

# Advertising audiences: wolves in sheep's clothing

Are we advertising to the herd or the pack? Asks Sarah Morning, Agency Republic

**S**INCE MARK EARLS' groundbreaking paper *Advertising to the Herd*, in 2003, the ad industry has come to accept that humans are a group species; a theory borne out by the way in which the web is evolving from a basic information system to a complex social network.

In his paper, Earls asserted that humans have an innate herding instinct; that as individuals we gravitate towards behaviours dictated by the wider group, following the crowd as it were. It is why we walk into a crowded restaurant rather than an empty one, or choose Coke over Pepsi despite any personal taste preference for the latter. There is much evidence that this latent desire to herd is as strong in our online environment as it is offline.

An experiment by Duncan Watts in 2007 presents a clear case: 14,000 participants were asked to listen to, rate and (if they chose) download songs by unknown artists from a website called Music Lab. While some participants saw only the names of the songs and artists, others saw how many times the songs had been downloaded by previous participants. Sure enough, our herd instincts shone through: when people had seen what others had downloaded, Watts found that the most popular songs were much more popular (and the least popular songs less popular) than in the independent condition. Classic cyber-cattle behaviour.

The networked generation, unsurprisingly, behave as a group. We follow the movements of the herd, as Earls predicted. Applications like Twitter and Flock (an internet browser that aggregates friends' feeds from a range of social networks) keep us updated with every stutter and twitch from the rest of the herd. We are primed, constantly monitoring and observing, looking for any beginnings of a group movement among the smaller sways and meanderings of the flock. It is no wonder that advertisers have tried to tap into this by introducing applications like Facebook's ill-fated Beacon-software that updates you on your friends' recent purchases.

But back in 2002, before the emergence of the socialised internet, Cova and Cova warned the marketing community that

online groups should 'be considered with care'. In *Tribal Marketing: The Tribalisation of Society and its Impact on the Conduct of Marketing* they quoted Kozinets, warning that they, like he, considered online consumers 'much more active, participative, resistant, activist, loquacious' than had previously been believed. Active, participative, resistant, activist, loquacious. Are these behavioural descriptors of a herd?



## The behaviour of different groups

Earls was right: we are as an industry now advertising to groups as well as individuals. However, the term he used to frame this insight is perhaps slightly misleading, because herding is not the only behavioural characteristic of a group species. Although the notion of a 'herd' is often used as a generic for group behaviour, it is worth reflecting that different animal collectives behave in distinctly different ways; hence, we have a wide range of terms to describe them: flocks, prides, herds, swarms, packs, to name but a few. The behavioural characteristics associated with each term vary dramatically: whereas herds and flocks primarily group for passive reasons of collective safety (to reduce the danger to each individual) and

are largely herbivores; packs, prides and swarms exhibit much more hostile, active behaviours associated with carnivorous activity, hunting and aggressive defence. Given the connotations of passive submissiveness that the term carries, it is dangerous to assume that we are simply advertising to a herd - not least because our primate ancestry suggests there is more behind our instinct to group than just passive safety.

## The fission-fusion society

Our ancestry tells us that we're not just simple herd animals by nature. Chimpanzee and other primate groups exist as fission-fusion societies: 'a type of social organisation in which individuals regularly form small subgroups for foraging but from time to time also join together in larger groups; the variation in grouping usually depends on the type of food' (Fleagle, 1988). Omnivorous chimpanzees form different types of groups, the behavioural characteristics of the collective formed depending on the type of food sought. Chimpanzees have, at different times, both the herding instinct of herbivores and the pack instinct of carnivores. It has long been known that chimpanzees form highly aggressive hunting packs that chase and kill small monkeys like the Red Colobus, and even brutally attack members of their own pack.

If our ancestral past is anything to go by, it suggests that we don't just have a latent herd instinct, but a pack instinct too. We were, like many primates, both gatherers and hunters; indeed one theory regarding the domestication of the dog argues that it occurred when wolves 'of a suitable temperament joined bands of human hunter-gatherers due to their organisational similarities with wolf packs' (*Wikipedia*).

In *An Army of Davids* Glenn Reynolds argues that advances in technology have allowed ordinary civilians to rediscover this innate instinct, to act as 'a pack, not a herd'. Technology, Reynolds says, gives small groups unprecedented levels of power and influence. It has, as he sees it, broken down the old authoritative notion of society in which citizens are viewed

as herds; the people as sheep and the authorities as shepherds.

### Pack behaviour in the digital world

There is much evidence that Reynolds' hypothesis deserves credence, and that the now hyper-connected digital space allows humans to embrace this active group dynamic. When we consider consumer behaviour in the digital world, it is less that of the passive herd, waiting to be directed and controlled by shepherds and 'horse whisperers' (Earls) and more like an active pack looking for a reason to rally and, often, attack. You need look no further than the blogosphere to find wolf-pack tendencies, our need to establish rank and territory in a new virtual world. Wolves routinely mark particular scent-posts to establish territories and positions within packs. Just like wolf-pack members, bloggers leave marks (written comments) as they wander around their virtual territories. Blog posts function as scent-posts in the virtual world. Like wolves, the more comments we make, and the more places we routinely deposit some trace of our identity, the higher our rank within the blog pack is likely to become.

Many blogs have a 'blogroll' that functions as a list of regularly visited territorial scent-posts - as well as a Technorati 'rank' of the writer's position within this pack. A blogger's territory is well marked for anyone passing through: traces can be found on Facebook, Flickr, del.icio.us, etc. The more dominant, high-ranking bloggers, of course, have the most far-reaching territories. They are the alphas of the pack, in whose trackbacks and trails (for example, 'via blog x') others follow. In terms of territorial ownership and social ranking, bloggers behave like pack animals - something many brands discovered to their cost in the early days of Web 2.0.

It was so-called 'packs' and 'swarms' of bloggers that were responsible for the most savage attacks on brands in recent years. Kryptonite is the most regularly cited example, but there have been plenty of others, including Virgin's experience with the online 'pack' B3TA. Gone are the



days of the solitary letter of complaint against a big brand. The digital world gives us the opportunity to rally together and awaken our pack instinct to hunt and attack collectively. In this new media landscape consumers are not simple herds meandering through a digital wilderness at the mercy of brand whistlers. They are far more active and aggressive, displaying distinctly territorial behaviour. Indeed, recently, further evidence of the power of the pack has been seen with the launch of WikiLeaks, a site designed to expose the lies and weaknesses of governments, multinational corporations, brands and other large organisations: To the user, WikiLeaks will look very much like Wikipedia. Anybody can post to it, anybody can edit it' the site tells us. The collaborative authoring of WikiLeaks fosters the notion of the pack attack in which a group of smaller individuals work together to bring down a much larger animal - like lions attacking a buffalo.

But it's not just bloggers and activists. The same pack mentality appears else-

where in the online world. In popular gang-based games like *Grand Theft Auto*, and within many MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) an aggressive pack-like mentality is a crucial part of success. 'Traditionally, combat with monsters, alone or in groups, is the primary way to earn experience points. The accumulation of wealth (including combat-useful items) is a way to progress in many titles, and this is traditionally best accomplished via combat' (*Wikipedia*). Not only are progression and game success closely linked with combat and attack, but also, more importantly, with *ad hoc* group participation: 'Also traditional in the genre is the eventual demand on players to team up with others to progress at the optimal rate.'

Our ancestral, primate instincts are realised in the digital wilderness. 'Even if players never join a formal group', the description from Wikipedia goes on, 'they are still usually expected to be a part of a small team during game play'. Like chimpanzees, then, from time to time during these games players come together to create temporary packs.

This fission-fusion model is being replicated in e-commerce as well, most notably in China, where consumers form temporary *ad hoc* groups to negotiate bulk discounts. The phenomenon of *tuangou*, or 'team purchase', is growing quickly across the country. Likeminded consumers meet up in real-world shops and showrooms at a specified date and time, mobbing sellers and negotiating a group discount. Crowds group first online on sites like Teambuy, Taobao and Liba. eSwarm is a similar site that brings buyers and sellers together to bulk-buy. Buyers sign up for a free account, then join current groups of buyers known as 'swarms', or create new ones. Sellers then bid for the business, the theory being that the larger the swarm, the more attractive it will be. Like our primitive ancestors, as consumers we too form *ad hoc* groups to make it easier and more efficient to forage and hunt for what we want - an active, pack-like foraging model far removed from the Beacon notion of passive, herde-commerce.



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## Advertising to the pack

Given this, it is no surprise that the brands making most headway into social networking are those that are advertising to packs and swarms rather than individuals, or passive herds. Indeed, much of the most successful online marketing in recent years taps into the fission-fusion social model: campaigns that create not fixed 'brand-communities', but temporary brand groups that amass for a specific purpose and then disperse. The success of such campaigns suggests that consumers, like primates, form temporary packs or forager groups.

Forager groups form when marketers scatter bits of information about products or brands across the web (or a number of different platforms), forcing people to come together to scour, track down and collate what they have. Henry Jenkins described this as Transmedia Storytelling in his book *Convergence Culture*; where old and new media collide, giving us the example of *The Matrix*; a story with pieces scattered across a variety of platforms. Ad hoc groups formed all across the web to pull the scattered pieces together.

Many brands go one stage further, however, laying specific trails and tracks, encouraging the formation of a hunting pack rather than a simple foraging group. Alternative reality games (ARG) have been a phenomenally successful way for brands to do this, providing consumers with a 'prey' to hunt collectively - either as information or a reward. As *Contagious* magazine recently reported, 2007 saw 'the migration of alternate reality games into the mainstream'. A diverse range of clients are beginning to recognise the power of this format: Warner Brothers is currently using an ARG to launch the Batman film *The Dark Knight* and Diageo hid its latest Guinness commercial online, constructing an elaborate treasure hunt until it was unveiled.

The ARG is a highly effective way to stimulate the organic creation of an ad hoc group, tapping into our latent pack instinct. What we see with ARGs is perhaps less the formation of so-called brand-communities than temporary

brand-packs rallied for the hunt, often working together to bring something or someone down. Individuals come together, get what they want through collaborative effort and then disperse.

## The packs within social networks

The mistake many advertisers make is to see social networks as singular group entities. What our ancestry suggests is that we are a fission-fusion society, and that the key to marketing in social networks is about stirring and rallying temporary sub-groups. Recent research by Forrester predicts that 'mass communities such as Facebook will evolve into more selective groups'.

Brands need to provide a reason for sub-groups to exist, to come together and come into being, whether to hunt, forage or, in the case of O<sub>2</sub> and Facebook, to fight. In July last year O<sub>2</sub> created perhaps the most successful foray into social networking space so far. One key reason why it worked so well was that it gave people a reason to rally. It tapped into a primal, pack-like instinct. In October 2007, the brand launched a sponsored group on Facebook dedicated to The Battle for the

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UK's Favourite University'. The group encouraged students to generate 'noise' on behalf of their university by uploading photos and comments. The university with the most Facebook activity at the end of a month won a £50,000 O<sub>2</sub>-branded on-campus party.

In his introduction to *Advertising to the Herd* Earls talks about what he calls the 'sound of the crowd'; the tribal, pack instinct that causes hundreds of thousands of football fans to chant together. An instinct that, he reports, causes those at such games to 'report extraordinary feelings of elation and belonging.' The Facebook set-up from O<sub>2</sub> was encouraging similar behaviour: the more 'noise' a university group made, the more times each individual member appeared on the page, the higher up the rankings they went. The brand was encouraging pack-like howling, a mass group call to action to mark their territory and their dominance over other packs. The page garnered a staggering 63,000 members in just 11 days. Part of its success lay in the fact that it gave a reason for sub-groups within the generic Facebook mass to rally a reason for small university-based groups to come together as packs, to subdue other groups with their howling.

*Advertising to the Herd* was a wake-up call for advertisers about to be faced by Web 2.0. It made us realise that we are increasingly talking to groups, not just individuals; and that human beings are essentially a group species. However, the recent explosion of social networking and the increasing connectivity of the web have changed the nature of the game further: as Cova and Cova warned, online groups are very different from those in the offline world. Their behaviour is active, resistant. If we are learning anything in the digital arena, it is that it may be dangerous to talk simply of herds; because those brands that are succeeding in this space are not those that try to herd, but those that give consumers reasons to rally together as active packs, primed, focused and ready for action.