

The psychology of online influence

It is not technology that is important in influencing web users but an innate understanding of our ancestral human nature

By Martin Talks, with Matthew Willcox, *Draftfcb*

Despite the plethora of social channels and our unending releases of more powerful technology, we still have the same basic instincts and brain patterns as our ancestors who emerged from Africa 100,000 years ago.

After all, that's why social media channels are so successful. They fulfill that age-old desire to sit around the campfire and share stories and information. Social media and technology don't change that instinct. They amplify it.

So what should the modern marketer do? Draftfcb has established The Institute of Decision Making, which seeks to understand how to activate instinctual triggers to influence consumer decisions in our clients' favour. Comprised of a team of strategists and planners across multiple offices, we work with academics who are at the forefront of revealing deeper understanding of human decision-making, particularly in the areas of behavioural economics and neuroscience.

Here are a few thoughts from our work:

1 Influence people through their intuitions

We strive desperately to be rational even though our actions are often not rational. Like when I bought the biggest

MacBook Pro I could, even though it weighed a ton and I knew I would have to carry it in and out of work every day. That wasn't a rational decision. But I worked out plenty of reasons why it was a sound investment. Gary Klein, whose research pioneered the field of Naturalistic Decision Making, estimates that 95% of our decision-making is non-rational. Tim Ambler, of the London Business School, believes we decide on purchases on the basis of feeling and then go on to post-rationalise that purchase.

Realising this opens up plenty of marketing opportunities. Influencing people through their instincts - their intuitions - creates an emotional connection with their decisions. So, perhaps, don't give them too many facts and figures upfront. Supply those

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details for them to justify the purchase afterwards.

But it's not just purchase decisions this applies to. Les Binet and Peter Field in their IPA Datamine study of 880 campaigns show that 'emotionally based campaigns are not only likely to produce very large business effects but also produce more of them,

outperforming rational campaigns on every single business measure'.

I am very much a believer in the power of emotion online. It is not a clinical space of 'Is' and 'Os' at all. The rise of social media is testament to this. It appeals to our basic instincts and is an enabler for people to express their feelings. It is emotion, not technology, that continues to be the driver of the social media revolution.

2 Use visual methods of communication to influence

Why is it often a great idea when trying to increase people's confidence in a brand to include video on websites featuring real people? Why do I ask people to submit videos of themselves before interviewing

them in person? Because pre-language, cavemen communicated almost exclusively by body language to convey their thoughts and emotions. It's certainly a learning we have put into good effect for our client, eBay. We have increased trust in the eBay platform by visual imagery, opening up eBay and revealing the faces of real eBay employees

A blue speech bubble graphic with a white outline, set against a blurred background of a city street. The bubble contains the Foursquare logo in a stylized, rounded font. Below the logo, the text 'CHECK IN HERE' is written in large, bold, white capital letters. At the bottom of the bubble, there is a smaller line of text: 'Check in to unlock specials, meet up with friends, and explore what's nearby.' followed by the website 'foursquare.com' and the Twitter handle '@foursquare' in white.

foursquare

**CHECK IN
HERE**

Check in to unlock specials, meet up with
friends, and explore what's nearby.

foursquare.com
@foursquare

who care about your experience. And visual clues don't just stop at body language. This is clearly shown by some of the new social media offerings that are gaining rapidly on the older platforms of Twitter and LinkedIn, and explains why Facebook is enhancing visual aspects of its offering. Pinterest and Instagram are good examples.

Pinterest, in particular, offers a visual experience. The site, which was founded as a closed beta service in March 2010, allows users to post only images - along with a link back to the source or other relevant site for more information. Pinterest is already the third-most popular social media network in the US and is said to generate more sales than Facebook and Twitter put together.

Another one to follow is Instagram. The convergence of mobile and social continues to be a major trend in 2012, and marketers are turning their attention to mobile apps, particularly those such as Instagram that allow users to showcase their creativity, share photos and connect back to social media. Facebook paid \$1 billion for Instagram - the revenue-less, two-year-old, mobile company with 13 employees.

3 Keep it simple
One of the major attractions of the likes of Pinterest is that it's really easy to use. The caveman in us looks to use primitive shortcuts to deal with the complexity of life.

A common theme across the work of Adam Alter, a psychologist at New York University Stern School and Institute collaborator, is understanding the extent to which easily processed content (or cognitive fluency) guides thinking. People instinctually prefer things that are easy to think about to those that are hard. Marketers who focus on simplifying the cognitive process needed to make a decision by delivering 'digestible' solutions can gain competitive advantage in a world of choice.

I have experience with this in the film industry, trying to encourage people to do the right thing and buy movies legally. We created FindAnyFilm.com - a sort of Google of film - that makes it easy for people to find

the film they are looking for. It appeals with the hypothesis that 'easy beats free'. Why go to all the trouble to find and access illegal copies of films when FindAnyFilm.com will tell you how you can watch any film in any format in seconds?

4 Influence people at all points in the customer decision journey

In many ways, digital technologies have made the customer decision journey more complicated. However, they do now offer a myriad of key moments throughout that journey for brands to provide simple nudges.

There is huge potential in location-based services like Foursquare and ShopKick that bring together social, local and mobile communications. Messaging people while out and about, too, can drive direct sales results. Drafftcb ran a campaign in four cities in the US with Del Monte's Kibbles 'n Bits pet food, KMart, MilkPEP and Glade using 'geo-fencing', which allows you to create a perimeter around a retail location or geographic area to send location-specific messages to mobile devices. The success was tangible - nearly 20% of recipients made purchases related to the messages they received.

These technological enablers allow shopping paths to be altered, decisions changed and new motivations introduced.

5 Influence people through those they trust

The people we trust influence our decisions. Historically, we trusted people who were respected in their societies. In modern times, this has been the 'chiefs' in society - the chief executive officer, the chief of staff.

But that respect is being eroded. The 2012 Edelman Trust Barometer showed only 30% of UK respondents found CEOs to be believable spokespeople for their organisation. This represented a 9% plunge from the previous survey in 2011 and compares with a 25% rise in the credibility of 'people like yourself, taking this category up to 60%.

Increasingly, influence needs to be earned. It doesn't come with a job title. So new ways are emerging to understand who is influential

and how to influence the influencers.

There are a range of commercial indexes of influence that offer to assist you in finding those influencers; such as Peer Index, KLOUT and KRED. They use data and algorithms to identify the key influencers for your brand in your market.

We tapped into the niche community approach when helping Roche Pharmaceutical get the most out of conferences. By creating a mobile service to enable healthcare professionals to connect and network with their peers, the data released by Roche at these conferences receives a better chance of being understood and, therefore, adopted into medical practice.

6 Quality not quantity

There has always been strength in numbers, but, if brands want to create some sort of stampede effect, they should seek to connect intuitively, rather than just playing a numbers game. For instance, I have found that expressions like 'thousands of people are switching' may be better than 'world's favourite'. Sometimes, even vaguer senses of majority are better: 'many people' or 'our customers' favourite dishes', rather than statistics which lack in emotional appeal.

We do all like to boost our numbers of Facebook fans, LinkedIn connections and Twitter followers. In many ways, this makes sense. But a note of caution. The numbers may not be all they seem. Take Facebook, for instance. The content a brand publishes on Facebook only appears in active fans' newsfeeds. This can be 16% or lower, unless you choose to pay extra to reach the rest with Facebook's new Reach Generator. It's quality not quantity that counts.

There are many ways to up the quality of your numbers. Content is definitely King here. Another way to look at things is not to treat your online databases and social media followings as channels; but to take the customer into the heart of your proposition. This is sometimes called collaborative commerce. Like Best Buy's Twelpforce, getting its shop floor guys to respond to questions on Twitter. Or, My Starbucks Idea, asking for fresh ideas from its customer base,

from new flavours to store locations to technical innovation, such as the in-store kiosks to reduce queues.

7 Test and learn

In recent times, we have heard a lot about the benefit of failure in business. The benefit of learning from our mistakes. But we still fight it like crazy. We desperately try to apply our best common sense - that's common sense right? Or is it?

Duncan Watts in his book *Everything is Obvious: How Common Sense Fails* argues that over-confidence in the power of reasoning often leads to catastrophic and avoidable error. Watts, like Gladwell - the writer of *The Tipping Point*, is interested in unexpected social phenomena. But Watts has a different view. Gladwell likes to tell of dramatic stories in which you can pinpoint the one thing that got a trend started. Watts, however, argues that such triggers are essentially impossible to identify ahead of time and that measure and react strategies are the most effective.

Increasingly, I believe that people are, in many ways, 'predictably irrational', as Dan Ariely, Professor of Psychology and Human Behaviour at Dukes University, puts it. You can influence their behaviour. You just have to understand the irrational beasts that we are. I regularly now put this into practice with a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) approach to online influence. Find out what the real customer problem is, form a hypothesis to answer it and then launch a potential solution as an MVP. By carefully measuring the results, it is possible to iterate the solution - to focus on what is working and cut out what is not. It is a beta approach to marketing. A constant evolution of message, but one rooted in understanding that our caveman instincts have not evolved very much.

My advice to brands, businesses and people is that if you want to have online influence, find your inner caveman and let those primeval instincts guide your actions in plotting social media strategies.