

What If Giving Up Your Brand Really Means Giving Up?

Engaging With Branding Is No Substitute for Engagement With Brand

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Published: [February 22, 2010](#)



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Before you move some of your surviving budget into a spiffy new social-media campaign and give up control of your brand to "the conversation," consider that you might be replacing your old-fashioned, excruciatingly commercial marketing with newfangled irrelevant nonsense.

At least that's what I get from the Edelman 2010 Trust Barometer, [which found](#) that only 25% of people it polled see friends and peers as credible sources of consumer and business information (that's a decline of nearly 50% since 2008). Folks also think less of their peers as credible spokespeople. Should these findings cause worry for the almost four out of five companies planning to take TV ad money and put it into social?

I hate to go all Wilford Brimley on it, but hell, yes.

I know all too many CMOs who find criticizing the social-media lobby something like debating the dialectic with avowed Marxists -- you're never right when the very premise of your existence is wrong, and it gets old being told that your visceral concerns are a result of your failure to perceive class struggle or to tweet enough. Nobody with responsibility for a bottom line has ever felt comfortable with social media as a replacement for traditional advertising. Arguing that consumers "buy more" if you "sell less" just smacks of another five-year economic plan for the glorious motherland. Notwithstanding the allure of cost savings and glib convenience that consumers will sell things to themselves, there's not much goodwill built up for the stuff inside most corporate-marketing departments.

It's altogether possible that people didn't initially rush to social media because they found their peers so compellingly helpful, but rather that they ran away from commercial speech because

advertising had proven to be so irritatingly useless. Conversational media could never be anything more than secondary, anecdotal research on products and services, along with partially reliable color commentary, but that's an accomplishment when compared to the predictably inane or dishonest content we usually put into ads. Want proof? Contrast a random chat-room conversation about a product with the last assortment of Super Bowl spots.

Maybe consumers found the anonymous crowd simply less bad than branded communications? This is my theory, anyway, and not a conclusion of the Edelman study, although when the research also says that "traditional authorities and experts" have regained consumer trust, it suggests to me a broader, perhaps maturational trend is under way.

Even the best game of telephone requires that somebody start it off by saying something, and it's up to CMOs to make sure that brands do so by contributing content that is credible, authentic and useful (and not just some emotional or associated brand attribute). We can still be wildly creative, but the crowd can't invent truth ... it is only a litmus test and connector. And the ultimate truth of brands is that we promote them so people will buy them -- not just think fondly -- so maybe the purpose of commercial speech needs to get back to giving them reasons to do so?

If we renewed our commitment to selling based on credibility, authenticity and utility, maybe people would trust what we tell them, respect our corporate reputations, and give us their purchasing loyalty. Maybe if we stopped thinking we can give up responsibility for why they should buy, and start acting like David Ogilvy and sell to them once again, they'd find comfort relying on our communications as well as the subsequent iterations through the social echo chamber. This might unleash the ultimate promise of social and empower people to know, discuss and change the way businesses function, not just blather on about marketing blather.

Without it, I suspect that trust in the recommendations of the anonymous crowd will continue to decline, because its conclusions will be no less clueless than those of the individual consumers who contribute to it. It's no accomplishment to detach conversation from the reasons why brands would spend money to talk to people, and more conversation about less content will never qualify as believable or trustworthy. I think the Edelman research reveals that consumers are figuring this out.

It really doesn't matter how successful we are at getting people to click, forward or otherwise waste their time with even the most brilliant social-media campaign or tactic. Engaging with branding is no substitute for engagement with brands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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