

Brand Power To The Consumer -By Martin Lindstrom, Author Of Brand Child And BRAND Sense



In today’s world the consumer is in charge of your brand – not you. The reality is that, since the appearance of the Internet, the power in the brand game has shifted. In the old days, the marketer was in full control of the brand. Now the majority of brand impressions are initiated and promulgated by the consumer. It’s like the consumer has become the brand master, leaving the marketer to merely fuel the game, rather than play it. In a trend I predicted almost five years ago, and which in

my book BRAND sense I call the MSP or Me Selling Proposition, the consumer is in charge of ‘their’ brand.

No longer is the brand manual the holy grail for marketers. I wonder if you can even remember what your brand manual looks like. You probably haven’t looked at it in years. After all, the days of being able to explain your brand in terms of the brand manual’s pages and pages of detail are long gone, and so is the manual’s capacity for predicting the brand’s behavior in future years.

So what do you do to survive in a world in which, five years from now, we’ll probably find that almost every successful marketing activity is created and driven by the consumer? Well, what you do is prepare – now! Here are three pieces of advice which may help you prepare your organization for having the consumer behind the brand steering wheel.

The first and most important factor in preparing for this power shift is to address your organization’s decision-making processes. Your company will need to acknowledge that it can no longer be on top of every piece of your brand’s communication about your brand. And this acceptance will need to be at board level. You must persuade the board to begin developing marketing and communication materials which will be carried by the consumer and which, in fifty percent of cases, are likely to change the way you intended to represent the brand. Because this will be happen.

Some of the most successful brand campaigns are indeed run by consumers, not the brand. You know you’ve succeeded when consumers start creating websites about your brand and writing blogs to talk about your brand. You know you’ve succeeded when you key in your brand’s name on Google and find that the majority of traffic is consumer dialog about your brand. All positive of course!

Or is it? The reality is that there’ll be negative opinion as well. But this is where the mandate you’ve already won from the board comes into play. The board must be aware, from the start, that 100% positive discussion about your brand is an impossibility. The environment must be open and receptive to all comments – consumers won’t be interested in participating in a controlled debate. And that’s where you come into the picture. Your role is to kickstart the debate; to fuel the dialog and make it interesting. Some websites have done it beautifully. The

CampaignForRealBeauty.com, a website powered by Dove, is open to consumer debate. All comments are shared – negative as well as positive.

The second factor you should consider in preparing for the brand power shift is breaking the ice of conservatism. Your brand can no longer afford to be squeaky clean and uncontroversial. To encourage consumers to talk about your brand, you have to give them something to talk about. So the brand has to be edgy, provocative and opinionated.

The brands of tomorrow need to have opinions, otherwise they'll be perceived as bland. Many companies think that the success of a viral marketing campaign is about creating a 60-second video and sending it out. Wrong. It's about making that video so extraordinarily different, so provocative, so edgy, so funny, so extreme in some way that consumers can't resist sending it on and sharing the experience. This requires you to question how far you're prepared to go. And to rely on the mandate you achieved from the board at the outset when you made clear that your brand strategy was likely to change as a result of consumer-driven brand building.

The third factor to build in is what I call 'instant branding'. Things no longer happen according to a 24-month deadline. You might be lucky and have a deadline stretch to 24 hours. Brands need to prepare themselves for instant behavior in order to be able to react within hours to trends. Consumers will love your brand for it. You see, these days, most consumers see the Fortune 1000 brands as boring, slow and old-fashioned. If, within hours, you can turn around a witty response, for example, to some event or newly-emerged trend, people will most likely be positively surprised. The challenge is that such rapid response will be expected in both positive and negative situations. And, whereas in the old days your PR and legal departments would need to review your responses, there'll be no time for such processes. You'll need to set up teams which can react instantly when required, and show the consumer that your brand is more than a pretender to trend, but an entity with opinions and confidence.

Let's be clear: the brand manual can't do the work any more. And one-way communication can't do it either. TV commercials are about to die. Print and radio is suffering immensely. In fact, the only steadily growing brand-building media is interactive. Two-way, multi-way, reactive, responsive, receptive and active communication is the future for brand communications. The consumer is ready to talk. Are you?

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