

1 Marketing in the Age of Participation

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The moment it all crystallized for me stands out very clearly in my mind. It was early 2005, and I was still working in marketing at Hewlett-Packard (HP). I had to organize a meeting for a large global product launch for the Imaging and Printing Group and was specifically focused on helping the team develop launch plans for the United States. It had a significant digital marketing concept central to the big creative idea, which was something new. Big ideas, however, were not new; in fact, finding that magical big idea was the ultimate marketer's goal. The quest to uncover it usually began with a television concept that we would extend into the print and digital environments—if it worked. We had been counting on this formula for a number of years, and it had generally been a recipe for reasonable success.

But this time was different. The entire idea *itself* was about eliciting a response. The brilliant concept was designed to ignite participation from the individuals whom our message was trying to reach. This was not a “send out the message and see what happens” campaign. The idea itself was big, brilliant, and beautiful—but insufficient. In addition to the fact that we were asking for feedback, our audience actually had the tools to *take action*. This was significant, and that campaign suddenly made the notion of integration incredibly important.

Even before this campaign came about, I had acknowledged the growing challenges related to media interconnectedness. I understood how crucial integration was to achieve ultimate program effectiveness. Yet as important as it was, and as easy as it sounded, integration had suddenly become incredibly complex.

I was beginning to appreciate the challenges facing marketers in the new environment. The big idea, messages that had previously worked so well, were beginning to fail for several of reasons:

- 1. Despite the fact that digital was—and is—outpacing all other mediums the television “big ideas” conquered all.** Even today, creative agencies are generally masters at crafting persuasive entertaining pieces designed for television, a medium meant for leaning back and being entertained. They usually don't even consider or invite audience participation. Ironically, in this case, the idea and tagline of the HP printing campaign was, “What do you have to say?”—which referred to the individual expression reflected in someone's printed piece. The tagline was a literal invitation for people to participate by building and printing individual creative pieces. HP invited participants to “say” something using creative units that didn't function well; they hadn't given much thought to how they would actually receive the “response” or engage in the dialogue. The harsh truth was we really didn't *want* them to tell us “what they had to say”; we just thought the tagline was a good way to articulate self-expression, something that generally resonated well with individuals using printers. As good creative agencies usually do, the big idea struck the central nervous system of a cultural theme a little ahead of its time. Customers really did want a “say” and wanted to participate. We just weren't prepared for the response, nor did we go about creating an environment that conscientiously fostered participation.
- 2. Digital was the stepchild no one wanted to own and an afterthought.** Big creative agencies invested heavily in their creative and production talent in 2005. Their experience was in television and print. These agencies generally outsourced, often even contracting offshore, with small shops to create the web experience, that is, to do the actual coding for the ads or the sites,

usually as a way to save money. This meant that the end products sometimes didn't work correctly on the web and the concepts were never developed for the relationship medium. In addition, these other agencies usually built and managed other important digital cornerstones. The digital experience was built for creative units that were beautiful to the eye, meaning they were built in Flash and therefore invisible to search engines. So even if they *did* function properly and looked beautiful, no one could find them.

I discovered this the hard way—with a bit of a twist. Shortly before the campaign launch, we discovered that we had a poorly designed web experience and made the seemingly easy decision to hire another firm to take over. However, the coding was done in Portuguese and actually *finding* a firm with experience recoding Flash in that language was not as easy. We never would have outsourced the television component; we did this only with the digital assets, which firmly illustrated their priority and value in the marketing mix. And although this has changed somewhat today, it's not as much as one might expect given the importance of digital and search. According to the 2009 Global Interactive Marketing Organization and Agency Survey, most brand organizations have fewer than 10 employees working in digital. Despite the fact that digital mediums are growing, digital spend is still relatively small. In fact, a recent ZenithOptimedia ad forecast indicates that 95 percent of all future advertising growth will be on a screen (television and Internet). This study does not yet track mobile advertising growth, but it is projected to grow exponentially. This reinforces the importance of television and the increasing importance of interactive mediums.

- 3. Media was an after-thought in the process.** And as I mentioned, it was frequently done by a different agency—and wasn't considered and involved until too late in the campaign process. Media innovation around the big idea had great potential, but

because the creative agency was the genesis of big ideas and consequently the owner of strategy and innovation, the media partner was brought in at the last moment for efficiency purposes. Any opportunities for further integration were subsequently lost. This, too, is improving today. In the 2012 Cannes Lions competition, the advertising industry's largest global annual awards show and festival for professionals in the creative communications industry, there were a number of creative entries in the media category and media entries in the creative categories. This is an indication that more campaigns—and certainly the best—are now effectively blending creative, media, and technology.

- 4. All marketing assignments were designed as a form of persuasive entertainment.** This is the most fundamental reason for the impending failures. Marketers assumed that people were waiting to be entertained passively with a big idea that might influence an opinion—and that they were basically uninformed and required assistance in making a decision about a product or service. For decades, marketing's role was to aid people who simply needed information about a product in order to make a decision. This is where the idea of awareness originated. Programs were not designed to build a relationship with a person; we never asked ourselves what action we wanted them to take or thought of developing a two-way relationship. It never occurred to us to build programs fundamentally designed with participation in mind. And why should it have? Marketing tools, processes, and philosophies had developed and matured long before people used their computers, smartphones, or tablets to conduct an Internet search or ask their social network for feedback on a certain product or service.

On this particular day, I was working on integration planning. I began assembling a list of individuals and their respective agency

partners who worked across multiple marketing disciplines required to launch the campaign. Individuals who managed their discipline needed to understand the other functional plans in order to see how the overall marketing program was connected. The more connected and integrated a program is, the stronger it becomes, especially in the new digital landscape. For example, paid search and organic search required coordination and integration for optimal effectiveness. Yet since *my* organization managed paid search, it was tied to advertising and marketing and therefore it was integrated with advertising flight schedules. The corporate information technology (IT) department managed organic search, and the campaign was not even on their radar. Nor did they consider it their role to integrate with the campaign at all. In general, search should be coordinated with direct marketing, which was managed by yet *another* group; with public relations; and so on. Somehow, all of these teams and their agencies had never even met one another until the day I brought them into the same meeting to discuss launch coordination and integration.

To plan the meeting, I had to track down individuals who managed various disciplines and identify their respective marketing partners. Eventually, the invitee list reached 60 people. How was I ever going to schedule a meeting for this many people? Even if I did get a reasonable attendance rate, how would we ever get through or plan the coordination in a way that both added value to individual functions and made the overall plan stronger? This was the moment that I realized that although we were operating using traditional marketing tools and processes, the world had changed. I knew that in order to plan, develop, and launch successful programs, marketing was due for an overhaul.

The meeting actually took place. I don't believe all 60 individuals made an appearance, although a number showed up in the room and others joined via phone. As each team discussed their individual

plans and other teams asked questions, the overlap became very evident. In many cases, individual managers were not even asking the right questions about their individual programs, because they lacked information about other programs that ultimately affected their own. The tools, philosophies, processes, goals, and approaches—even the language around marketing—simply were not working any longer.

We have long known that big companies always have silos, and they're less than optimal at internal communications, which can often limit even seemingly obvious connections. Similar to any company, these teams were simply doing their jobs as they always had. The difference was *me*. I was no longer content with the “old” way. I struggled for a way to help others see the light, but I didn't have much success. The same conversations with the same words just occurred over and over again, which led to us using the same tools we had been using for years.

Words have always been important to marketers, who are masters at finding the right words, the right essence, and the right feeling to change perception. If you could change perception, then it was generally thought that a change in action would eventually follow. This is the core essence of any marketing brief: persuasive words that describe how one feels and how we want that person to feel after receiving our message. Marketers talk a lot about what we do and are doing to others. I was listening with a new ear, though, and suddenly it all seemed to have no meaning in the new world: *Above the line, below the line, big idea, marketing message, viral, reach, frequency, target, audience*—even *consumer*—I was just as guilty as everyone else, unconsciously using them over and over every day without really knowing what they meant or where they came from.

The marketing and media landscape in 2005 was decidedly less complex compared with today's highly networked complex environment. The rise of social media, the mobile explosion, and the fragmentation of media globally are increasing complexity.

Perhaps even more fundamental than the landscape in which we work in is the basic mind-set shift of the focus for *all* marketing efforts: the consumer. The evolution of consumer sophistication and expectations is demanding a change in our marketing fundamentals, more so than any other single factor. Having lived or been born with technology tools that arm them with a constant supply of information, today's consumers now have new expectations about their relationships with the brands whose products and services they use. They have evolved well beyond the uninformed, passive, undecided individuals they once were. They are new participants who expect to join, connect, share, take part, and engage with other people and brands. They believe that their voice makes a difference—and they're right.

Because I worked for a big global company on a market-leading product line, I had the privilege of working with brilliant agencies to architect beautiful creative masterpieces. These were mostly big ideas designed first for television and intended to wow consumers into finding out more about something they were unaware of. Although these concepts were stunningly elegant and beautiful, they often didn't translate well in the interactive environment—because they were not *designed* for the participative environment. We never asked the question, "What action do you want someone to take when he or she sees this? That is, until the "What do you have to say?" campaign came about. Suddenly, we *were* asking them to take an action and *do* something. We weren't prepared for the response, but the new participant was expecting more than a response. They were expecting a reciprocal *relationship*.

The decades of marketing in one-way communication messages were gone. This realization suddenly led to my desire to find out how we got here to begin with—and set out to understand more about the history of marketing before beginning the journey into marketing for the future.

Participant Marketing Summary

1. The controlled and linear tools, processes, and philosophies we use for marketing were developed for a different era in marketing, not today's Participation Age.
2. Most marketing ideas have been generated by creative shops that are masters at crafting persuasive and entertaining pieces designed for television, a medium meant for leaning back and being entertained. They rarely consider formulating ideas around inviting audience participation.
3. Media is generally an afterthought in the process—an approach that is not conducive to the dynamic and complex media environment we live in today.
4. Inviting action and tracking performance are on most marketer wish lists, but they are often difficult to implement.
5. It's nearly impossible to deliver truly integrated marketing in today's fragmented and complex media environment, and it's increasingly difficult for marketers to control this delivery.
6. Many marketers are not even aware of *why* they are using the language, tools, and processes they use every day, but they always have and continue to do so because it feels safe and there are few alternatives.