4 & 20 Blog Posts

http://gregverdino.com

24 conversational marketing and social media posts from the past 24 months on the gregverdino.com blog. **greg verdino**

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Introduction

Two years can feel like a lifetime or they can fly by in a flash. When it comes to blogging, they can do both at the same time.

In October 2006, while heading emerging channels at Digitas, I began blogging because I believed that if I was going to advise clients about social media I I needed hands-on experience actually *doing* social media. I still believe this, but I'd be lying if I said that I ever believed that *my* blog would attract much of an audience. Yet, two years (and many personal work and life changes) later gregverdino.com is still going strong. It attracts thousands of readers per month, has become a mainstay of *The Viral Garden's Top 25 Social Media & Marketing Blogs*, occasionally flirts with Technorati's Top 10,000 blogs, and has found its way onto countless other lists including the *Advertising Age Power 150* and *Junta42's Top 42 Content Marketing Blogs*. Most importantly, it has allowed me to meet and connect personally with hundreds of smart, motivated, passionate and likeminded marketers. Not bad for a website that started as little more than a small, personal experiment in walking the talk.

This eBook, **4 & 20 Blog Posts**, commemorates my first two years of blogging by presenting 24 posts written and published between October 06 and Oct 08. I think it's a good way for new readers to discover older content and longtime readers to revisit some of my work. Besides, *not everyone reads blogs* – so if even a few blog readers email copies to marketing buddies who might benefit from the ideas presented on these pages... well, that would be pretty cool. You can debate whether or not these are my best posts, but I do think that they represent some of my recurring themes, constant hot buttons, passions and interests. In some ways, they show how my thinking has evolved over the past two years. In other ways, they prove that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

These posts appear unedited, and include all of the orginal links so feel free to click around if you're reading this on an internet-connected computer. If they ran with errors and typos online, you'll see the same errors and typos here. If I referenced a company then that no longer exists now, so be it. Each post marks a point in time and some may feel dated. But, in the end, I hope they still contain some interesting, useful, accurate or challenging ideas, commentary and points-of-view. If not, well, *at least it's all free...*

If you like what you see here, I'd encourage you to seek out the original posts at my blog and peruse the reader comments. They are often smarter than whatever I have to say, and are well worth your time and attention. As always, I encourage you to reach out and let me know your thoughts – check my bio at the end of this eBook for plenty of ways to connect.
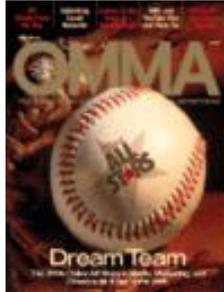
Enjoy.

Don't Let Ads Kill the Video Star

October 05, 2006
(originally appeared in OMMA Magazine)

I'm writing this column in August, which means that while many of my colleagues take well-deserved vacations, I'm at work thinking about video. Sad, I know, but I'm not the only one. Each day brings news from mainstream media stalwarts and user-generated video upstarts. Viacom and Google joined forces on a deal for the syndication of ad-supported video to sites in Google's AdSense network. This came on the heels of NBC's alliance with YouTube; the network uses the social video portal to distribute clips and solicit consumer-created promos for its programs.

Neither move is surprising given the traction video-sharing has achieved. As I write, sites that feature consumer-generated video -- YouTube, MySpace, and Google Video -- top the Nielsen/NetRatings video ranker, while the more "programmed" video offerings from AOL and msn reveal audience declines. The broadcast networks' own destinations don't even crack the top tier. Clearly, many mainstream media companies now realize that to remain relevant in the new age of *networked* television they must realize that given a choice, people often choose amateur content of their own making over professional network fare.

Media people seem to get it, but advertisers aren't there yet. Media analyst Jack Meyers recently projected 185 percent growth for video spending in 2007, with the online offshoots of offline media benefiting most. It's great to see video hitting its stride, but if we limit ourselves to the tried and true, we might miss our chance to innovate within the new world of consumer video.

Sure, embracing user-generated video can be a risky move. Readers are no doubt familiar with the Chevy Tahoe campaign, an example of consumer-created video gone wrong. But for every Tahoe, there is an American Express 15-Second Clips Competition. The Digitas campaign leveraged AmEx's Tribeca Film Festival sponsorship to launch a user-generated video competition that engaged cardmembers, drove increases in site traffic, and generated some truly compelling videos.

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In August, sensing advertisers' discomfort and looking to monetize its traffic, YouTube announced that brands can build their own channels where they can offer proprietary content, solicit user interaction, and promote products and services. Warner Music christened the service with a channel promoting Paris Hilton's debut CD. The notion of marketer-friendly safe zones seems like a fair compromise. You are in the community but not really of the community. But while Paris might do well, will video enthusiasts flock to your toothpaste, automobile, or credit card channel? Not necessarily.

In a recent meeting with YouTube founders Chad Hurley and Steve Chen, Digitas' creative chief Mark Beeching advised YouTube not to pander to the advertising industry. He's right. The brand channel seems designed to appease those of us who might otherwise be afraid to step outside our comfort zone. But this shouldn't be about placing ads, pushing out messages, or building walled gardens within video-sharing sites.

Any video-sharing site's real value isn't in its technology or content. It's in the passionate, engaged people that, if activated properly, represent not merely an audience for ad messages, but a large, vocal community of willing co-creators who use video to share their own stories and can help us tell ours, maybe even better than we can ourselves.

With or without us, people are already creating content about our clients' products, and other people are watching it. The smartest thing we can do as marketers is to inspire and empower these influential amateur video creators to help us tell and distribute our stories in ways that are organic and more in sync with the spirit of the new social video age.

What will this look like? I don't know, but I'm excited to figure it out.

Let's Define the Word "Pull"

January 19, 2007

If **"the consumer is now in control"** is the most often cited truism in new marketing, then **"marketers need to shift from push to pull"** is surely a close runner-up.

True enough, but here's the rub. I've heard more than a few people in our industry elaborate on this statement by explaining that, "marketing used to be about pushing messages out to consumers, but now it's about pulling consumers to the brand." Um, ok but no.

Pull is not about pulling consumers in; it's about giving consumers a reason to pull **_us_** in. Remember truism #1 - **_they're_** in control; **_they_** (not we) decide where they go and what they experience. We've lost the right to pull consumers anywhere (if we ever really had that right at all.)

Pulling consumers toward our brands is really just the desired result of push marketing - we interrupt consumers as they go about their business and hope to redirect (or pull) them into some kind of brand experience. It's still old marketing.

Pull means that we to go to them, join their communities, give them reasons to voluntarily draw us into their personal media experiences. We're not interrupting them. They're opting into us.

So next time someone asks you about the shift from push to pull, remember that "push marketing" is what old marketers did, **"pull marketing" is what new consumers do.** Different? Yes. But this is how the game is played today.

Does Your Ad Agency Advertise?

January 29, 2007

Most don't. Sure, occasionally a shop will buy a page or two in an [industry](#) [magazine](#) to celebrate a new business win or to thank a long term client for its business -- but this is by no means the norm. Instead, agencies typically rely on word of mouth, client referrals or simply their good reputation to garner attention, gain consideration from potential clients and ultimately earn new business.

For the most part, ad agencies let their work speak for itself. They thrive on buzz. They might use PR to prime the pump, but actually running ads for their services? Probably not.

But does your ad agency still sell [advertising](#) *to you***?** I mean old school run-it-on-[TV](#), stick-it-in-[banners](#), put-it-on-the-[radio](#)-in-[newspapers](#)-in-[magazines](#)-or-on-[billboards](#) advertising? **Shove-it-in-the-cracks-between-the-content-people-really-want advertising?**

Probably. And are you content to buy it from them?

What does your ad agency know that you don't?

Be the Content

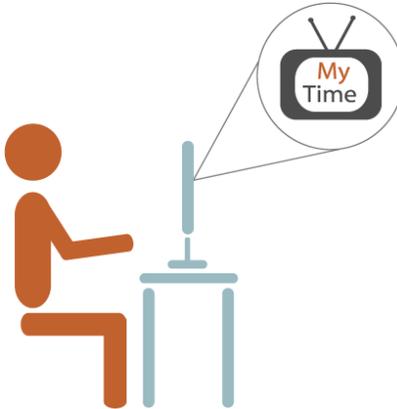February 1, 2007
(originally appeared in OMMA Magazine)

Image: David Armano (darmano.typead.com)

There's an old advertising joke that goes like this: "The answer is a 30-second spot. Now, what's the question?" It shines a harsh light on the fact that in the world of traditional advertising the television spot has become the automatic "correct answer" for brands looking to deliver a message to the masses, whether or not it really is the right tool for the job.

Today, as the consumer exerts more control over her consumption of media, as primetime gives way to "my time" and as technology empowers more people to make the shift from content consumer to content creator, the effectiveness of traditional, interruption advertising has been called into question. In the age of broadband, TiVo, YouTube and MySpace, it's no longer so clear that interrupting viewers as they watch the Thursday night lineup is the best way to engage a marketplace. I'm not suggesting that television advertising is dead – of course, it isn't – but it does feel like we're headed down a slippery slope.

And at the bottom of that slope, we find the Internet - the place where, as Joseph Jaffe predicted in his 2005 book Life After the 30-Second Spot, the television commercial would make its resurgence. We are in the midst of a broadband video revolution, yet advertisers still cling to the 30-second spot, in the form of pre-roll ads.

In fact, if online marketing has its version of that old advertising joke, it probably goes something like this: "What's the right length for a pre-roll ad? You're asking the wrong question." But this joke isn't so funny. The debate over the right length for a pre-roll spot

has been going on for well over a year and the truth is that pre-roll is not the right way for marketers to make the most of soaring consumer adoption of online video.

If online video is going to grow into the $2.9 billion channel that eMarketer forecasts it will be by 2010, it will get there not on the back of interruption advertising, but as a result of innovative marketing approaches that are custom-made for the online on-demand world. Instead of debating the right length for an ad unit that isn't right for the medium, the industry should focus its efforts on finding new ways of engaging consumers through the power of sight, sound and motion.

If the question is, "Then what's the right way for marketers to leverage online video?" the correct answer is, "distributed brand content."

First, let's take a look at what I mean by brand content. For decades, advertisers have been filling the cracks between pieces of someone else's content, but with the advent of the DVR and the promise of a million channel universe delivered over a broadband connection, it has never been easier for consumers to skip over those cracks and go directly to the content they wish to see. To me, this calls for a radically different approach. If we want to reach consumers in the on-demand age, we need to stop standing between them and their content and actually *be* the content they want to see.

When it comes to broadband video, advertisers and agencies need to focus their energies on producing content that has sufficient appeal to attract, retain and engage the consumers with whom you hope to build lasting relationships.
With some exceptions, consumers do not want to watch content *about* your brand. But consumers will watch original programming that *supports* your brand, if it is entertaining, informative and provides value. Here's my simple sniff test: if the typical consumer wouldn't consider the video you've created content, then it isn't content.

I called this a radically different approach, but in truth it isn't a new approach at all. When P&G created the soap opera category, they weren't shows about consumer packaged goods. They were bona fide entertainment vehicles that appealed to a large audience of household shopping decision makers. These shows may not have been *about* soap but were so successful at engaging their target audience that they certainly sold a lot of product.

Some progressive marketers have already experimented with brand content creation for the web – Brawny, Audi and BMW come to mind as early innovators. More recently brands as diverse as Budweiser, Diesel, Cadillac and Degree have moved beyond advertising and created leading edge original web video programming. To get web video right, more of our industry's energy needs to be focused in this direction.

Not every agency or advertiser will be equally equipped to create content on their own. Mainstream media companies, independent production companies, the growing

stable of professional web video producers, not to mention consumers themselves can all be good partners for co-production of original programming.

Now, let's move onto distribution. The creation or co-creation of brand content takes us partway down the path, but marketers should not simply present this content on their own destinations. For me, this has been a key flaw of many of the brand content initiatives to date. The web is becoming less destination-oriented and more about broad, open source distribution.

The brand channel simply is not a standalone proposition. Instead, smart marketers will not only focus their effort on creating great video content, they will also look to syndicated portions of that brand content experience to other sites, putting their video on the sites where the viewers already are, rather than simply putting their video where the brand is and hoping to pull in a sizable audience.

Ford Motor Company seems to understand this. Their Bold Moves video blog segments run not only on the vlog itself but have also been distributed on third party broadband sites like ROOtv.

In the world of networked media, though, distribution is not limited to carefully orchestrated syndication deals. Consumer-to-consumer sharing of brand content assets provides marketers with a unique means of engaging consumers, making them our partners in brand storytelling, and gaining additional reach that, quite simply, cannot be bought.

For me, one of this year's biggest online video success stories was the Dove Evolution short film that illustrated the lengths to which marketers go to create idealized images of female beauty. While it is impressive that this two-minute clip garnered over two million (unpaid) views, it is at least as significant that thousands of blogs picked up the video and provided additional social distribution.

As marketers produce brand content, it is critical that they think about these assets outside of the context of a single branded destination and ensure that the content can be widely distributed through both syndication partnerships and social media channels. In the end, the question for any online marketer is, "Would you rather invest your money in creating traditional advertising that consumers skip, or invest that same money in producing and distributing engaging content that they will actually want to see?"

Now, what's your answer?

Are You at War With Your Customers?

March 20, 2007

Do you view marketing as an act of brute force against the consumer? The odds are that your knee-jerk response is, "*no.*" But the language you use when you talk about marketing may indicate otherwise.

Is your marketing-speak peppered with words like **target, campaign, preempt,** and **penetrate**?

This post is not simply about semantics. We choose the language we use for specific, if sometimes sub-conscious, reasons. And when we use the words of warfare to describe our efforts to communicate with and influence people it says something about the way see view our discipline and our role vis a vis the people who buy our products.

Marketing isn't about us *VS* them - it is about us *AND* them. It is not something you do *TO* a person, but rather something you do *FOR* them.

Try this. When you talk about marketing, use words like **partner, service, invite** and **collaborate**. See how quickly your entire marketing approach changes.

The Social Media Disconnect

April 03, 2007

At [Virtual Worlds 2007](#) last week, I was struck by how few agency people were in attendance. The event drew more than 600 attendees -- the metaverse development companies and platform providers were there in full force. So were the pundits, bloggers, technologists and futurists. I saw quite a few brand marketers and media company professionals, as well. But by my informal scan of people's badges (by no means scientific, but certainly directional), I would guess that there were no more than a dozen or so representatives from the big agencies (digital, traditional or otherwise.)

At first, this surprised me. Since the start of the [Second Life](#) press blitz, the agency world has been abuzz with talk of Second Life in particular and the promise and perils of virtual world marketing in general. *Everybody* wants to be the "hero" that champions that "killer" Second Life idea and gets a client to bite. But most don't really know how to make that happen.

At Virtual Worlds 2007, the first business conference devoted entirely to this hot topic, I had the opportunity to hear from (and speak with) many of the thought leaders who are shaping the space and charting the future of 3D internet. Just listening to these people provides some much needed perspective on the right (and wrong) ways to think about entering the virtual world -- as well as key insights into why traditional marketing approaches tend not to work. *And I was one of just a handful of agency people at the show. What a lost opportunity!*

But when I took some time to think about it, I realized that this disconnect is by no means specific to virtual worlds. I speak with marketing professionals every day (both client and agency side) who are defining social media strategies but are not themselves active users of social media services, much less students of them. They market on blogs, but aren't themselves bloggers (or even regular blog readers.) They define strategies for social networking but don't themselves use social networking sites like [MySpace](#) or [Facebook](#). Of course they are burning to "do something" in Second Life but often haven't even gone through the registration process (if they have, many

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more don't make it past Orientation Island.) And never mind newer social services like [Twitter](#) and [Tumblr](#) -- they've never even heard of them (but as soon as they do, they'll want to find ways to tap those tools for marketing purposes too.)

Yet, when all is said and done, they don't understand why their social media campaigns didn't work...

The rules are different here than they are in traditional media -- and you can't learn those rules by lurking around on the outside. I'm probably preaching to the converted (if you're reading this blog, you're probably of like mind) but it is pretty obvious that we're in the minority. Lots of people talk the talk; I don't see nearly as many walking the walk.

My point isn't that I know more than they do. Maybe I do, maybe I don't. My point is that everyone in this business owes it to themselves (not to mention their clients) to experience social media firsthand. It is only by rolling up your sleeves and getting involved with these channels as a consumer (even as a power user) that you can truly understand how to leverage them (and tap the active communities that use them) for marketing. You can't be a passionate user of *everything* (who has time for that?) but I firmly believe that you do need to at least try any new form of media that you plan to recommend to your clients. The list of services I've tried is as long as my arm -- I haven't loved every one of them but at least I can look my clients in the eyes and give them my personal perspectives on them all.

Do You Make Your Customers Uncomfortable?

April 27, 2007

I bought a suitcase at Target. As the cashier rang me up, she asked me to unzip the case and proceeded to check not only the main compartment, but also each and every zippered pocket, to make sure that I wasn't hiding shoplifted items in the luggage I was buying.

I realize that shoplifting is a very real problem for retailers, that Target is simply protecting its financial interests and, on paper, the "checkout search" seems like a reasonable preventative measure. But as I stood at the register, with the cashier checking my new bag for other, stolen merchandise -- in plain view of other shoppers -- **I left pretty uncomfortable.** In fact, as I stood there I began to feel like maybe, just maybe, I actually *had* done something wrong and I would now be found out.

This policy seems like a great deterrent, *but at what price?* Am I likely to make another large purchase at Target, knowing that I may be subjected to another similar experience? Maybe, but I'd think twice.

But this post isn't really about Target and their anti-shoplifting measures (after all, they've got a business to run and margin to maintain.) **This experience got me thinking about all the things we do that seem to serve the needs of our businesses but could have unintended impacts on how our customers feel about our brands.**

The sorry truth is that most of us probably do this kind of thing far more often than we realize.

In the real world, it might be the snooty maitre d', a restaurant's "no sharing" policy, the car salesman's frequent trip to "speak with my manager" behind closed doors, the

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pushy cold caller, the unhelpful customer service rep. It's charging customers who are already paying a fair (or more than fair) price for your services for extras that could be offered at no charge.

In the digital world, it's the onerous registration form, the lag between online inquiry and email (or phone or snail mail) response, the "fancy" web experience with scant payoff, the annoying flash ad that expands to obscure the content that the site visitor is actually trying to read. It's anything that stands between the consumer and the information/content/experience/product they really want.

None of these things seems especially harmful -- we're exclusive, we're just negotiating to make sure we earn a reasonable profit, we're only trying to do something cool, hey we're busy but we'll get to you when we can -- but that doesn't mean our customers will see things the same way. In fact, they probably won't.

It isn't enough to keep our own business needs in mind, consumer be damned. **It is our obligation to see each and every action through our customers' eyes and do what we can to make them feel comfortable. Comfortable doing business with our companies, supporting our brands, with the product choices they've made.** This new mindset might cause us to rethink some of our current policies and decisions and retooling our efforts may even cost us some money in the near term. But it will help differentiate us from our competition and more than pay for itself over time.

Think about it: **who would you rather do business with? A company that makes you feel good about your choice and yourself? Or a company that makes you uncomfortable about**

Get Off the Scale

May 09, 2007

Is scale (or lack thereof) just an excuse for laziness?

Lack of scale has to be one of the most commonly cited reasons why marketers (and their agencies) don't greenlight emerging media programs in social media, mobile, gaming or even broadband video. On the flipside, the ability to deliver scale is one of the benefits most often cited by media companies (particularly mainstream media companies) when pitching their wares. The logic seems to run that, in order to be worth the time, effort and money, any marketing tactic needs to (1) allow us to reach millions and millions of people, in a short timeframe, with exactly the same execution; and (2) be easy to replicate time and time again.

But **here's the rub** -- people don't love brands or buy stuff because they've achieved (shallow) reach of a large audience. In fact, it's the brands that do just that (and *only that*) that consumers are most likely to [ignore](). Instead, people love brands that make meaningful connections with them as *individuals*. **If scale measures breadth, what are marketers doing to achieve depth?** Our ability to have deep, lengthy, rich engagements with a relatively small audience will ultimately determine our success as marketers. But these types of engagements are hard to come by, difficult to replicate and generally require us to think in terms of growing relationships (real brand relationships rather than simple message exposures) over time (most likely in partnership with influential consumers who will help us spread our message to others) rather than in terms of big hits right now. And that, for many brands and media companies alike, means departing from the tried and true.

It means pursuing innovation, knowing full well that -- even if our innovation delivers results -- we can't do the same thing a second time. It means coming up with new ways of advertising, instead of recycling and repurposing the old formats. It means trying something without the assurances that we're adhering to well-documented best practices and that our success can be measured against established benchmarks. It means doing something that won't "scale" but that *will* allow us to engage a core audience -- be they influentials who will talk up our products or services to other buyers,

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or just committed buyers themselves -- for whom our brands are actually relevant. *Imagine that!*

That might be pretty scary to some -- and **it's not easy.** To succeed in this environment, we need to stay on our toes, commit to trying new things all the time, acknowledge that something that works today for one audience on one media property simply won't work tomorrow for a different audience across a wide range of other sites. **But to the smartest marketers among us, it's exciting and ripe with promise.**

Are You a Giver? Probably Not.

May 23, 2007
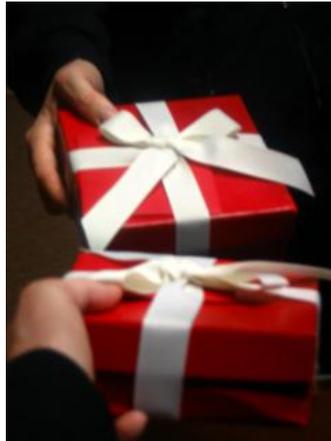
Earlier this week, Mack Collier read big business the riot act for missing the boat with social media. The key benefit of social media, he argued, is not that it provides us with yet another channel for messaging, promotion and sales, but that it gives us a way to bring the voice of the customer into the corporation. In other words, we might feel the urge to talk but we have much more to gain by listening.

I agree with Mack, but think that there's more to the story.

Listening to the community is vital. So is taking what you learn and using it to change the way you do business. And all of this certainly plays into the shift of power from the marketer to the consumer. But more often than not listening still benefits the company far more than it benefits the individuals who do the talking. We're still taking; we're just taking *something else*.

Sure, some people may simply want the opportunity to be heard and, if a company uses consumer feedback to improve its products or services, of course there is some benefit delivered back to the people. But I believe that brands need to deliver more value than that -- and nowhere is this more evident than in social media circles where consumer control is most prevalent.

For me, the bottom line is this -- in order to succeed in social media, marketers need to give more than they get. In the new world of marketing, where we can tap into the collective knowledge of consumer communities, an open ear isn't enough. **We need to be prepared to deliver *at least* as much value as we extract -- and more likely deliver *more* value than we extract to justify the time, attention and input that we hope consumers will give us in return.** People have plenty of other places to devote their attention -- and the very fact that they've made the shift from consumer to creator, from passive audience to active participant means that they've already chosen a

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different path than the one mass media and mass marketers might have prescribed. **If we want to regain their attention *and we intend to do it on their turf,* we'd better make it worth their while.**

This is a difficult concept for many marketers because it runs counter to the way our world has always worked. The consumer pays more for our product than it costs us to make it. We ask consumers to willingly offer up their time and attention -- to watch our ads, click our banners, surf our sites -- and repay them with little more than "the chance to buy our stuff." I mean come on -- we hold focus groups in which we garner insights that can materially change our go-to-market strategies and the participants who volunteer their opinions and intellectual capital get a token payment and some cookies.

I think the people who keep us in business deserve more than cookies. **What are your thoughts?**

Social Media: How Much is Too Much?

July 10, 2007

Within the past week, we seem to have finally hit the point at which even social media mavens are beginning to question if all of this is just a bit, well, *too much*. Valeria wrote a great post that poses this very question. So did Jeffro. Ryan questions whether we're now putting too much emphasis on amassing digital "friends" -- another great question given that online friendships and even blog comments are now for sale. Last week Armano announced that he was giving away coveted private beta invites to a non-existent service called BouGie (just to prove that some people will sign up for anything, as long as it's new and invites are in limited supply) and even Jaffe has asked if we social media folk are a bit Fickl.

All of this chatter prompted me to tally the various social media tools that I use personally (to one extent or another) -- the list is daunting:

I blog here, comment on countless others, contribute to the **crayonCast** weekly podcast and need to start making time to contribute to the **crayonville blog** as well.

I keep track of my **MyBlogLog** community, post photos to **Flickr**, slide sets to **Slideshare** and interesting links to **del.icio.us**.

I've signed up for three different "presence" applications -- **Twitter**, **Jaiku** (to which I really just cross-post my blog feed, Twitter tweets and Flickr photos) and now **Pownce**.

For safe measure, I also aggregate blogposts, links, photos and Twitter tweets at a **Tumblr tumbleblog** (and even I don't really know what a tumbleblog really is.)

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Social networks? I'm on **MySpace**, **Facebook** and **LinkedIn** (plus a few others that I know I signed up for but can't quite remember.) I have a **YouTube** account too, but I've never posted any videos.

And don't get me started on virtual worlds. I have two different **Second Life** accounts plus one each in **Kaneva**, **Gaia Online**, **Habbo**, **Cyworld**, **There** and **Virtual MTV**.

Tired yet? Yeah, me too.

I love new technologies and am particularly passionate about the many ways that consumers can connect with one another through social media applications. I will always stand near the front of the line to try out the new "next big thing." It's kinda what I do for a living.

But do "real people" behave this way? Does the typical consumer even know what Twitter is, let alone Jaiku or Pownce? I assume (hope?) that the average web user (meaning someone who doesn't work in this crazy business) isn't nearly as networked as I am. Maybe the average person simply joins a network -- or two or three -- based on where their friends hang out and, rather than constantly scanning the horizon for the next thing to join, actually stays put as long as their friends stick around.

Are social media mavens living inside a bubble of our own making, artificially inflating the impact that most of these nascent technologies are having on the population in general, and ultimately getting our companies and our clients riled up over something that will, over time, turn out to be, well um, nothing?

Of course I don't believe this last bit, not even for a minute. At least not in the macro sense. I firmly believe that social media has fundamentally changed the game and that social computing will become more, not less, important to more and more people over time.

But I also believe that **those of us who are so consumed with "playing the game" do need to remember that the people sitting in the stands don't necessarily look exactly like the guys (and gals) on the field. And maybe they don't want to.**

What do you think? *Weigh in.*

What Did You Expect?

July 15, 2007

I was out to dinner and overheard a woman at another table say, **"This isn't what I expected."** You probably hear this kind of thing a lot -- I know I do -- and you probably find yourself saying it often enough as well. It seems like life hands us plenty of instances when what you *actually get* doesn't live up to the promise of what you *thought -- or even were [led to believe](#) -- you were going to get*.

But here's what occurred to me this time around -- **"this isn't what I expected" could just as easily be a reflection of surprise *and delight*, as it is a reflection of surprise *and disappointment*. It could mean, "This is so much better, so much more, than I expected, "rather than just, "I really expected more."**

There's little accounting for what people themselves will expect -- some people may set the bar unreasonably high, others may set it so low as to avoid frequent disappointment. If you have customers -- or clients, stakeholders, passengers, patients, guests, shoppers, or whatever it is you call the people who buy your stuff -- I'd say that you have the opportunity (not to mention the ability and - I'd argue - the responsibility) to turn disappointment into delight.

Here's a simple formula: **give people a good idea of what they can reasonably expect and then do everything you can to over-deliver against that expectation every time.**

Frank Zappa School of Marketing

July 19, 2007

Either Elvis Costello or Frank Zappa (opinion is split) once said, **"Writing about music is like dancing about architecture."** It's a great quote, no matter who actually said it.

I'd like to add, **"Or like presenting PowerPoints about social media."** None of these things make any sense and, at the end of the day, are pointless exercises. No?

OK - I'm being intentionally provocative to make my point, but bear with me.

Of course, I understand that formal presentations have their place in educating clients and colleagues about new topics and I've certainly presented more than my fair share of slide decks. But when talking about new marketing strategies and channels, don't our most traditional forms of presentation seem a bit (well) old school?

The beauty of social media, of course, is that anyone can do it. And **isn't rolling up your sleeves and giving it a go the best way to understand what social media is all about?** That's why I started blogging in the first place -- so that when I spoke to clients about it, I could speak from personal experience rather than simply regurgitate published stats and some pundit's point of view. In the process, I feel like I've learned more than a few lessons -- how to build and support a community, the importance of commenting on other people's blogs, what types of posts attract readers and what types of posts don't, and more -- that I never could have learned from a book. It's why crayon publishes the weekly crayonCast and why many of you blog, podcast, hang out in Second Life, belong to Facebook, Twitter, Jaiku or Pownce -- to make sure you're eating the dogfood that you're feeding to your clients and colleagues.

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So next time someone asks you to educate them on blogging, don't just put together a presentation about it. Why not hop on their laptop and actually help them set up a blog? If they want to know more about podcasting, download some free software and record an episode with them. If they want to know what it takes to establish and nurture an online community, ask them what they're passionate about and help them set up a Ning social network for people that share that passion. If they ask what a wiki is, or want to understand the power (and perils) of crowdsourcing in general, establish a wiki and work together to come to a shared understanding.

I could go on but you get the point. So next time, leave the Powerpoints at home and **go for a less conventional approach. When it comes to social media (or music or architecture for that matter), it actually makes more sense than the more traditional options.**

A T-Shirt is Like Social Media Because...

August 06, 2007

AdvertisingAge.com is running an article this week about the t-shirt's potential as a marketing vehicle. The piece is a bit silly because, ya know, brands have been printing their logos and slogans on t-shirts for eons. But while reading it, I was struck by how closely the benefits of t-shirt marketing mirror some of the key truths of social media.

Consider:

"T-shirts remind you of who you've been. They show the world who you are. But that doesn't mean they have to be devoid of marketing messages."

Couldn't the same be said of blogs, photostreams, linkrolls and social network profiles?

"The shirt ends up helping you remember a trip or a triumph -- something. And it is that connection to a particular time, place and event that makes it so powerful."

Hey - sounds like Twitter to me.

"T-shirts are the lazy man's scrapbook."

This is exactly how I'd describe my Tumblr site or even how I'm using Jaiku at this point.

"T-shirts remain one of the longest-lived promos you could ever throw at a customer... Make a brilliant t-shirt for your brand, and you will have a walking billboard for life."

This is the kicker. Advertisers still think about campaigns as discreet programs with fixed start and end dates -- when the last ad runs or the promotion expires, the campaign is over. If t-shirts are forever, then your Google results help to make sure that social media content is *forever-ever*. This can be incredibly powerful or unbelievably damaging,

depending on what consumers are really writing about you and how well you employ social media channels yourself.

"A t-shirt starts conversations -- that has always been one of its biggest jobs -- and the more comments it elicits the more it gets worn."

I figure that last quote speaks for itself. Or maybe I'm just overanalyzing this whole t-shirt marketing thing. What do you think?

["Advertising helps me decide" t-shirt by [Vintage Vantage](), with a head-nod to [Karl Long]().]

How Are Television Ads Like SUVs?

August 23, 2007

According to a story recounted in **The Elements of Persuasion** -- G. Clotaire Rapaille, cultural anthopologist to many of the world's automakers, advises his clients that **"it isn't safety per se that matters, but rather the feeling of safety."** Classic perception vs reality -- or more precisely, perception as reality. So the car makers load their SUVs with airbags (which probably do contribute to the actual safety of the vehicle), design them to sit higher than normal passenger cars (which makes the driver feel more powerful and in control but has been proven to make the vehicles *less* safe) and max out the number of cupholders (which have absolutely nothing to do with safety, but play into the fact that humans feel more secure when they have a beverage at hand.) And soaring gas prices aside, those SUVs fly off the lot.

In fact, it seems that our quest for the "perception of safety" guides many of our most important life decisions, from the relationships and careers we choose to what we eat and our choice in dogs.

But what does all of this have to do with marketing innovation and new media?

Maybe nothing -- but it *does* say a lot about our industry's adherence to old reliable ad models that *feel* safe but are actually getting more dangerous with each passing day. We've been spending billions of dollars on television advertising for decades and, to bastardize a well known IT maxim, no marketer ever got fired for buying prime time. We tell ourselves that viewership isn't on the decline, that the viewers we still attract really are paying close attention even though they're surfing the web and checking their Blackberries while even their favorite shows are on, and that DVR users really do sit through all the ads. We pay ever higher prices despite falling ratings. But, really, television is the safe decision because -- well, *just because*. The safe choice? Not really. No marketer ever got fired for buying television? Maybe not, but that won't last for long...

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No need to just pick on TV, as much fun as that may be. You may feel pretty good (pretty secure) about that Yahoo! banner buy -- even though you overpaid on a CPM basis and your click through rates have never been lower. Investing your ad dollars in the big portals feels like a safe bet, even when you're simply putting all of your rotten eggs in just a few broken baskets.

So let's switch gears. Many of our new marketing channels -- from social media to interactive television to gaming and mobile -- feel pretty risky. We can't rely on so-called best practices because there aren't any. We can't take comfort in predictable results because there may not be enough of a precedent. We may not even know for sure how to measure success. In short, new approaches force us to stray outside our safety zone and that scares us. And keeps us from stressing innovation over the tried-and-true.

But here's the rub. The things that have worked for us in the past may *feel* like the safe choices but, given that they no longer work quite as well, they are actually becoming the *riskiest* choices -- especially if your key competitor has an eye on getting to the future before you do. Maybe the "safe choices" you're making are actually putting you in the greatest danger of marketing failure.

Give it some thought. We may be wired to respond to the "perception of safety" but maybe the achievement of "true safety" is worth just a bit of discomfort.

The Britney Spears School of Marketing

September 09, 2007

I suppose that I get what I deserve for watching the MTV Video Music Awards, but I have to say that Britney Spears's so-called comeback performance significantly under-delivered against my already crazy-low expectations. Bearing in mind that both Top 40 radio and the blogosphere were jittery with anticipation -- not to mention the fact that she is literally trying to resurrect her singing career -- you might have thought that she would have pulled out all the stops.

Instead, we got really bad lip-synching and even worse dancing. And if you missed it but don't want to take the word of a cynical marketing wonk like me, check out what the MySpace and Live Journal crowds have to say. Harsh!

Now, just as I unsurprised as I was that Britney's performance was (*ahem*) not good, you should be unsurprised that as I watched the show I was thinking about what lessons it holds for marketers. And actually, this one is pretty simple -- although it certainly warrants the telling.

Even if people already have low expectations, it is still possible to disappoint them and one surefire way to do just that is to simply go through the motions. Consumers can spot a fake from miles away and if you're faking it (whatever *it* may be for your particular product or service) people will not only notice but also call you out and let others know just how bad you really are.

The 7 Strands of "Blog DNA"

September 20, 2007

Recently, I was working with some of my fellow crayonistas on a blogging strategy for a client and we put together this simple graphic that presents the **7 Strands of Blog DNA** - **the key elements that, when combined in a unique way, make any given blog what it is.** *Original, compelling and unlike anything else on the web.*
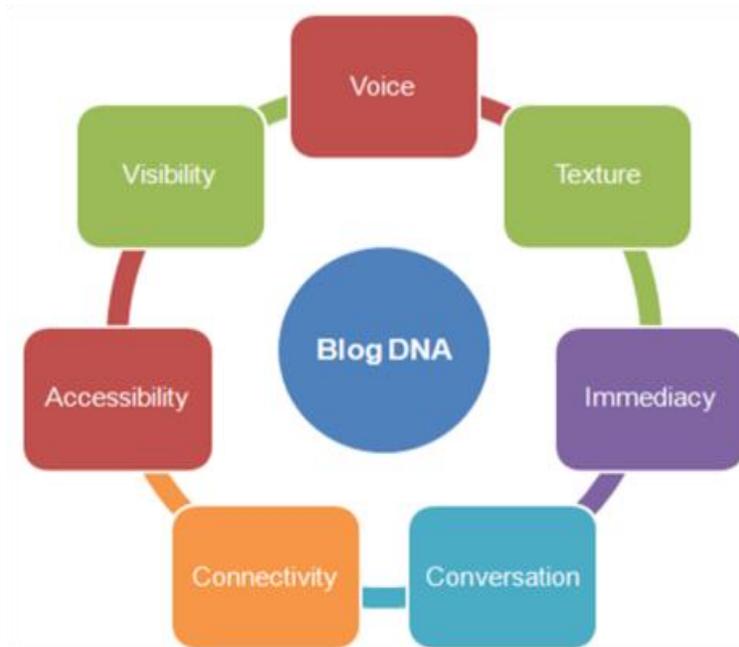
Let's consider each of the 7 traits:

1. **VOICE:** It's what you say and how you say it. Voice is your blog's unique, distinctive narrative style that draws readers in and keeps them coming back.

2. **TEXTURE:** This trait refers to the unique combination of multimedia elements that give your blog a distinctive look and feel that complements the unique sound of your voice. Texture speaks to if and how you use audio or video, illustrations or photos to dress up your posts.

3. **IMMEDIACY:** This is a measure of recency and frequency. Immediacy is the element that keeps your blog feeling fresh and timely.

4. **CONVERSATION:** This is the element of dialogue, the degree to which you provide the reason and the means for people to talk back to you, and to what extent do you engage directly with your readers? Lots of people argue that a

blog isn't a blog without conversation, but we can also point to at least a few high profile blogs that aren't conversational at all.

5. **CONNECTIVITY:** This speaks to the ways in which you participate in the community at large. It's your blogroll, the way you use links and trackbacks, the extent to which you comment on other people's blogs or even participate in blogger events and social networking activities.

6. **ACCESSIBILITY:** The extent to which you make it easy for readers to access your blog's content -- feeds, email subscriptions, widgets, syndication and more.

7. **VISIBILITY:** Tags, key word-rich headlines and posts, and automated search and directory pings. This is about making sure people find your blog and your most relevant content whenever they're looking for information on a topic you cover, whether they're using Technorati, Google or any other search engine to find it.

So, what's your blog's DNA? (Or the DNA of your favorite blog, if you don't write one yourself?) **How do you combine these 7 traits to produce something that is uniquely yours and that keeps your readers coming back for more?**

I'd also love to hear your comments -- and hope I can refine the framework based on your thoughts. Does this work for you? Did I miss anything? Get anything wrong? Chime in.

Black Eyed Peas School of Marketing

November 06, 2007

"Let's get it started, in here. Let's get it started (ha.)"

I can't tell you why The Black Eyed Peas' "Let's Get It Started" is running through my head, but it is. And it's making me think about marketing - as I'm sure The Peas intended.

When was the last time you thought of your ad campaign as a beginning rather than an end? Especially for agency folks, I think it is too easy to think of the tv spot, micro-site, print ad, press release or whatnot as the culmination of an arduous process -- you survived briefings, brainstorms, all nighters and media negotiations and now, *at last*, your campaign is live and you can revel in the fruits of your labor while you rack up those GRPs. But wait... *it's a trap.*

The campaign has always been a means, rather than an end. Done right, advertising (or any kind of marketing, really) is the catalyst that sparks action among consumers. They might check you out. They might even buy.   If you're really good at what you do, *they might talk* -- about your company, products and even your advertising.

If selling stuff (directly or indirectly, now or at some point down the road) is the primary objective of most marketing, I'd argue that getting people talking about your brand is a close number two. It certainly beats awareness which, truth be told, is a load of garbage (who cares if people *know about* you -- instead, you should care about what they actually *think about* you and *what they're going to do about it*) and is counted by only the most dubious of measures (recall - which mysteriously *never* declines following a campaign, no matter how poorly that campaign performs according to more concrete measures like impact on sales.)

And now, under the new rules of social media, campaigns not only *are not* the end; they quite literally *don't have ends* (as in end dates.) Even this isn't entirely new -- take Apple's 1984 spot. Steve Jobs probably just wanted to sell some new Macintosh

computers and keep his fledgling company's lights on, yet 1984 did much much more. It established the Super Bowl as an annual watershed (and water cooler) moment for the U.S. advertising industry and 23 years later that spot continues to set the standard for television creative. And (this is the most significant thing) people from all walks of life are still talking about it.

But in the age of social media, it has become *even more* apparent that campaigns literally do not end anymore. Your spot, site, banner or print ad becomes the fodder for blog posts and podcasts (at least among the marketing wonks), it gets shared, spoofed and talked about by consumers on [YouTube](#), [Flickr](#) and in their social networks and then, through the magic of [Google](#), it (and all the content that flows from it) lives on for years beyond the so-called campaign end date (and quite possibly forever.) In other words, **campaigns are the lifeblood of many, many online conversations that happen not only while your ads are running but long after they've left the air (or the ether, in the case of online marketing.)** *That's the good news* -- the bad news is that the very same things happen even when your campaign is crap.

So the next time you set out to create a new campaign, think about what you're *getting started*.

Consider all the ways your campaign can (and will) start conversations -- and not just any conversations but the kinds of conversations that you'd be proud to be part of, well beyond the last time your ad runs in paid media, long after your promotion ends (and the associated micro-site gets yanked) and sometimes even after your product has left retail shelves.

This might change the nature of what you create. If it doesn't, then maybe you're living by just the second half of The Black Eyed Peas' invocation – "~~Get Started~~, *Get Stupid...*"

Beyond Knowledge: Head in the Cloud

January 30, 2008

We're hearing more and more about 'cloud computing' lately. If you're not familiar with the term, former IBM big brain Irving Wlawadsky-Berger provides a succinct definition:

"*What is cloud computing? It is basically an Internet-based network made up of large numbers of servers - mostly based on open standards, modular and inexpensive. Clouds contain vast amounts of information and provide a variety of services to large numbers of people. Users of the cloud only care about the service or information they are accessing - be it from their PCs, mobile devices, or anything else connected to the Internet - not about the underlying details of how the cloud works.*"

This trend led Wlawadsky-Berger to write a series of posts about our evolution toward a knowledge-based economy. They're well worth the read - here, here and here (in that order.) Nicholas Carr has emerged as cloud computing's reigning rainmaker; he's well worth a read as well.

But I can't help but think about a parallel trend that is more about people and how we behave than the underlying technologies we may come to use - the share-and-share-alike culture of social media and what this means about the nature of knowledge itself. In a nutshell:

Knowledge itself is moving into the cloud.

What do I mean, exactly?

Although I should probably do some kind of reader poll to be absolutely certain, I think it's safe to presume that most of you are knowledge workers in marketing, media or technology. You get paid to turn what you know into a work product that your company or its customers will buy. That work product might be knowledge itself (a strategy, a white paper) or it might be a thing (a piece of software, a print magazine, a Super Bowl spot), but the important bit is that you trade in knowledge rather than iron,

steel or those things that we called widgets back in the 1950s (hint: they weren't portable chunks of content and functionality.)

Once upon a time, an individual's (or organization's) knowledge was highly prized and closely guarded. It was your intellectual property, the capital you traded for cold hard cash. A company would hire you because you knew more or knew better, and seemed to be better able to translate what you knew into action. In turn, a customer would hire your company because they believed that the knowledge you bring to bear was valuable and unique. Sure, other companies might provide similar services but there was just *something* about your knowledge base, thought process or whatever that just seemed more *right* for that particular customer's needs.

Where did all that proprietary intellectual capital come from? Some of it was (and is) truly original thinking on the part of the individuals that make up the knowledge workforce. But, truth be told, much of it was lifted from other sources or, more likely,synthesize from multiple fonts of raw material. However, more often than not even those sources or raw materials required an outlay of cash -- they were books by experts, expensive seminars by thought leaders and, of course, college educations. Or they required a potentially significant outlay of time and attention -- weekly breakfasts with a mentor, an unpaid (or low paying) internship where you learned just the bare-boned fundamentals of what people *actually do* in the industry you one day hoped to join. In any case, **knowledge was costly, to some extent scarce and maybe even out of reach to all but a chosen few** (who got that internship, who could afford that college education, who scraped together the money for that eye-opening seminar.)

OK - right - so fast forward to the Internet Age and more specifically the Social Media Age. **The Internet has, of course, made knowledge more readily accessible and increasingly free (or close to it.) Purveyors of social media have taken that a step further - many steps further, in fact.**

I'll use myself as a case in point -- not because I am the web's foremost purveyor of free brilliance but because I know what I've shared and, to an extent, how many people have received free knowledge. Well, I share ideas every week (nearly every day) on this blog - some are good, some are bad and some are simply works in progress. And more than 1,000 people access this knowledge [via RSS](#) every day and some countless others may discover an idea or two through [Google](#) and the long tail effect. I've shared 12 presentations on [Slideshare.net](#) and these have amassed a total of more than 25,000 views.

That's an awful lot of knowledge that has gone beyond my head (where it was proprietary information, at least until the point someone - usually an employer or a client - wrote a check to buy some of my thinking) and is now quite literally resident in the Internet Cloud (for free and forever.) Even at a hypothetical $1/view, those 25,000 Slideshare views start to look like real money. Even more so if, instead of posting the presentations under a [share-and-share-alike Creative Commons license,](#) I charged

even 50 companies just $1,000 for an in-person seminar during which I presented one of those same slide decks (I've been paid more than that to speak and there are plenty of people that earn upwards of $20,000 for just *one* presentation.)

Do I share everything I know? Of course not. But even two years ago, I wouldn't have shared *anything* -- not unless I worked with you or for you. And if I worked *for you*, you probably wouldn't have had it any other way. My "knowledge output" was work-for-hire and, if you paid for it, it was now *your* proprietary information. (If you work for a large corporation, you most likely signed a confidentiality agreement and something acknowledging that anything you think up while on that corporation's payroll that is relevant to the corporation's business is in fact property of the corporation.)

But as I implied a couple of paragraphs back, this isn't about me per se. It's about the fact that **there are thousands upon thousands of "me's" sharing their knowledge, documenting their theories and their thought processes, helping others make those slippery connections between seemingly disparate ideas.** And many of them are doing it through blogging, podcasting or presenting at [Podcamps](#), among other things -- free to anyone with a web browser. And I'm not arguing that it should be otherwise (no I'm not saying I should bill y'all for each time you've downloaded a slide set or read a post) *but*...

Is knowledge becoming a commodity?

If you want expertise on a given topic, you don't need to hire one expert (or even one company of experts.) You might simply need to draw the best thinking from hundreds of experts, all of whom have chosen to freely share their thinking online. And **the very same information that is accessible to you is accessible to your competitors and just about anyone else who cares to look for it.**

And if I think about why I share, I realize that it is less about self-expression than it is about a realization that for everything I "put in," I will get that much more out -- *many times over*. No matter what I know (or *think* I know), I realize that ["we are smarter than me"](#) and that my own ideas are better in combination with the countless other ideas from other thinkers on virtually any topic I care about. Sharing is the ticket to ride or (to get all retro [cyberpunk](#) on you) my knowledge permits me to ["jack in"](#) to a knowledge base that is bigger, better and widely distributed - yet easily and freely accessible to all.

Is the web fast becoming one immense crowdsourced "brain?"

That's a pretty powerful concept -- and one that I'd argue is far more significant than the architectural implications of cloud computing technology (though the evolution of one is almost assuredly contingent upon the evolution of the other.)

But if you buy into this concept, doesn't it also mean that **we are moving beyond - *not toward* - the knowledge economy**, at least beyond the economy that puts a significant monetary value on proprietary knowledge?

At least among social media circles, **we seem to place more value on the people who share most freely than we do on those who are "knowledge misers."** *Sharers* become the individuals (and sometimes companies) that amass the largest networks, yield the greatest amount of influence, are tapped by mainstream media reporters and conference organizers to share their knowledge in additional forums (often for nothing more than the promise of 'exposure'), are most often shortlisted for job opportunities or consulting gigs. Or at a personal level, some person may hire [crayon](#) for a project or me for a speaking gig because something I share on my blog or a concept I present in a public slideshow resonates for them - but the number of times that has happened is far exceeded by the number of times I've met people who have thanked me (in person, over email, through comments or by becoming and remaining a loyal reader/follower/fan/friend/whatever) for giving them free reign over some of my ideas.

So at the end of the day, knowledge -- and more specifically knowledge freely shared (in both senses of the word 'free') -- might be a currency, but **is the true value shifting beyond knowledge to "connections?" In other words, is knowledge becoming nothing more than a conduit to connections, while connections are becoming the bankable asset?**

It may have always been true that "it's not *what* you know, it's *who* you know." But if knowledge is becoming a commodity, I'd take that age-old maxim a step further. I'd argue that over time -- just as agrarian economies gave way to industrial economies and industrial economies have shifted to knowledge economies -- **our current knowledge-based economy will become:**
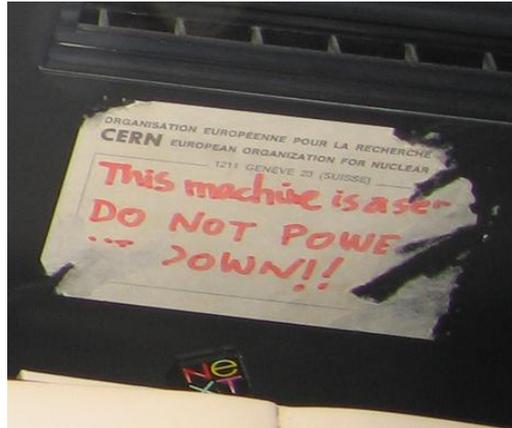
The "Connections Economy"

Maybe it already has. At a minimum, the shift is certainly underway.

I've shared my thinking here - so I'd love it if you'd share some of your own. :-) Jack in and let me know your thoughts.

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Tweet or Change the World. Pick One.

February 21, 2008

I've been pondering a couple of thoughts Jon Burg posted to Twitter yesterday. Jon's tweets are protected so if you want to see them or just stay on top of his whereabouts, random thoughts, food cravings and toilet trips (or whatever it is we Twitterfolk ramble on about) you can follow him. But for the purpose of this post, I'll paraphrase. Jon asks:

If we literally turned off all this social media / Web 2.0 stuff for a day would business productivity soar? And inversely, would innovation stumble?

Interesting questions. *What do you think?*

While your kneejerk reaction might be *"hell no"* and *"hell yes,"* (in that order) you might also wonder if maybe, just maybe, you've got it backwards.

I don't know how many of you worked for start-ups in the glory days of Web 1.0. I once worked for a company that - in addition to all the free sugary snacks you could stomach - boasted a game room, a bring-your-pets-to-work policy, a half pipe and (right where a normal company might have a giant conference room) a half basketball court.

The argument was that the environment fostered creativity, out-of-the-box thinking and a sense of community among the overworked employees (I was one of those.) But in practice, we spent an inordinate amount of time skateboarding, shooting hoops and petting our co-workers' dogs (not a euphemism...) And for those who really did try to keep their heads down and just get some work done, I'd say it was pretty hard to focus when a couple of your fellow cube dwellers were trading free throws just three feet away from your workspace. We never did find our groove and despite successive seven-figure rounds of VC funding we never did come up with that truly innovative, game changing web service that we all thought we were working towards.

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OK - so right Greg, thanks for yet another doomsday cautionary tale from the olden days. Well, we've learned a lot since then, haven't we? Maybe. *Probably.*

Or **maybe [blogging](), [Twitter](), [Facebook](), [Seesmic](), [Qik](), [Ustream](), [Justin](), [Utterz](), [Pownce](), [Second Life]() or whatever else you count among your poisons are little more than the candy drawer, half pipe, office hours pick-up game or dog park for the social media crowd.**

And maybe that's OK - because maybe we really do get enough upside out of our participation in these things to offset the time we put in (just like three hours of basketball per day helped you keep your weight down even though your diet consisted of nothing but free chocolate.)

But how many of us have calculated the cost of what we're giving up -- including productive work hours (says the guy who is blogging at 10:50 am on a Thursday) and quiet time to actually think about what you can do to make big things happen (says the guy who can't seem to function without a four-tabbed web browser, two instant messengers, email, Skype and ooVoo all running at the same time)?

I have no intention of "turning off" but you know I like to stir the pot. So let's hear your thoughts.

[Photo note: This is purported to be a picture of the first web server, showing the handwritten 'do not turn off' sign - no idea if it is or it isn't but I thought it was a fun image to pair with this post.]

The "You Test" for Social Media Agencies

May 29, 2008

This morning I noticed a tweet from Aussie ex-pat, social media wunderkind Paull Young that referenced a blog post by Forrester's Jeremiah Owyang, in which Jeremiah offers **advice to marketers looking to choose a competent, experienced social media agency.**

His post is worth reading in full, but his main point is that while many traditional agencies (including the maintream digital shops) now pitch social media services as part of their integrated offering, it is incumbent upon the buyer to dig beneath the surface and make sure the agency isn't all talk. In other words, **make sure the agency you're hiring really knows the channels, understands how to leverage them appropriately and can give you concrete examples of how they've done so for other clients.**

All good advice -- the truth is that for most agencies today, social media (or more broadly, conversational marketing) is a "*sure, we do that too,*" in much the same way online was a "*sure, we do that too,*" for ad agencies in the mid-1990s.

But I'd suggest that you should also submit the agency to an additional layer of scrutiny. More precisely, this isn't really about the agency per se -- it's about the individuals in the room, the people who will actually work on your business.

The truth is, most agencies have at least one bona fide social media expert on staff -- after all, we're a dime dozen these days.

I was "*that guy*" at Digitas. But if you were a client, the odds were pretty low that I would ever touch your business and, let's be frank, one guy (or even two - I brought on a smart and capable #2 just before I left the agency) out of thousands simply isn't enough. This doesn't mean that Digitas didn't do work in social media. They did (and they do) -- and they can certainly trot out examples of Facebook Fan Pages, widgets

and corporate blogs to prove that they can get the mechanics right. And their case studies probably strike all the right chords -- they speak of transparency, authenticity, positive Net Promoter scores.

The real question is, are mechanics enough? And of course the real answer is, no.

(For the record, I'm not singling out Digitas here -- I don't believe they are any different from other similar agencies. They may even be better than most.)

So if the formal review lets you down, how do you know that you are really talking to a roomful of bona fide experts who can help your company navigate the murky social media waters?

It's simple actually, but first we need to agree on what makes an expert an expert. *Here's my take...*

When I say bona fide expert, I don't necessarily mean a person with formal training or any sort of proper pedigree -- there quite simply isn't any such thing. But on the other hand, I also don't mean the casual observer (read: everyone else at the agency) who has read all the trade articles, can spout the jargon and maybe even has a Facebook profile just cuz all the kids are doing it. Agencies are full of these people -- for that matter, so are client-side marketing teams.

I mean someone who has a true passion for social media and has made it a personal mission to 'live' in the space and experience new social channels as a consumer first, marketer second. This goes well beyond professional curiousity. He (or she) is the guy who blogs every day when his colleagues don't even read blogs, he's on Twitter long before his colleagues have even heard of it, he uses social networks as true active hubs for his personal community of friends and followers. He has learned through first-hand experience what swims and what sinks, and is smart enough to suss out why.

So back to those individuals in the room -- the people pitching for your social media business. How many of them have the passion - how many of them are "*that guy*?" **Here's my suggestion. You need to look those people in the eye and give them the "You Test."** Ask them some simple questions like:

- Can **you** tell me about **your** personal blog?
- What is **your** Twitter handle? I'd love to follow **you**.
- Can I meet **you** in Second Life for a follow-up conversation?
- Can **you** friend me on Facebook? I'm really interested in getting a sense of how **you** use it to build and maintain relationships with **your** community.
- I'm really interested in getting a sense of what **you** find most interesting online. Can **you** point me to **your** deli.cio.us, Digg or StumbleUpon pages?

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I wouldn't expect everyone you ask to be active users of *every* tool out there -- I'm not, but I've certainly tried them all and can tell you why some didn't stick for me. But there is no substitute for real, first-hand personal experience -- **odds are that if someone knows how to make a given social media platform work for them, they can help you figure out how to make it work for you and your brand.**

Trust me. **The answers (or lack thereof) will be telling and might give you all the information you need about whether or not a given agency is right for you, regardless of what the creds deck says they've put into market.**

Twitter, Shunning, Siberia and Solitary Confinement

July 18, 2008

During my travels earlier this week, I had the pleasure of listening to Michael Nicholas of Carat present about the fundamental importance of social connections and the impact of groups on individual behavior. Since then, I keep thinking about one particular point he made -- I liked it enough that I'm bound to steal it and stick it in one of my own presentations somewhere down the line; but in the meantime I wanted to share it with you. It's good brain-fodder and goes something like this:

You can understand a lot about the importance of social connections by looking at the punishments we bestow upon individuals who do wrong.

By way of example, Michael pointed out that our criminals are locked up in jails and prisons -- taken out of the community and largely cut off from their normal social connections. And what happens if you do something particularly bad when you're in prison? We put you in solitary confinement, cut off from *all* social interaction.

Think about it; **solitary confinement might be one of the most extreme examples, but you can easily find plenty of others if you look around.**

The Amish shun individuals who stray from their society's core beliefs. A child who misbehaves is likely to get a 'time out,' which generally entails having him sit alone for a short period of time; a rebellious teen might get sent to her room or, if the offense is particularly heinous, grounded.

The age-old Russian practice of banishing offenders to distant and sparsely populated Siberia has become a common analogy for virtually any fate worse than death (like being reassigned to a remote field office or a back-office department or division of your company.)

Not inviting someone to your party because they aren't cool enough? Cutting off ties with a friend or relative who offended you in some way? Yep, all part of the same thing.

Community is important. It always has been. In fact, it's fundamental to who we are. Humans are pack animals, social creatures.

Is it any wonder that those of us who turn to the web for community get a bit frantic when the social computing tools we use to connect with other people stop working, even if only for a short while?

For the digitally inclined, a day without [Twitter](#) ([for](#) [example](#)) feels like banishment to Siberia (er, Cyberia), not because we love the technology so much but because it strips us of much needed interaction with our friends and peers. Sure, this is a trivial instance and not really a 'punishment' even though, at the time, it might feel like the Gods 2.0 are punishing us. But it seems that the inability to connect with our online network (the people, not the technology) is one part of the bigger whole; and one of the reasons social computing technologies are so important to so many people.

This last bit probably doesn't seem profound -- *it isn't* -- but **the notion of understanding the importance of community by understanding the nature of punishment certainly forces you to consider this whole social media thing from new, interesting angles.**

That's what I think, at least. *How about you?*

Hate to Tell You, but Web 1.0 was Social Too

August 07, 2008

Earlier today, I presented at [iBreakfast's Web 2.0 NYC Best Practices Conference](#). As you can imagine, there was **a lot of talk about social media and how it has made it possible for people to connect and share with one another online.**

Tru dat, but this afternoon has me **asking myself if this is really *that different* from so-called Web 1.0**. Ah yes, here we go with another 'Verdino as Cranky Old Man' post...

I'm old enough to remember dial-up and ["Internet in a Box"](#) (the first commercially available Internet software package.) In other words, I'm ancient. But I *also* remember that **back then -- this would have been 1991 or so -- the Internet was mostly about connecting with other people with the aid of new networked technologies.**

You didn't log on for content (there wasn't much to be had) or commerce (for the most part, nobody was selling much of anything over the web) or to see what your favorite companies were up to (few, if any, were jumping headlong into this new web thing at that point.)

You logged on to participate in forums, message boards or bulletin board systems -- to post messages, read others, visit and revisit to check out the latest replies. **You logged on for conversations with a bunch of your closest strangers in [America Online](#), [CompuServe](#) or [Prodigy](#) chat rooms (in fact, you might have been doing this as early as the 1980s.) If you were truly plugged in, you might have joined [The WELL](#), one of the earliest (and today, longest running) online communities.** I wasn't cool enough for The WELL, but I certainly spent more than a few hours a week chatting and sharing content in rooms and on boards.

If you did these things enough, you got to know some of the more prominent "personalities" at any of your favorite online haunts -- and they got to know you. You might not have had a formalized list of friends and followers, but you certainly had a set

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of ambient friendships with people you came to know largely (if not exclusively) through your interactions with them on the newly popularized World Wide Web.

Of course, somewhere between then and now the corporations moved in -- turning the 'first generation' web into a tawdry Times Square of brochure-ware, banner ads and eventually Flash microsites. *But that isn't where the whole thing started.* As I remember it, it started with people and connections and sharing.

No doubt, the technologies have changed. Bulletin boards gave way to [blogs](#); chat rooms to [presence](#) applications; and so forth. And today's shiny Web 2.0 objects are certainly much sexier, thanks to developments as diverse as Ajax and widespread broadband connectivity.

But the behaviors aren't so different, are they?

Are we overestimating the extent to which social media has truly changed the web -- or more precisely, the way people use the web?

Social Media: Lipstick on a Pig or Total Makeover?

August 18, 2008

It's probably a safe bet that many of you make your living (at least in part) by helping your clients -- or in the case of the client-side marketers among you, your companies -- engage consumers more effectively through social media channels.

Should your CEO blog? What should your brand managers know about MySpace and Facebook? Do you need feeds, widgets, a podcast or some kind of virtual world presence? How about mobile social software or presence applications? And then, of course, how do all of these things fit together and integrate properly with your mass media and traditional PR efforts to actually help you meet your business objectives -- because we all know that tactics without strategy won't get you to where you need to go.

These questions -- and others like them -- seem to be on the minds of just about every marketer, PR practitioner and client-side social media evangelist. And while these questions warrant answers, it strikes me that, if these are the first questions we're asking (even the strategy question), **we are starting in the wrong place.**

If you ask me, **starting with social media *marketing* can often amount to nothing more than putting lipstick on the pig (and yep, the pig in this case is your old school "anti-social" company.)** I can't tell you how often marketers ask me for advice on how to use social media to reach new customers and sell more stuff, yet have never even considered how they can use the very same (or similar) tools to work better, smarter and cheaper themselves. Worse still are those companies that seem hell-bent on marketing through social media yet can't even access social media sites from within their firewalls.

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The most far-reaching impact of social computing is not that it changes the way we market; it is that it changes the way we can and should do business. Marketing is just the external manifestation of this change, but the change needs to come from within the organization and must impact everything from how we attract talent to how we share information with our co-workers to how we define 'workplace.'

So rather than simply asking how your company (or clients) can market better (or at least different) through social media, **why not get straight to the heart of the matter with questions like these instead:**

1) How can we use social computing tools and platforms to allow the people who work at my company to share, collaborate, network and work more efficiently?

2) How can mobile social software and presence applications help my company's remote workers (from telecommuters to a widely distributed sales force) be productive no matter where they happen to be, stay connected with each other, and participate in a digitally-enabled corporate culture.

3) How might a private online community enable me to collaborate more seamlessly with my clients, investors and outside business partners?

4) How can I take advantage of social computing technologies to offer my existing customers more convenient, flexible ways to open a direct line of communications with a company representative (or with each other) when they are in need of help or support?

5) How can platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, Second Life, pretty much any instant messenger, and even YouTube or Ustream be seen (and used) as corporate productivity tools, rather than as the time wasters many managers and IT professionals still perceive them to be?

6) How do I tap into social networks to find and attract the best new talent? And how can I empower new workers with a set of tools that will allow them to be productive when, where and how they actually want to work today?

7) How can listening to online conversation about my company, brands, products and competitors provide not just an entry point for my marketing team to 'join the conversation,' but also valuable insights help me improve the way we operate, what we sell and how we produce it?

These are just the seven I thought of while writing this post. No doubt, there are dozens of others. **What other questions would you add to the list?**

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Next Big Thing? First, Master the Last Big Thing

September 23, 2008

It's the middle of September and we are in smack in the middle of marketing conference season. As I write this, Advertising Week is in full swing and a number of other marketing, social media and new media events (including OMMA Global, Web 2.0 Expo, Blog World Expo, Inbound Marketing Summit and countless others, I'm sure) have all recently wrapped up.

And as is often the case with these types of events, I'm sure many of these have brought out the usual set of gurus talking about the next big thing to audiences of eager client and agency side marketers hoping to find out what it is, what it means and how to get a jump on the newest, shiniest object before it hits the Marketplace section of the Wall Street Journal.

So I figured I would write a quick blog post advising all the folks who leave these events with visions of shiny new marketing sugarplums dancing in their heads to take a deep breath, turn around and consider which of the 'last big things' they haven't yet used to the fullest of their potential.

Wait a second. A so-called marketing futurist is telling us to back up and retread the ground we've already walked?

In a word, '*yes.*'

I've often pointed out that social media insiders need to remember that they are ahead of the curve and can't assume that the rest of world is as excited about (or even aware of) the latest, greatest presence applications, mobile social networks or any other new thing that the gods of Web 2.0 throw our way. Outside the land of the bloggerati and Twitterati, it is still pretty progressive for the average consumer to have

both a MySpace and Facebook profile, let alone an account on Flickr, delicious or StumbleUpon. Mention ExitReality or even lifestreaming and your buddy is bound to call for back-up (ummm, pun intended.)

So I'd like to offer similar advice to marketers. **Stop fixating on the *next*, and start getting smart about the *now* -- or even the *recent*.** Before asking what shiny objects are sparkling just around the bend, take a look at the many, many channels that are available to you today and ask yourself if you've done the best job of experimenting, optimizing, standardizing and internalizing the way you use the long list of the not-so-new to engage consumers.

For example, **what does your organization do with the following channels?**

- Blogging
- Podcasting
- Virtual Worlds
- Gaming
- Social Networking
- Online Community
- Mobile (think SMS, not QR Codes)
- Widgets and Applications

- Feeds (RSS)
- Search Marketing
- Search Engine Optimization
- Behavioral Targeting
- Contextual Targeting
- Video
- Branded Content
- Word-of-Mouth Marketing

None of these things are really all that new, anymore. At one time or another, every item on that list (and many others, of course) was buzzworthy. They were the next big thing, or at least the new new thing. And while most still get plenty of play in marketing circles, most don't raise nearly as many eyebrows as they once did. Most probably wouldn't be handed off to your 'innovation' guy or gal, as they might have been even a year ago. They're just more ways to connect with an increasingly multichannel-engaged consumer.

But **be honest -- have you cracked the code on any of them yet?** I don't believe many marketers have -- fewer still have mastered *all of them*. But a lot of these very same marketers are already losing interest in the untried, in favor of the unknown.

What can you do better? Which 'new to you' thing from the list above can you test (or better yet, turn into a vital element in your overall marketing mix) before you move along to whatever media or marketing innovation the so-called gurus are crowing about today?

What is your organization doing to master the Last Big Thing?

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About Greg

Photo credit: Brian Solis

Equal parts marketer and futurist, Greg Verdino is a recognized expert on marketing innovation, emerging media and Web 2.0. He works as Chief Strategy Officer at crayon, a conversational marketing consultancy. His unique, sometimes controversial, perspectives on media and marketing are presented at gregverdino.com, one of the web's most influential marketing blogs.

In addition to blogging, Greg has written for MediaPost's OMMA magazine, iMedia Connection and MarketingProfs.com, and was a contributing author to The Age of Conversation and Age of Conversation 2: Why Don't They Get It? He has been profiled in and quoted by a wide variety of business and news media including Advertising Age, Adweek, Business Week, Forbes, New York Times, Newsday and the Wall Street Journal.

Greg is also an active speaker, represented internationally by 9.9 Media - The London Speaker Bureau. His recent recent appearances include Brand ManageCamp, DM Days New York, Inbound Marketing Summit, MarketingProfs B2B Summit, OMMA Social, Virtual Worlds 2008, and a number of corporate meetings.

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