

Interactive – the future, but on whose terms?

Roderick White outlines how interactivity – in one form or another – will be a critical element in tomorrow's successful marketing

THE PAST 20 YEARS or more have seen a steady growth in the proportion of marketing communication budgets worldwide going into what used to be called direct marketing - more or less targeted communications designed to initiate at least a dialogue with a prospect or customer, and, preferably, to create an actual sale.

As both marketing and media have evolved, and especially with the inexorable rise in penetration of the internet, two key concepts closely related to direct marketing have come to the fore. The older of these is the idea of one-to-one marketing, and its variants such as mass customisation - an idea that is superficially highly attractive and appealing, but in practice so hard to realise that it has lost currency almost as fast as it gained it.

More modern - though in fact it is merely a re-presentation of something far older - is the idea of interactivity: that marketing needs to involve a two-way process, in which the customer can (if he or she so wishes) contribute as much to the process as the marketer. The pioneers of internet marketing fastened onto this - and the global IAB is, it should be remembered, not the Internet Advertising Bureau, but the Interactive Advertising Bureau, even though the UK body has settled (quite recently) for the former.

Media-neutral

In fact, as is clear from the articles that follow, interactivity is more or less media-neutral. In the UK at least, a lot of the conceptual running has been made by interactive TV (iTV), partly through the exploitation of viewer involvement in reality shows and quiz shows with the aid of the mobile phone, but partly through the vigorous efforts of Sky and to a lesser extent the cable companies to promote the marketing use of the 'red button'.

One result of this activity has been that while interactive TV is becoming quite well established as a marketing system for goods and services in the UK, on the other side of the Atlantic this is still a rare phenomenon, and Chase's recent launch of an interactive campaign on Echo's Dish Network was reported by MediaPost as 'experimental', in a market where hitherto interactive TV has mostly tended to be thought of as VOD (video on demand). Guy Phillipson argues, however, that it is the internet, through IPTV, that will enable TV to become truly and effectively interactive.

Meanwhile, of course, most internet marketing activity has, in practice, already been essentially interactive and transactional in character - so that the medium's value as a branding tool has been somewhat neglected by many marketers and their agencies. The growth of the internet and the booming progress of e-commerce serve merely to underline the continuing potential for interactive marketing, while developments in the relationship between consumers and the internet continue to evolve dynamically, with the recent vast interest in social networks and the development of consumer-generated content - a subject *Admap* will return to in the April issue.

But while a lot of hot money is on the internet and on iTV, these are not the only media that can exploit the notion of a marketer consumer dialogue. As Mark Barber points out, radio, as it increasingly becomes available on digital platforms and through DAB itself, has developed a greatly heightened interactive capability to add to its traditional closeness to its listeners and the interactions that have long been in place through phone-ins and the mail.

Similarly, as Gray Sycamore makes clear, direct mail is a highly interactive medium, even if a high proportion of mail is never responded to, and, as he says, both economics and ecology are moving against it over the longer term. Here, the obvious potential direct substitutes are email and SMS, but email has been seriously damaged by the gathering floodtide of spam messages, and SMS may go the same way, even if legitimate marketers manage to implement their (quite properly) proclaimed commitment to permission-based use of the medium.

Timely and relevant

This serves to bring into focus the continuing problem facing all forms of interactivity: it takes two to tango, and the leader on this particular dance floor is the consumer. Consumers will, by and large, interact with commercial media messages on their terms, not the marketers'. Typically, this means that they will do so when they have a need for a product or service, and the time to look for it. With the continuing proliferation of brand choice that exists across most market categories, this will continue to mean that there will always be more marketers trying to make themselves relevant, at the right moment, than there are right moments for consumers who are in the market.

In other words, commercial clutter, of some kind, is inevitable, probably in all and every medium. Even though the consumer is the one who will be most in control, marketers and their agencies will still have to try, somehow, to manage things so that it is their brand that gets the consumer's attention.

It is tempting to interpret this as pointing to the need for good, old-fashioned intrusive advertising and promotion: for thrusting the brand in front of the consumer's nose, preferably with a thumpingly good offer attached. And, probably, this form of approach will go on being used for many years: it's hardly new, and there are still plenty of marketers who feel emotionally and intellectually attached to the hard sell that it implies.

But what's the alternative?

Enhanced understanding and involvement

The proliferation and fragmentation of media facilitated by digital technologies has vastly increased the number and range of potential touchpoints that can exist between a consumer and a brand. What's more, as our understanding of consumers continues to develop, we know that their moods and mindset vary through the day, and in relation to different types of media and occasions of exposure to them.

We have begun to accept, too, that the role of emotion in the way people relate to brands has a crucial effect on their willingness to consider them, and their eventual decisions to buy.

If we, as marketers or agency people, can successfully integrate this developing knowledge and understanding, we will - at least - have a better chance of developing tailored approaches, through a variety of media, that can successfully involve people with our brands, and ensure that they are both relevant and accessible when the consumer wishes to make a purchase.

As Dominic Finney makes quite clear, the need for this kind of sensitive and comprehensive understanding of consumers and media means that agencies will have to change both their organisation and their focus - a view amply confirmed by the recently published IPA-Future Foundation study of the agency of the future, which emphasises the probable decline in traditional advertising and the continuing growth of both consumer-generated (word of mouth, and so on) and 'editorial-style' communications, with a consequent need for agencies of all kinds to re-think their approach to their business.

Clearly, the developing groundswell of interactivity is an important constituent of the changes that will have to occur. As the IPA report says, 'It is increasingly difficult to see any gap between contemporary advertising and contemporary direct marketing activity.'

Or, in other words, the future's bright, the future's interactive. •



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Interactivity is as old as Gutenberg - it's just never had a voice before

In this article, Jeremy Bullmore argues that the internet has not changed mass communication quite so drastically as everyone seems to think. It is true that it gives audiences a voice for the first time: transmission is no longer one way only, from a very few to the many. But it was never true that 'the many' were merely passive recipients, an Admass; they always interacted with the message, we just didn't know how. The exception is humour: we know it works if people laugh, and they only do that if they participate in interpreting the message. But all communication works the same way, by making the recipients 'accomplices', using implication to draw people in so that they creatively work out the message.

Jeremy Bullmore, *Market Leader* 35, Winter 2006

Programme involvement and interactive behaviour in interactive television

Interactive television facilitates two-way communication between individual viewers and advertisements embedded in programmes. In this paper we examine how interest in the content of television programmes affects the interactive behaviour of viewers with interactive advertisements that are included in advertising breaks. Our empirical results show that the likelihood of entering interactive behaviour is negatively impacted by the viewer's involvement in the programme, but only after a certain threshold is passed.

Shalom Levy and Israel D. Nebenzahl, *International Journal of Advertising* 25, 3, 2006

Switching on to interaction

Nick McConnell, director of sales and marketing at Broadsystem, outlines the history of interactive TV in the UK, and reports on a survey to investigate who interacts and what motivates them. He concludes that certain audience groups are more likely to participate than others, that prize offers are the most attractive motivators, that the price of participation is not a disincentive, and that there are more opportunities for response advertising. He sees the possibilities as endless.

Nick McConnell, *Admap* 459, March 2005

Wonderful Wasted Web

Stan Rapp, US Editor of *Admap*, sees the World Wide Web as the extraordinary commercial phenomenon of the modern world - yet very few marketers are capitalising the opportunities it offers. Using personal examples he shows how easily web sites can disappoint (and how others can delight). He concludes with ten tips to make your website a memorable and enjoyable experience.

Stan Rapp, *Admap* 467, December 2005