

Crowd control

Crowdsourcing consumer-created content shouldn't mean negative loss of control of your brand. It is up to brands to deliver an experience that elicits a positive social response

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There has been a lot of talk about companies losing control of their brands - being unable to control what their brand stands for, how it is perceived, and the conversations around it. We've heard that the ubiquity of information, the power and authority of social networks has tipped 'control' over to the consumer.

Search engines and personal networks have become more effective at filtering out what's relevant and trusted. Chances are a search engine like Google or your own personal network on Facebook is probably your first stop when searching for information on a brand, company, or product - not the website of the brand itself. But it's the quality, content, and nature of the conversation that's going on about a brand in those networks that drives what a brand is perceived as and stands for.

There are great examples of crowdsourced, consumer-created, experience-based content that helps other consumers to shape perceptions of a brand one way or another. Content like this travels so quickly, is shared so widely, and has the

power to form perceptions as it does because it's all based on true experience.

Netflix found out the hard way. It grew grassroots brand ambassadors that adored the company for its ease of use, efficiency and low cost model. When the company changed course and not only raised prices but proposed spinning off the DVD portion of the business, customers revolted. Netflix listened to their loyal base and reverted to the old model, albeit with the price increase.

An example of content that helps other consumers to shape perceptions of a brand is the 'United Airlines Breaks Guitars' video, where a customer sings about his broken guitar and which has received 11,047,837 views as of this writing. Content like this travels so quickly, is shared so widely, and has the power to form perception like it does because it's based on a true experience. Put another way, it's what you do, not what you say. Consumers are simply holding brands to account. They're amplifying the experience that brands are giving them. Companies still have control of the experience they deliver. And investments like advertising and PR are going to be effective only when they don't run counter to that amplified experience.

Is your brand set up to succeed? Here are six things to examine:

1 Are you leading with experiences?

Unless you're already going to market with a superior and consistent experience and are confident in your ability to deliver, measure, and manage it, you're wasting your money.

2 Are the experiences you create designed to amplify?

Harnessing the moments created by brands is as important as creating the experience itself. Using social media to tell the world about what you are doing is great, but don't stop at Facebook and Twitter. Is your brand present in the forums it needs to be in to influence and shape conversations important to your customers and industry?

Where social amplification is concerned,

your point-of-view as a company is more credible, interesting, and amplifiable than your marketing message. Nokia is a good example. Nokia has a strong point-of-view on human-led design that it applies to its phones' form factor and user interfaces. Perhaps more importantly though, its leaders, designers and futurologists are frequent speakers, commentators, contributors to a broader conversation that's happening in the technology and design world about what human-led design should, and will be, in the future. They're more than just makers of hardware - when Nokia speaks, technology and design leaders across the world take notice - they listen, they amplify, they influence. And that's more effective and powerful than the most well-placed paid messages.

3 Does your brand genuinely add to its context?

Successful brands contribute to and become a necessary part of the user's life, no matter the context they're put in. Apple brings together entertainment, information, utility, and design to create an additive experience. The Virgin brand consistently adds a great measure of style and entertainment to ordinary things through consistent experience and attention - travel, communications - even the Virgin Wine offering somehow manages to turn a plain-Jane mail-order wine club into a two-way, participatory, satisfying, cheeky and seductive experience with its unique voice and take on curation, education, interactive selection, and customer service. Both those brands simply earn their places with their users.

Your brand may not be a lifestyle icon, but it still has to earn its place at the table. Think of all the places and instances your brand and its target come into contact - your sales or retail channels. Customer service, events or concerts you sponsor or where you have a presence. Your online and mobile offering. What exactly is your brand adding - why does it have a right and purpose to be there? What's the usefulness, the utility, the reason for your brand and not another? If you can't



answer that question, chances are your brand is just part of the noise and your money is best put somewhere else.

4 Are your experiences true to what you stand for?

Here's the acid test: if when you remove your brand name from a brand experience and insert your competitor or any other brand, does the experience work for them? If so, you're not translating what is special and differentiating about your brand into real experience. Experiences aren't skin deep. Doing them right is about more than just following brand and communications guidelines, or giving a list of attributes cursory environmental and tonal references. Bringing a brand to customers through real interaction means weaving your brand's story throughout the experience in such a way that it can't be divorced from the story a customer will take away and amplify.

5 Are you organised for success?

If you're like most, your organisation is not set up to manage a brand in a world where actual experience is faster-amplified than paid media. Your internal structure is a good sign of how likely you are to succeed. Is 'brand' separate from marketing? Are internal employee communications separated from external communications? Who does customer

service report into? Do many different officers/executives each 'own' part of the experience? If you answer 'yes' to any of these, beware.

6 Do you have the right people?

Even if your organisation is set up to manage end-experience (and not just communicate), you may not have the right people in place. Most brand management organisations are full of people with communications heritage and background, unaccustomed to looking at a brand outside of the lens of messaging, tone, positioning, attributes and other tools that communicators and agencies have created for themselves over decades.

As companies shift to focus on experience, often these same people are slotted into roles with new, broader responsibility. Brand is brand, right?

The chances are someone who has built their skillset exclusively around writing communications copy, managing advertising agencies, and worrying more about how the campaign looks than whether the product and experience are up to snuff, are not the right leaders for brands today.

These skillsets are fine for a paid media-led world, but they simply don't make sense in a paradigm led by experience. They probably lack the credibility and internal networks, and, in many cases, the technical

and operational skill to inform and influence the real delivery of experience inside your organisation.

New brand leadership will have to have much more of a grounding in real experience, have a comfort in speaking to experience through the lens of both brand and business strategy, understand the nasty realities of experience design and delivery, and have the ability (and experience) in converting design to reality.

Brands that will thrive in crowdsourcing will hold their consumer experiences to account - guiding, managing, and expecting to the same level scrutiny and precision as would be given to advertising, public relations, media, or any other critical investment or activity.

It's easy to assume that, because consumers have access to social networks, brands will somehow lose control of message and perception.

The truth is, brands have unlimited possibilities to live up to their brand promise, thereby creating a community in which consumers evangelise the brand. These new opportunities are readily available to the brands that are willing to execute in the new reality of consumer control.