

COMING OF AGE

I N C O R P O R A T E D

Baby Boomer Marketing & Senior Marketing

The End of Powerboat Marketing

By David B. Wolfe

Introduction

Most marketers are like power boaters – they command self-generated forces to meet their objectives. Lately however, powerboat marketing seems to be yielding diminishing returns. It's dawning on some marketers that, it may be better to think less like a power boater in the New Economy and more like a sailor who taps the external powers of wind and current. I thought about this after reading the following muscular statement by an Internet marketing services company: "We help our B-2-B customers choose the best ways to target the right audiences, and then help move those audiences productively through the entire customer life cycle."

That claim reflects Old Economy thinking that promotes customer control and manipulation. The promise to help businesses "target the right audiences, then help move those audiences productively through the entire customer life cycle" is a hollow promise for it overlooks the difficulty of "power boating" consumers in any direction in the New Economy. One reason is the Internet offers consumers various protections against control and manipulation. Cross talk between consumers on a massive scale is one such protection. They report to each other via the Internet on their experiences with companies and products.

The Adult Median Age is 45

The aging population is another reason powerboat marketing is losing steam. The adult median age is nearly 45, making middle age consumers the dominant players in the marketplace. This has presented marketers with the most independent-minded customer population ever. In midlife, behavior typically becomes more autonomous. Resistance to entreaties by others to take various actions – like buying a given product increases. The Internet magnifies this behavior by helping consumers be more self-reliant in gathering information about their needs and options for needs satisfaction. The Internet also increases consumers' desires for personalized, empathetic attention from vendors. Empathy is the emotional affect of identifying with and understanding another person's circumstances, feelings and motives.

The Challenge of the Internet

Kevin J. Roberts, CEO of advertising giant *Saatchi & Saatchi* said in a recent Wall Street Journal interview, “The challenge of the Internet is how to bring emotion and engagement – how to bring love – to a personal and sometimes antisocial medium. Great brands can't exist just by providing information. The great ones have mystery and sensuality. Our task is to create mystery and sensuality on the Internet. Right now we're failing hopelessly – just hopelessly.”

Most website designers and owners view the Internet primarily as a vast, networked medium for distributing information and taking orders. However, it is probably safe to say that aside from B-2-B commerce, most people see the Internet mainly as a medium of pleasure. From chat rooms and e-mail to games and – yes, pornography – most people not using the Internet for business reasons use it mainly for feel-good experiences. This extends to online shopping: if a shopping site doesn't make a shopper feel good, chances of a return visit drop. Online retailers not understanding the need to richly emotionalize their sites to stimulate the brain's pleasure centers are the likeliest candidates for failure.

Were I a venture capitalist thinking about investing in a new website for consumers, I would want to know what the PQ of the planned site is. PQ is pleasure quotient. Because pleasure is dependent on sensory input, I would want an expert assessment of the site's potential for sensory arousal in the brain's sensory cortex and limbic system for all five senses. Every marketing message in every medium should be designed with an informed consciousness of the following fact: Awareness depends on sensory arousal - the less the arousal the dimmer awareness.

Engage the Senses

Knowing how the brain works had little value in Old Economy marketing that focused on “typical” or “average” consumers. Such knowledge is critical in New Economy marketing that increasingly is focused on each customer as a unique individual. Old Economy consumers aren't real people. They're statistical units bunched together in mathematically derived clusters. New Economy consumers are real people. They are one-of-a-kind individuals who online retailers try to acknowledge as such through personalization platforms created by such companies as Net Perceptions, BroadVision and Autonomy. The idea is to improve selling efficiency by delivering information to shoppers tailored to their unique attributes. However, as Saatchi's Roberts said, providing information is not enough. The senses must be engaged and emotions aroused before awareness and interest develops and a customer can make a buying decision.

Emotional arousal is highly idiosyncratic. Something that stimulates positive emotions in me can produce negative emotions in someone else. Just think of controversial public issues like gun control, abortion and smoking to get the point. Beliefs play a major role in predisposing the character of emotional responses. Age is another factor, as is gender, ethnicity, life history and even the season of year and time of day. The yet unmet challenge in website design is the creation of an interactive platform that can infer from conversations with consumers their emotional profiles. This is where Internet marketing is headed.

Rosalind Piccard, associate professor at MIT's Media Lab and author of *Affective Computing*, says, "The days of personalization platforms are numbered because they can't deal with consumers as individuals. Individuals depend on emotions to manage their lives. No personalization platforms have the ability to deal with human emotions on an informed anticipatory basis."

Go With the Grain of the Brain

Recent brain research indicates that willful decisions are not possible in the absence of emotional arousal. That discovery validates Roberts' charge that "we're failing hopelessly – just hopelessly" in catering to emotions with Internet marketing. Marketing is not about getting out facts but about stimulating emotional centers of the brain – particularly two sites in the brain – one in the midbrain that is reflexive, the other in the cortex that is adaptive. The success of a marketing message can be better secured by knowing how each emotional center will likely respond.

The Internet is changing marketing far more than most people yet realize. Its impact on marketing can be likened to the impact of people learning centuries ago that the earth was round. Before then, most people thought it had to be flat for otherwise everything not tied down would fall off. Few ventured far at sea for fear of falling off the edge of a flat earth.

Fear of the unknown leaves many marketers are similarly disinclined to sail into the deeper unfamiliar realms of the New Economy. But in the New Economy, marketers, who like sailors, bend deferentially to the external forces whipped up by consumers will succeed better than marketers who retain the confrontational, brute force mind of a power boater. Importantly, much as sailors must have intimate knowledge of wind and current to optimize the results of their deferential dance with wind and current, New Economy marketers who do best will have an intimate knowledge of brain and mind – or put their trust in those who do.

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