

## Curator Culture

By Steven Addis

Marketers are scared. YOU were named as Time Magazine's Person of the Year and CONSUMERS took the nod as Advertising Age's Agency of the Year. You have more power than ever. But it's not your consumer power that terrifies marketers. It's your sway over millions of other consumers as a curator. A curator with unlimited resources to research products, review them for others, and expose the disingenuous. A curator with the ability to transmit on a mass scale. And a curator with credibility corporations have all but squandered.

Companies used to be brand guardians and controlled every aspect of what we knew of their products. And, when I was growing up, we all got the majority of our information from three networks: NBC, ABC, and CBS. A guy named John Cameron Swayze demonstrated Timex watches by torturing them in ever more creative ways. The Maytag repairman was lonely. Doctors in white coats told us cigarettes were healthy. And we bought it all.

We sat back on the couch and passively let this sea of persuasion wash over us. The advertisers owned and controlled the tools of mass communication. And, who were we to doubt? We trusted what we were told because nothing could compete with the credibility of these demonstrations and expert testimonials. The communication was one-to-many, and this control was so complete that it seemed like it would last forever.

But the power that took decades to build has been wrested away by consumers in mere moments. The confluence of two major events hastened this shift. First, we discovered that we can't always trust what companies tell us. And, secondly, the tools of mass communication are now in the hands of anyone with an Internet connection. The contemporary marketplace of infinite choices and instant access to resources has bred a generation of educated, skeptical, and resourceful consumers.

In some ways, we are connected as we were a hundred years ago, where one farmer might have asked another for advice on the latest equipment. Our network was the town hall or the church. Communication was one-to-one and we trusted our peers.

Now, like then, we are connected through shared values and shared experiences – just on a much grander scale. The old tools of mass communication (like television advertising) pale in their ability to target, interact, or engender trust. Our new networks are one another through the natural evolution of email, instant messaging, blogs, peer reviews, and user-generated platforms such as MySpace and YouTube. Communication is now many-to-many with the ability to target with the precision of one size fits one.

This new generation is anything but passive. Consumers don't just buy and use a product. They research articles, read peer reviews, seek out blogs, and in the process, become experts themselves. They then critique the product and freely share their opinions—they are the curators who drive commerce and culture. This power shift from companies—accustomed to marketing “at” a mass of consumers—to individuals, who curate on behalf of one another, profoundly changes consumer expectations, behavior, and branding as we've known it.

The power of influencers is not new. But having tools available to instantly convey personal opinions is a revolution. As the number of choices expand, our dependence on curators increases proportionally. Charles Eames said, “Beyond the age of information is the age of choices.”

But how do companies reach customers who now look to each other, rather than the companies, for trusted guidance? Finding and cultivating consumer trust in this economy of abundance means businesses need to understand, embrace, and harness the shift to become a “Curator Brand” – a brand that engenders such a level of trust and advocacy that it rises to the level of a peer. Here are some ways a courageous few companies are earning our trust.

## **FIND YOUR NICHE**

Consumers reward the brands that speak directly to them. The more they feel understood, the more they bond. In spite of this, the natural tendency of companies is to extend their brands as wide as possible in the hopes that they might appeal to everyone. These mega-brands inevitably fall on their own weight as they lose the connection with their core audience.

Remember in the 70s and 80s, when Levi's was the hottest jeans brand? As its core audience aged, Levi's launched loose fitting cuts to hold on to them. What they neglected to see is that young people would no longer relate to a brand that their parents wear. Even after this, the company still chose the strategy to launch a low-priced Wal-Mart jean called Levi Strauss Signature, further "blanding" the brand.

This mega-brand strategy is on its last legs. Companies are realizing that the turbocharged word-of-mouth of today is changing the rules. People can easily search out the small niche brands on the Web that align with their personal needs.

These companies understand their audiences and prefer to go deep rather than wide. Small companies can do it with one brand, while large companies can manage a portfolio of narrowly defined brands. These brands unapologetically court their niche market and don't concern themselves with alienating other groups. While it takes courage to do this, it pays off by establishing a strong, clear brand that makes its well-defined audience feel completely understood.

The evolution of Toyota's brand is one of the best examples of portfolio management. Rather than stretching its name to the point of dilution, Toyota acknowledges its limitations. First, it created Lexus for the luxury audience. Then, Toyota understood that it doesn't (and shouldn't) have the street cred to appeal to urban youth. So it created Scion without an explicit association to Toyota. With the Scion, Toyota created a carefully targeted brand that promotes this vehicle to the exclusion of other audiences. While other companies take pains

not to offend, billboards for the Scion provocatively proclaim: “So wrong for so many.”

This contrasts Volkswagen’s attempt to move its mega-brand up-market by launching the \$80,000+ VW Phaeton, in spite of its almost identical styling to Volkswagen Corp’s own Audi A8. The former CEO’s ego not only created a monumental flop (Phaeton was withdrawn from the U.S. market in early 2006 as sales fell below that of even the company’s rarified Bentley brand), it may have also confused the populist image of the VW name.

As people look to brands that more closely reflect their own values, large brands are at a disadvantage to smaller, more targeted ones. In fact, I believe leading brands are at their most vulnerable to nimble challenger brands. The best defense for large companies is to acquire these innovative niche businesses, like Nike’s acquisition of Hurley Clothing and Bauer Hockey. Yet, I believe it’s likely that the most successful brands of the next decade may not yet exist.

### **LIES, LIES, LIES**

How fragile is trust? Everywhere you look, another lie is exposed. I don’t think there are more liars today; it’s just easier to expose them. People now have the power to combat those who mislead, helping others wade through the din of marketing noise. There’s a new generation of muckrakers helping us decipher fact from fiction.

The sincerely authentic brands have little to worry about. But brands like Harley Davidson are scarce, while the rest search for a way to connect with consumers on a deeper level. Sincere authenticity may be an impossible standard for most of these brands and the marketers behind them. It would be a big step if marketers could simply resist the temptation of being inauthentic.

Marketers can no longer rely on consumers believing what they hear. The Curator Culture cuts both ways—consumers reward the sincere and expose the disingenuous. As John Feldman, partner at the law firm Reed Smith said, “If

you're in the business of selling candy, sell candy; if you're in the business of selling burgers, sell burgers. Where marketers need to tread carefully in this high-stakes game of 'gotcha' is in dressing up products as healthy when they're not."<sup>1</sup>

It's only a matter of time before Pepsico is exposed for the insincerity of its Smart Spot program. Pepsico places this green symbol on products where some bad ingredient has been removed or reduced. So Diet Pepsi, Cap'n Crunch's Swirled Berries, Baked Cheetos, and Diet Mountain Dew carry an endorsement that implies positive nutrition simply because Pepsico sells a product that's worse. Rather than "astroturfing" brands as healthier than they really are, companies like Pepsi are better served by simply being honest by creating a portfolio of nutritional choices.

Pepsi's tactics contrast to those of a courageous independent New England grocer named Hannaford Supermarkets. Hannaford offers its customers Guiding Stars, an honest rating of the nutritional value of its products. An unbiased board assigns a number of stars to each food item Hannaford sells, often to the disdain of its own vendors.

An infamous example of corporate duplicity was the controversy surrounding the Working Families for Wal-Mart blog. At first glance, the site appeared to be a grassroots organization countering the public criticism of Wal-Mart by union-backed groups like Wake Up Wal-Mart and Wal-Mart Watch. But it was later revealed that this site was actually created by Wal-Mart and their public relations company, Edelman. Wal-Mart was publicly flogged for creating the impression of spontaneous, grassroots behavior.

This reflected poorly on both Wal-Mart and Edelman. Quickly learning the lesson, Edelman's CEO, Richard Edelman, apologized on his blog for not being straightforward about the identity of the bloggers and accepted responsibility for the implied deception. He left the opportunity to comment on his post open. Although many took this opportunity to attack his judgment, his transparency helped heal some of the damage done by the fiasco and worked towards restoring

the company's integrity.

When a company doesn't present itself authentically, its image has a lot to lose. It's a WIKI world where the world is watching and instantly exposes those who obfuscate, validates the honest, and rights the wrongs.

## **YOU SHARE THE BRAND**

In the current zeitgeist, the "tell-and-sell" approach of traditional advertising is waning. Today's consumers have become accustomed to having a growing impact on the success of a brand. So, when a company invites its customers to participate in their brand, it's saying that it values them and their opinion.

It can begin with small gestures, like when M&Ms let consumers vote to pick their new candy color. Converse allows users to design their own shoes online, offering almost infinite possibilities. LEGO allows users to design and buy their own custom LEGO models, and share their designs with others in the online gallery.

Sharing the brand can also include courting the curators directly. Director Bryan Singer interrupted shooting for Superman Returns to fly halfway around the world to meet with fans at Comic-Con in San Diego. He spent hours meeting with nontraditional media, taking hard questions about the movie from its most passionate fans. His gesture won rave reviews from the online community and excellent publicity for the film.

Brands such as Doritos and Chevy have allowed consumers to create their television commercials. While I believe this particular tactic will be a short-lived novelty, it does signal the shift to share brands with consumers. Consumers have come to expect such level of participation in the brands they buy. And, even if they don't take advantage of the access, the inclusion is critical to creating armies of brand curators.

It doesn't take going to great lengths to give your consumer a seat at the table.

Leaders of companies like JetBlue and Sun Microsystems are using blogs to provide a glimpse into their operations. Targeting their most involved and potentially loyal customers as well as their internal audience of employees, these companies are hooking a new generation on corporate transparency. And once transparency becomes the norm, expectations are changed forever. Those who lag will be deemed “closed” and less trustworthy.

## **BRAND AS ADVOCATE**

We trust peers who share our experiences (e.g., parents, car enthusiasts, etc.) or share our values (e.g., political organization, church, etc. ). We regard these communities as peers whose mutual self-interest guides us in choosing products or political candidates. How can a company marketing a product compete with such shared advocacy? Some companies actually rise to the level of peer by putting the consumer’s interests above its own.

Progressive Insurance boldly assumes the role of consumer advocate as part of its identity. Progressive gathers car insurance quotes from its own company as well as its competitors, and puts all of the quotes right on the homepage. As their ads state, sometimes Progressive offers the lowest price, sometimes it doesn’t. This straightforward approach allows Progressive to position its brand as a peer looking out for you. And it backs it up in the most credible way possible. The result is a company that garners trust and credibility with its customers. The tactic also draws traffic to its site, which improves its search engine success. And, it works – Progressive is the number one search result on Google when you search for “auto insurance.”

Consumers are probing deeper into the products they buy. They want to know how the products are made, the labor conditions, and the social responsibility of the makers. Companies are racing to learn how they can be better corporate citizens and appeal to the changing sensitivities of their audiences.

Other companies create advocacy by bringing complementary and even competitive brands into their sphere. They surround themselves with an

ecosystem of other brands that extends the utility of their brands, adds cachet, or quickly leverages trends.

While Apple has been criticized for its closed operating system, its retail strategy is remarkably open. Apple stores don't just carry Apple products. They also sell carefully selected products from partners like Bose, Epson, JBL, and Canon. This allows Apple to jump quickly on trends such as new styles of laptop cases and, therefore, extend their own brand. This type of brand interaction affords a company like Canon the cachet of being merchandised in Apple's temples of urban hip. The positive association of the Apple brand rubs off on every product in the store (if it's in the Apple store, it must be good). But, most importantly, Apple offers competitors' iPod speaker systems right next to its own to insure that consumers at every price point have optimum utility of its core iPod. Apple sells more iPods while leveraging an ecosystem of brand choices, positioning the company as the consumer's advocate. Apple rises to the level of a trusted peer, becoming a curator brand.

## **THE COURAGE TO DIFFERENTIATE**

The new consumer values originality and can easily perceive "me-too" brands. The courage to differentiate from other brands is a weapon against mediocrity. Nobody rushes to share a mediocre experience with a friend. But, I underscore "courage," as most companies' tendency to frame brands errs to the familiar, leaving the courageous few to be envied.

No matter how the tools of communication evolve, consumers still relate to a great story. If a brand is the sum total of consumers' perception of a product, then branding is the collection of stories that affect that perception. But, now that technology is in the hands of the populace, companies no longer control the message's delivery. It used to be that putting a TV commercial on a particular program meant that the ad would be viewed by the number in that audience (minus those who got up to use the bathroom). But, thanks to a lot more channels and commercial-skipping DVRs, it's becoming far less likely that the message will

be heard. Viral marketing is based on chance and hope because the audience decides what is viral-worthy. Passing an email with a YouTube video link is the 21st century's version of word-of-mouth.

If companies regard their audience as potential curators of products, of experiences, of stories, they are far more likely to give us something that will provoke us to engage and evangelize. Southwest Airlines understands the power of the story. Since its beginning, Southwest has made its marketing message about “love.” Its NYSE ticker is “LUV,” promotional gel luggage grips are given to loyal customers as “luv handles,” and they held a “luv story contest” inviting people to share love stories related to Southwest for a chance to win prizes. In fact, over its 35 years, pretty much every promotion for Southwest has integrated the idea of “luv.” It has paid off with a distinctive, friendly, accessible image that has a very distinct personality and character in a crowded marketplace.

And Southwest employees have true brand instinct: the visceral understanding of what's on-brand and what's off-brand. You can feel this instinct when interacting with its employees and with those of other service brands such as In-N-Out Burger, Four Seasons Hotels, and Starbucks. I believe this comes far more from the intangible understanding and appreciation of a brand's spirit than from training sessions and manuals.

## **BRANDING ELATION**

A common misconception is that the opposite of dissatisfaction is satisfaction. Satisfaction falls in the middle of the continuum. The opposite of dissatisfaction is something more like elation. Satisfaction should be the bare minimum companies expect from us.

The brands that realize that they can provide beyond the minimum will connect more profoundly with their customers. JetBlue doesn't just give its customers a small packet of peanuts for travel. Rather, they include snacks like Terra Chips, pistachio biscotti, and jumbo cashews—and they certainly don't charge for them. Every seat has DirectTV and XM Satellite Radio, and in select airports, free

wireless hotspots are provided. Best of all, they keep their prices competitive, which has earned them a loyal, evangelistic customer base. This, coupled with its CEO's sincere apology posted as an online video, got them over a dramatic lapse in their service last winter.

As trite as it sounds, consumers do feel special bonds with the very few brands that rise to the level of peer. If you think of brands as friends, you trust the ones who don't let you down, make you feel special in some way, and bring other friends into your circle.

Where the brand and customer meet, you'll find shared values and experiences. When a company focuses on a well-defined niche, its consumers feel understood. When a company is honest and authentic, its consumers feel free to trust. When a company shares its brand with its consumers, they make them feel valued. When a brand is a sincere advocate, its consumers feel engaged. When they have the courage to truly differentiate and they give people something great to curate, consumers become spokespeople and tell others. While you might not be able to put your finger on exactly why you love the brands you do, they stand out above the others by instinctively understanding the power of the Curator Culture.

1 - Stephanie Thompson and Lisa Sanders, Advertising Age, January 17, 2007

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