

The age of 365-day continuous two-way consumer conversations

Now that digital is ubiquitous in our daily affairs, brands must be 'people focused', playing a perpetual and valued role in consumers' lives, says **Niku Banaie** Isobar

WE LIVE IN an increasingly interconnected and networked world. Billions of social interactions are created and made by individuals in their overlapping communities every day. We are moving rapidly to a place where everyone can be connected, through mobile, wireless or fixed access to the internet.

This will have profound effects for business and communication. It will require us to think differently about not only marketing, but also customer service and even the entire company. It means an evolution for brands to find their own, relevant way to exist and play a valued role. It requires a new logic that is people focused and not technologically biased. This will require a different approach to that of traditional campaign planning.

While campaigns have a start and end, connected networks of people can't be turned on and off or have media bought against them. A different approach is required that knows how to get the conversation started, nurtured and amplified. Brands need to be able to participate in, and react to, what emerges. It's a move from 360-degree to 365-day communications.

This approach can live alongside campaigns and help to enhance them. But because it is constant, brand owners need an approach for everyday communication, as well as when they launch more traditional campaigns.

It could be described as a cultural and people-focused phenomenon. Technology has provided us with the tools to satisfy the human need to communicate and connect, and today we are more empowered than ever to exercise that behaviour.

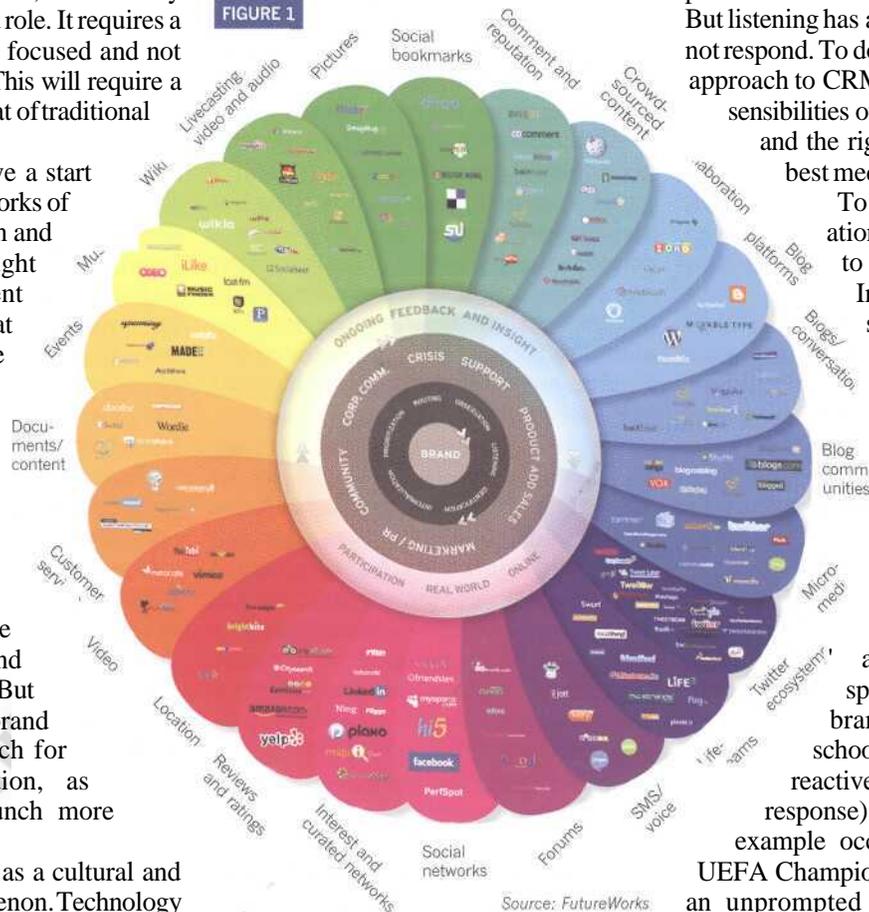
Professor Henry Jenkins, of the comparative media studies programme at MIT, calls this 'participatory culture'. He illustrates a situation where "people consume and produce media together, when they pool their insights and information,

mobilise to promote common interests, and function as grassroots intermediaries". This scenario has implications for how companies should attract and engage customers, create meaning and add value. Consumers are arguably running the biggest recommendation service in the world.

Complexity of conversations

To understand people, their connections and the social web requires new ways of seeing and listening to what's going on in blogs, chats, emails and social networks.

FIGURE 1



Source: FutureWorks

Consumers are talking about products, services and companies, and it is within these conversations that we can find millions of real-time, unfiltered attitudes, behaviours and intentions.

The Conversation Prism (Figure 1), created by Brian Solis and Jesse Thomas of Silicon Valley PR and new media agency FutureWorks, illustrates the many

options within which a company could operate today. When many conversations are happening around a brand, its owner has to know when to engage or not. There are tools that can help in this process, such as the free Google blog search, Attentio trendpedia and Nielsen blogpulse, and the paid-for Cymphony, Attentio and Nielsen Buzzmetrics.

The social media site Twitter has given rise to the 'Twitterverse' - a rapidly expanding world of applications and methods that allow people to listen, capture and plan within the micro-blogging service. But listening has a limited value if you cannot respond. To do this requires a refreshed approach to CRM that is infused with the sensibilities of the best digital agencies and the rigour and analytics of the best media agencies.

To participate in conversations does not mean having to create big initiatives. Instead, the focus is on small or micro-interactions that can leverage key moments and give the brand a relevant role in a particular happening.

The digital teams at Adidas have created a simple way to plan activity for conversations. They define these as planned (identified springboard moments for a brand), anticipated (old-school scenario planning) or reactive (surprising and timely response) opportunities. A recent example occurred during the 2009 UEFA Champions League Final, where an unprompted photograph of Barcelona's Lionel Messi kissing his Adidas F50 boot was rapidly incorporated into the dedicated YouTube channel, www.youtube.com/adidasfootballtv, and into homepage takeovers that had been planned in anticipation of the event.

Another example is the Adidas Originals Facebook community, which has around 1.9 million fans. This community not only keeps people up-to-date with

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Originals events and offers, but is the first place Originals campaigns are launched, as it provides the perfect word-of-mouth fuelled springboard and, critically, is only a few clicks away from the Adidas e-commerce platform.

Adidas is continuously learning how to leverage this space, with positive effects. Other brand owners can also create or find conversations to solve specific problems and deliver value for their own situation, whether for NPD, competitive threats or reputation management.

The insights from consumer conversations may be applied to many functions, including driving corporate strategy. For example, a company can react to early warnings of adverse issues gained through monitoring digital conversations quickly enough to lessen their impacts.

This type of thing doesn't just work for youth brands. For example, Intuit, a firm that makes tax preparation products for tax, accounting and financial professionals, has created an online experience called TaxAlmanac (www.taxalmanac.org). This is a free online tax resource with information sourced from the professional tax community. It is not only a valuable resource, but allows Intuit to keep abreast of the topical issues that professionals are discussing in real-time. To make the most of such opportunities, it is important to understand when and where these conversations are occurring, and how they integrate with other communication channels that we have at our disposal.

Joining the dots

Marketers face three types of media as channels of interaction with their audiences: paid media, owned media, and earned media (Figure 2). We know that, in today's multi-channel, atomised micro-markets, paid media's effect is limited and there is more emphasis than ever on leveraging owned and earned media. What we are learning is that activation in earned media spaces is typically the consequence of other communications that usually, not always, originate in either owned or bought spaces.

US retailer Zappos.com has had success with its approach to activating convers-

FIGURE 2

Owned, bought and earned media



ations between its own and earned media spaces. Its Twitter aggregator service informs people about offers as they happen, but what is most potent is the platform's ability to drive up organic search results.

The *New York Times* turned the experience of reading the paper online into a social one that activates conversations, with a service called Timespeople. It is a plug-in for Firefox that lets you see what your friends are reading and share stories with them across all your personal social platforms. It reveals valuable data that helps you decide what to read.

These examples show an approach to marketing that is very distant from the hard-push tactics of old. The emphasis is on finding, befriending and activating the like-minded for a common cause or good, and for profit. To do this requires an alternative view of planning.

It would seem logical that when we have an almost constant focus group going on in the thousands of conversations happening, we would need to operate with more agility if we are to play a part in them. This would mean working in our usual ways (focus groups, big strategy, big campaigns), but also to work on constant 'micro-initiatives' that have been informed by conversations and to react to them accordingly through fast strategy and creative development. This requires companies to think more like a publisher or the nerve centre at a news station, constantly capturing, digesting and casting their point of view to the world.

This situation requires changes to how marketing and media budgets are allocat-

ed. To operate in the networked model, there is a greater emphasis on content production, community management and creating open APIs than ever before. We used to view the production of campaign assets as around 10%-30% on concept creation and production and the rest on buying media. However, in the new model, the emphasis will move away from the bulk of spend going on media buying, with a greater proportion going on 'media earning' actions. A working scenario like this requires people who can think across big bangs and conversations, avoiding any separation that silos this type of thinking.

The other part of the issue is responsibility. How does a company organise itself in light of conversations, and which department's job is it to undertake the task?

On the social web, 'meaning' is becoming the new powerful currency that connects brands with brand-holders. So whose role is it to create meaning within this space? The internal PR department? The customer services department? The digital agency? The all-new social media agency?

It is whoever has the ability to consistently create social value, not as an afterthought but as a baked-in aspect of the company and brand behaviour. It is whoever has honed the art of finding, befriending, and activating the like-minded for a common cause and for profit. It is those who simply don't put social as a last line on a communications plan.