think of your digital marketing as a line item on your media plan, you are just plain missing the boat — and the opportunity — to do something really special with your brand.

Think of it as an engagement medium or as cultural marketing (how people use technology; how this interaction changes; how they think and behave) but don’t think of it as channel marketing or a place to do advertising. Trust me, it doesn’t work.

Rather, ask yourself: How do the people who I want to target use digital within their lives? What is the gap my brand could fill? What is the opportunity to provide something amazingly useful?

2. Experiences, not messages. This phrase was coined by G.M. O’Connell, the founder of Modem Media (one of the first digital shops and my former employer) many years back. I think it still holds water today. I wish more people would think about the customer experience of digital.

Does your ad agency have User Experience (UX) people mapping customer journeys, defining the way your creative interacts with users? If not, you’re missing the nuts and bolts of digital.

And, if you create a great experience, it opens up the realms of social exchanges and habit creation that have significantly greater influence over human behaviors (advocacy, automatic re-order, etc.) than the impersonal, message-driven aspects of television ads. Experience. Experience. Experience.

3. Put your brand in beta. The tradition brand-planning process doesn’t work for digital. The old process: Research → differentiated insight → positioning → message → big idea → tagline

falls on its face and makes, well, bad digital advertising. In addition, it gives you a false sense of “truth”; insights change as consumers change, brand positions move as new competitors emerge.

In digital, you need to be nimble and have a process that allows you to build your brand in real-time. My suggestion: Put your brand in beta. Let people bang on it, weigh in and make suggestions ... all in real-time.

Do this and you’ll reap the rewards of ongoing insight into what people really want from your brand and how to best give it to them. This process creates the type of divergent insight that makes brands famous.

4. Crowdsourcing the big idea. Remember, participants not consumers. Think of this as a give-and-take between you and the people interested in your brand. Your brand lives in the crowd; accept this fact and move forward. Give them a seat at the table, invite them to research and ask them: What do you want? Do you have any ideas to make this better?

Use online listening tools to understand the conversations around your brand; seed ideas in communities that align with your brand’s purpose and gather feedback in a transparent manner. It’s kind of easy: Listen, learn and give them what they want.

Your digital strategy and product(s) will sink or swim based on this simple question: Would I use this? If you make something that changes how I do everyday things — I think of what the Whole Foods app has done for my ability to plan weeknight meals — I will be loyal and buy more. This is the secret to branding on the web and building brand commitment through digital marketing. Combine this with your emotional brand story and you’ve got a winner.

So I’ll leave you with one question: How could your brand be (more) useful? ■



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