

Who can I trust?

Martin Lee, Acácia Avenue, argues that trust is the key to getting a decision in favour of your brand

EVERYWHERE YOU LOOK in marketing literature these days, people seem gripped by subjects such as word of mouth, advocacy, influencers, social networking, herd decisions, Web 2.0, and só on, ali in the cause of getting a very contemporary fix on consumer decision-making. It seems self-evident that the landscape of making decisions has radically shifted.

Amidst ali this apparently unarguable flux, I am left wondering, paradoxically, whether anything has changed at ali. For sure, the internet has become a great enabler, and it has opened up opportunities for sourcing information and opinion from other consumers, and to some extent brands can be disintermediated in this flow. But, without denying the significance of this, it is ultimately a behavioural phenomenon. At a far deeper level, consumers are still driven by something that's always motivated them: the search for trust.

Of course it is true that there is less intrinsic trust nowadays - this is being continually measured and it's common knowledge that people have less trust in large institutions such as the Church and the government. We also ali know what happens in these cases - fewer people vote or go to church. And brands are not exempt - in a sceptical culture, their trust credentials are under pressure too, and if they fall foul of the public's trust, they can expect people to vote with their feet.

People want to trust

Now, although there is less trust in institutions today, that has not taken away the desire for trust. The issue is, what does trustworthiness look like?

At this point, it is very tempting to dive straight in to the word-of-mouth debate. Só let us fall for temptation; it is much more fun than resisting it. There is a compelling argument that says that if trust in the large brands is dropping, and if word of mouth, and its technological proxy, Web 2.0, is the hot issue for brands to grapple with, then shouldn't we ali be tackling this subject head on? The 'new' marketing challenge must surely be to find ways of harnessing word of mouth and finding

marketing workarounds that incorporate it into the marketing mix?

At the quite deliberate risk of sounding like a grumpy old marketer, this is actually the oldest marketing challenge. Categories that have perennially had lots of product launches and consequently small budgets per launch, such as books, have never really had any other weapon in their armoury. Publishers have known since at least the 1970s, probably earlier, that their best marketing tool was and is the proof copy - print as many pre-publication copies as you can afford on low-quality paper, get them into the hands of influential readers, spend a pitiful amount of money on PR, mostly to make the author feel loved, and then if the book genuinely has potential, let word of mouth take over. Otherwise, save your marketing budget. In the book business, you could always tell if a book was a good candidate for bombing - when it had a significant above-the-line budget.

The reason why this works is easy to understand: it is ali to do with the intrinsic quality of the product, in this case a book. Publishing history is littered with tales of books with virtually nothing spent on them going on to become monstrous best-sellers, such as *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. But to point out the obvious, note what has happened here from the manufacturing end. The manufacturer (publisher) has literally got its product out there - the acid test. There is an unimpeachable integrity to the marketing. What it has not done is to catalyse a word-of-mouth campaign through online buzz alone.

Suspicious

Moving away from the example of books, it is fascinating to notice that consumers are already starting to get suspicious of apparent word-of-mouth phenomena. To give one solid example from our own work, we noticed in the travel category in late 2005 and early 2006, that consumers were waking up to the empowering option of not having to take on trust the claims of tour operators or high-street travel agents with regard to hotels and holiday destinations. Brands such as Trip

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Advisor were continually name-checked as independent sources of information, where you could read reviews from travellers with nothing to sell and no axe to grind.

Yet in 2007, a scant 18 months on, consumers in the travel category aren't nearly so trusting. They have already lost their Web 2.0 innocence. They are telling us they have significant authorship doubts concerning these reviews. They are hearing stories about commercial deals being done behind the scenes on review sites. Although they are still taking note of sites such as Trip Advisor (and there is no suggestion that Trip Advisor is known to be doing this, simply that ali review sites are guilty by association), they are already learning to read reviews with a more careful filter, trying to second-guess how much like themselves the writer is, and whether there is any possibility that this person might be a professional.

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We were so intrigued by this that we convened a project of our own this summer to understand trust online in more detail. The clear message from consumers is that they have definitively moved beyond placing explicit trust in the wisdom of the masses and are now weighing everything in the balance of their own experience of life. The biggest example of their scepticism in the wider world of the internet is Google, which are often mentioned as having lost a position of trust because leading positions in searches are widely believed to be purchased. Again, perception is all, and the impression of an erosion of trust in one site affects everyone.

So, before moving on from online trust, the advice about Web 2.0 is clear - brands should resist the temptation to exploit new online techniques to replicate word of mouth, if the source of that word of mouth comes from inside the company. Consumers will smoke you out, and even if there is a short-term tactical win, the risk is a long-term reputational loss that will not be worth it.

So back to trust. I said earlier that consumers still demonstrate the same desire for trust, even though actually trusting is harder than it once was. Another important insight follows from this. In many categories, particularly big-ticket categories, consumers feel they owe it to themselves to do research and information-hunting before they commit to a purchase decision. Whenever this is the case, the planning, learning, reading and advice phase can be very elongated, and often inconclusive. And yet the moment of decision, when it finally comes, can be swift and decisive.

Most-trusted source

In close analysis of that moment of decision, what becomes clear is not that people have suddenly learnt the killer fact they did not have before, but that they have just found their most-trusted source. Often, what they apparently learn at that moment, they already knew - some specification or functional feature - but finally they have heard it from a source they resolutely believe.

Of course, it is worth recording here that that source can very often be a personal testimony from a friend, colleague or family member, in other words our good friend word of mouth. And yes, of course, where this is available to someone, it is still the most powerful influence and trusted source of all.

But while acknowledging genuine word of mouth, we also have to recognise that, for marketers, it is a source of influence that is hard for them to harness to their cause, other than through the literal excellence of their product or service, which makes it worth recommending in the first place.

However, this does not have to be a cause of despair for brands, because there is no earthly reason why they shouldn't be the most-trusted source. I am not going to apologise for repeating this point yet again: let us not forget the all-important desire to trust. If you are sceptical about this, here is one practical reason why people want to trust brands - it shortens decision-making. It is not just brands that lose out when trust goes; consumers lose too. They feel a personal burden of information-gathering, go backwards and forwards to the same sources and often do not come to a decision at all. Do not be tempted to think this is just symptomatic of more choice. As I said previously, once a trusted source is found, the purchase decision can often be immediate.

Generosity, transparency, wisdom

So how should a brand behave to achieve this holy grail position of being the most-trusted source? Well, it is so embarrassingly simple to describe that it feels anti-climactic, but then, if it was easy to do, everyone would be doing it. In essence, it is about taking a leaf out of the book of the human beings that we as people emphatically trust. If we think of the characteristics of the people we most trust, we would come up with a set of words that in some weight of combination would include, say, generosity, transparency and wisdom. Doubtless others too, but that is plenty to be going on with.

Generosity is a value that a lot of brands espouse, so this will not feel like a surprise, and may feel doable. And it is, and nor is it the preserve of touchy-feely brands. Half an hour before writing this, a woman at my credit card's call centre waived my interest for the month without having to go through any levels of command and even though I was at fault for missing the due date. Guess what is going to happen when I get the next offer for zero balance transfers or some other inducement? Straight in the bin, because their generosity to me has, in the nicest possible way, put an onus onto me. I would have to be pretty wretched to not respond in kind with some reciprocal commitment to them.

Transparency is about not having hidden agendas, and this is more difficult for many brands because in large companies a gap often opens up between the brand and the business that sits behind it. Many businesses seem keen to pretend that customer service is the main reason they are in business, and it leaks through to customers as unbelievable cliché, which at best washes over customers as so many empty words, but at worst is profoundly alienating. For instance, I would have so much more trust in a pilot who said as part of his welcoming remarks that 'My safety is my greatest concern.' That's the pilot I want to fly with - the one with a relentless and single-minded interest in self-preservation, not one who reads from a script that he's more interested in me. Imagine how that would change the trust dynamics of that tired old discourse.

Even back in the everyday world of consumer transactions, we respond to brands that are clear about the fact that they are in business to make money. That is something we can trust. As we all say about people who have no hidden agendas, we know where we stand. Let us not forget that loyal customers are committed to the idea that businesses they like make money - if they do not, they will go out of business, and that is the last thing they want. Of course, transparency does not have to be aggressively done; there are ways of using tone of voice to be grown up and sophisticated at the same time as >

being honest. First Direct has shown how this can be done for years.

As for wisdom, this is a human value that's very hard for brands to match, because wisdom in a person normally has a reach across a huge breadth of experience, and even great brands tend to be locked inside the limits of their own category. But a brand like John Lewis approaches wisdom. It gives off an aura of being calm, experienced, knowing what is going on, and knowing how to react. Customers would never expect that a reverse in their trading conditions would induce panic, and in this way, the quality of wisdom in a brand is a gold standard of trust.

Warmth

We could go on - qualities like consistency and authority have obvious roles to play in trustworthiness too. But to summarise, the characteristics of brand trust are not just a list, they add up to something, and that something is the same feeling we have towards people we trust - one of warmth. Warmth is more of a take-out than a characteristic, but it is how people feel towards brands (and people) that they trust.

Brands that I feel warm to do not have to work hard to get my attention. I know where they are coming from, they have a point of view that is interesting, a reassuring depth, and we are in a reciprocal relationship where they are generous to me, and I may well be generous to them, for instance by not abandoning them if they let me down sometimes, as they almost certainly will.

And to finish with a current live example of exactly this phenomenon, think of Cadbury's. Cadbury's is a brand that has long understood brand warmth. Unlike my credit card, it does not normally have the opportunity for human interactions with which to demonstrate generosity, but its recently famous gorilla advert is an ad that has generated so much shared pleasure that it is precisely an example of generosity of spirit from the Cadbury brand. It transcends Cadbury's and has become a public property. But that's fine for Cadbury's - it is almost impossible to see the ad without feeling warmth to the brand. And this from a brand whose trust credentials at the functional product level were at rock bottom only a few months previously. Like any brand that people want to trust, it can survive disaster by behaving in ways that remind us why we trusted it in the first place, and move on to deepen its relationship with its customers. ■

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