

Marketing to the digital healthcare community

How the impact of digital networking on healthcare marketing is leaving some marketers and their brands behind...

Seven years ago, I found myself rummaging around under desks in a stark concrete basement at the end of a neglected corridor, under the teaching hospital in Addis Ababa. We were laying Ethernet cables next to the pathology lab to connect the first computing network, in the first computing room, of Ethiopia's first teaching hospital. It was one of digital's early corporate social responsibility projects, and although I was there to think about what would come down these telecom pipes, without them in place nothing much was going anywhere.

A few weeks later the *British Medical Journal* poured down those pipes and onto screens across the computing room. Doctors, students, researchers, and stray NGO workers were suddenly connected to what I have been calling ever since 'the digital networked society' (DNS).

It's hard not to overstate the significance of the crossing point we witnessed that day. Suddenly the teams in Addis had at their fingertips most of the resources of a London research institute; the tears and excitement on senior doctors' faces is something I still cherish, and just for helping some guys connect cables.

That's the scale of change the medical industry has had to come to terms with. The web knocks down barriers we've all taken as unmoveable. It removes frictions in the movement of knowledge, with scant regard for geography, professional memberships, copyright, comprehension of the receiver, structure, quality, and often the laws that regulate the medical sector so inflexibly offline.

WHEN WORLDS CHANGE...

These changes arrive at sudden crossing points like that day in Addis, heralding shocks to the status-quo, and creating new models for communication that everyone has to rapidly learn. Publishers, readers, manufacturers, consumers, medical practitioners; all have to individually figure out how they are (re)connected together in these new spaces.

And then it changes again. The pace of innovation may be daunting, but many long-term themes are clear. Patients will self-diagnose and share their findings with each other as well as their healthcare workers; access to information becomes democratised, and the *Google* generation acquire new

expectations for both knowledge and about how to manipulate it. Information comparison becomes immediate and richer, but misinformation sits alongside academic papers within the same search results listings; citations become an augmented part of all content, but *Wikipedia* recasts the notions of 'truth'; unknown companies illegally sell uncontrolled and unregulated pharmaceuticals – using the same tools that allow primary healthcare workers to relay diagnostic data from the field.

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AND THEN... CHANGE AGAIN

After the dotcom crash, a series of success-story digital firms started to emerge. From around 30 different strands, the genes of the second generation of internet communications was isolated. In an industry infamous for its jargon, 'Web 2.0' became the new buzzword, and *Facebook*, *Google*, *Craigslist*, *MySpace*, *Flickr*, *Wikipedia* et al became household names.

These digital genes included the creation of platforms that connect people together (social networks), the ability to produce and then share content with others (social media), success in architecting frameworks for participation (rather than producing all the content), and extracting and processing some of a community's knowledge, then sharing it back (collective intelligence). There are many more, but these have some of the strongest implications for brands, and illustrate the scale of the change.

HOW DO MARKETERS NAVIGATE WEB 2.0?

These are huge issues, because as social networking has transferred online, new networking platforms and techniques have opened up. With them come many new ways to reach customers, and thousands of social spaces brands can participate in. As tools such as blogs, personal profiles and social media have become more accessible, anyone who wants to has been able to create a web page. They can air an opinion that becomes discoverable through search engines and leave a breadcrumb trail about your brand.

If that seems a little daunting, the good news is that while there are thousands of tools, marketers have only five main ways to harness them:

1. Architecting their own communities
2. Participating directly within a community
3. Sponsoring or be associated with specific communities
4. Supplying community participants with information and motivation
5. Observing and learning from how participants discuss and behave in relation to their brands.

SO WHAT IS 'BLENDED MARKETING'... AND WHY DO MARKETERS GET IT WRONG?

Blended marketing is neither new, nor transient. Using the best media channels to integrate your messaging across platforms is so elementary we hardly acknowledge it. Yet why do these principles so often fail to retain traction in online? Because all too often, marketing behaviour is repeated, rather than rebuilt.

HOW CAN I DEVELOP A MORE BLENDED APPROACH?

Here are five things to try in your next campaigns:

1. *Try placing the web at the heart of the mix, using it as an engine to process and advance the brand activation created through other channels*
2. *Extend the depth and richness of information on your own site, by letting its content and messages reach out into the high traffic digital media properties your target audiences now log onto*
3. *Try using the web as a return path to connect customers back to the brand*
4. *Try harnessing established technologies like podcasts and videocasts routinely to present and discuss products at a time convenient to the viewer*
5. *Try taking part in conversations with your customers to listen and respond.*

Five ways to get there:

1. *Open your minds and your browsers; explore the new networked spaces to increase understanding of how they work*
2. *Free up the time of your best people; let them lead and give them the space they need*
3. *Be prepared to change; uncover ways to listen effectively to market signals, and create ways to be responsive and adapt*
4. *Learn; build digital marketing learning into the fabric of your business*
5. *Experiment; unless you continue exploring the diversity of digital channels, you won't keep up with the changing environment.*

'Integration' doesn't mean simply making the web banners look like the press artwork. That 'matching luggage' approach is only a starting point, not the end-game. 'Media-neutral' doesn't mean simply choosing your channels based on where audiences are. Sure, people have reduced the time they spend with classic media (printed journals, broadcast television, magazines etc), and their switch to the web at home and at work demands every marketer re-evaluate their strategic mix of media.

Smart marketers are blending channels together to exploit the unique communication powers of each platform. They replace the monologue approach that dominated marketing, with dialogue. They harness the opinions and voices of their customers to endorse the brand, rather than simply presenting it. They create communications in tune with the culture of a landscape rich in blogs and wikis. And along the way, they will probably build a whole new model of how campaigns work.

WHAT MORE CHANGES LIE AHEAD?

The good news is that for a channel with so much change, the future isn't as opaque as many think; or at least, not all of it. Here are 10 strands that your marketing will need to harness in the near future:

1. The web will become many times more important to your customers than it is today. Treat today as the early steps in a transition to the digital networked society, not the end point
2. Your customers will develop a portfolio of online communities they refer to for advice, recommendation and peer reassurance about your products – they will place their trust in what they hear
3. Many media brands from classic media will make the transition to the digital networked economy, still delivering you an audience, but often using different publishing models
4. The value of information is weak without context; search engines and communities provide context and enhance value
5. What you are familiar with on the web today will migrate into our pockets tomorrow; mobile platforms are simply a gateway into the same data
6. As the barriers of access to knowledge melt away at every step in the supply chain, more questions will be asked and more answers needed to be found
7. Getting your products and information found at the very moment of a customer's greatest potential interest will remain critical, but the number of tools and techniques will continue to swell
8. If your firms' actions fail to match their words, the gap will be exposed
9. Achieving impact when communicating through your classic channels will continue to be pressured
10. The businesses that succeed will be those with adaptive marketing structures that can learn these new environments and quickly respond.

Author : Danny Meadows-Klue is founder of DigitalTrainingAcademy.com. He can be contacted at Danny@DigitalStrategyConsulting.com