

# The new audience

Marketers need to reconsider 'the audience', which is no longer passive, ready to absorb brand messages, and is no longer theirs

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Since its earliest days, marketing has prided itself on putting the people who buy the products being marketed (or the 'consumers', as we've got used to calling them) at the heart of its thinking and processes. You could argue that the fundamental point of marketing (as well as its primary contribution to contemporary culture) is the idea of organising business around the needs, wants and desires of the people who buy its goods and services.

Along the way, we've come to rely on certain ideas about these people - how they do what they do, how they make the decisions we seek to influence, the nature of the relationship between us and them, and the importance of the role we play in their lives.

Perhaps marketing's relationship with the people 'formerly known as the audience' now deserves a second look. This article provides a critical look at some of our assumptions in this area and outlines some new rules of thumb for marketers to use in their thinking about 'the audience'.

In recent years, science has encouraged us to rethink much of what we took for granted about the people who make up our audiences. We have learned that thinking is much less important than we imagine in shaping our behaviour. Much of our decision-making is essentially automatic and based on shorthands and heuristics; we often do stuff and make sense of it later. Cognitive behavioural scientists, such as Kahnemann and Tversky, and *Nudge* authors Thaler and Sunstein, have catalogued the cognitive biases that have come from our "lazy brain's" use of shorthands and heuristics for decision-making.

Equally, we've come to understand that we are a fundamentally social species. Our

minds are supremely adapted for a world of others, rather than for independent thought. Our ability to learn from each other (via 'social learning' and the disembodied accumulation of others' knowledge and skills we call 'culture') is now widely seen to be the key mechanism behind the spread of all kinds of phenomena, from the clothes we wear, the music we listen to, and whether we vote or not, to the names we give our children. Many now believe this must therefore also be the key to changing such behaviour.

So far, so good. Marketers of all sorts are starting to benefit from these insights. Nike chose to make a product/service with built-in sociability (rather than try to per-

suade consumers to run through advertising), while the UK Government's Department of Health created the integrated Change for Life programme, built on a thorough review of behaviour-change literature and an array of different tactics.

But this is just the beginning. The next cluster of really exciting insights for marketers to engage with are not about humans and human behaviour at all; they're about our ideas of the audience itself and our assumptions about marketing's relationship with it. Arguably, these have the power to bring about more fundamental change in the practice of marketing and advertising.

A school concert encapsulates much of



Carnivals are a remnant of earlier rituals that have been suppressed, says historian Barbara Ehrenreich

the cluster of ideas around 'the audience'. In every school concert, there are strong environmental cues that the stage should be the focus of attention (raised platform, seats pointing in the same direction); a clear physical demarcation between those performing on stage and the audience (what theatre folk call the 'fourth wall') to signal the difference in the respective roles of performer and audience; and cultural practices which reinforce this delineation by keeping the audience passive and immobile (except for those who don't know any better and clap between movements).

This same lens has served us marketers well for several generations as it reflects the mass media's understanding of the traditional relationship between broadcaster and viewer or listener, and publisher and reader. We see one party as active and exclusively responsible for the creation of content; the other passive and respectful of the content provided for it. We often tacitly refer back to the great events of the golden era of broadcasting, when we think about the idea of 'audience', like the lunar landings and Live Aid, with the population gathering around their TV sets to watch in wonder the scenes beamed to them for their betterment.

Many of the defaults in our thinking remain along these lines. We advertisers still tend to assume that the content we create to market our brands is consumed as avidly as the long-gone television blockbuster; that our brands lie at the centre of the audience's lives; and that ours is the thing that they think about above all.

According to this model, advertising and marketing is something we do to people. We might try to transmit messages to them,

## LEARNING ABOUT THE PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOUR INSIDE THE AUDIENCE

OLD	NEW
Think then do	Do then (sometimes) think
Rational	Emotional
Calculating	Shorthands/heuristics
Independent	Connected/interdependent

persuade them, 'drive' them. All that militaristic vocabulary seems rooted here - targets, campaigns, bursts. We think that marketing and advertising is about us doing things to the audience. Their role is to receive and respond appropriately and promptly.

However compliant the audience might seem to be, this is far from the natural state of affairs. In her wonderful book, *Dancing in the Streets*, cultural historian Barbara Ehrenreich describes how in the late middle ages, the religious and secular authorities of northern Europe set about suppressing the noisy, emotional and *participative* traditions of religious and popular assemblies (the remnants of which we see now only in carnival and football crowds). They set about training a compliant, passive audience, ripe for isolation and heavyweight instruction. It is the latter that is the artificial construction, not the former.

And it's the latter that seems to be coming unravelled by the connective technologies of the era - texting, emailing, searching, tweeting, Facebooking and so on. Or, as Professor Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody*, points out, what the audience does as a result of adopting these emergent

technologies is turning the clock back.

The more we see each other, the more likely we are to respond to what each other is doing, thinking or feeling. This is why the Ancient Greeks built their theatres in such a way that each audience member could see, hear and feel the others too. Given half a chance, what we do is copy those around us and their behaviour, thoughts and feelings. Perhaps partly, at least, because our genetic inheritance is of a social creature, we do this with alacrity but without being aware of it.

But here's the rub: the more we're able to follow each other, the less of a role there is for any authoritative source, like a brand, government or expert; and that really changes the role of audience.

One way of thinking about this is the ubiquity in the modern world of what is known in tech circles as 'the backchannel'; that is, the ability of audience members to communicate freely and openly with each other, rather than being locked into a primary relationship with you, the marketer. Imagine you are giving a speech into a kind of conference room. Behind you is a big screen with your PowerPoint charts displaying the wisdom you have to transmit to the poor souls who sit in front of you.

But imagine that alongside your beautiful charts on the big screen there also starts to appear a live stream of comments and messages (from say, Twitter) from audience members present (and not present) discussing with each other their reactions to what you are saying and how you say it - linking it clearly to other conversations and points of view. This is the backchannel and, in the modern world, one way or another, it is always on. Members of the audience are always able to

" You see, the more we see each other, the more likely we are to respond to what each other is doing or thinking or feeling, Given half a chance, what we do is copy those around us and their behaviour, thoughts and feelings"

share their experience of you and your brand, their thoughts and feelings *with each other*. Your role as speaker, or leader, is always secondary to that of their conversation, their interaction and their relationship with each other.

This changes the power balance dramatically. Rather than the individual audience member being isolated and tied into a primary relationship with the brand, he/she is now able to take advantage of their peers' knowledge and experience: indeed, they have access to it at all times. The more people are able to see each other, the more they are able to take their lead from each other and thus the less compliant they are to the wishes of authority figures. Just as most of us go to the doctor having Googled our symptoms in advance, so 'consumers' look to each other for guidance before purchase, and pay more attention to people online, who they'll never properly meet, than to the marketing of brands they have used for a lifetime or the opinion of a trained expert.

Not that this is entirely new, but in many ways, this new connective technology is enabling the audience - like the 'sisters' of the song - to 'do it for themselves', more than ever before. While this can lead to sudden and violent swings of popular opinion, it is as natural as breathing. At the same time, these connected individuals expect to participate - perhaps not in the active, noisy way of those adult Lego fans, who are helping the firm's management to lead the business away from bankruptcy; and probably not quite like those early Twitter users, who shaped that social media platform by informally inventing the grammar of 'tweeting' and 're-tweeting', and who have also served to distribute and market the service to their friends.

No, data and experience suggest that only a minority in any given population at any given time are prepared or equipped for this high level of involvement. Yet, almost everyone resists being treated as a simple, passive recipient of content (branded or otherwise) and products and services. Most want to participate in some way, to do so with each other.

Talent shows such as *American Idol* and *X-Factor* are TV formats that, by design, encourage the broader audience to get involved with the programme by interacting with each other.

## HOW THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE AUDIENCE HAS CHANGED

FROM	TO
Passive recipients	Active users
Interested in you	Each other
Independent of each other	Socialising with each other

The broadcasters and production companies work hard to amplify this built-in tendency to stimulate participation and interaction. Similarly, more experimental news organisations have made strides to stimulate readers to co-create news content.

This area offers much learning for brand marketers in that it shows how encouraging the members of the audience to do what they want to do with each other is where the real value lies. American film-maker Lance Weiler claims that more than 70% of the value of entertainment content is to be found in the services and conversations co-created around the core of the content itself. It's what the audience members do, say and create (socialise) around the product you make that creates the real value for everyone. Your product and your marketing are primarily of value only in so far as they create an excuse for the audience to 'socialise' around.

## CONCLUSIONS

Next time you find yourself thinking about your audience, please remember this: they're very different from what we've been told - less considered and deliberative and certainly much more influenced by each other than even they'd like to admit. More importantly, they're not really an audience in the way that received wisdom suggests - passive and dependent on what you offer. They're not 'listening' and, to be honest, they're not yours. If they're an audience at all, it's first and foremost for themselves. And therein lies the opportunity for marketers.

