

Practice Papers

Brand journalism: How to engage successfully with consumers in an age of inclusive individuality

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Larry Light

LARRY LIGHT

is the Chief Executive Officer of Arcature, a marketing consulting company that has advised a wide variety of marketers in packaged goods, technology, retail, hospitality, automotive, corporate and business-to-business, as well as not-for-profit organisations. Along with Joan Kiddon, Larry Light authored a book, 'Six Rules for Brand Revitalization', describing Arcature's approach to producing measurable business results. Larry has earned an international reputation in business and academia. In summarising the top ten ideas of the decade, Ad Age selected Larry Light's 'Brand Journalism' as 'arguably the most realistic description of marketing today — perhaps ever'.

Abstract

Brand journalism helps brands engage powerfully with the modern consumer. Marketers must build consistent powerful brands in an environment that demands global consistency, local differentiation and personal relevance all at the same time. There is also an important development in customer values and behaviours. The customer wants to be respected as an individual and wants to feel they belong to something bigger than just themselves: this is called a need for 'inclusive individuality'. Brand journalism is the best approach for addressing these challenges.

Keywords

brand journalism, globalisation, localisation, personalisation, inclusive individualist, brand story, brand framework, content

BRAND JOURNALISM

In June 2004, the new concept of brand journalism was unveiled at a conference sponsored by Advertising Age. Brand journalism was the way McDonald's was approaching its marketing as part of the turnaround plan. Brand journalism is even more relevant today than it was ten years ago.

Brand journalism was defined as a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted way of creating a brand story. It means telling the many facets of the brand story when everyone knows the brand and what the brand means.

Brand journalism addresses the fact that a brand means different things in different

regions to different people in different situations. In the USA, The Holiday Inn brand is viewed as an affordable brand for family travellers while the Chinese perceive Holiday Inn as an upscale experience. In the USA, Holiday Inn satisfies different needs for a person travelling with their family on holiday compared to when that same person is on a business trip. In Europe, Pizza Hut is a sit-down Italian experience; in the USA, it is primarily for take-away pizza; in China, it is an exuberant atmosphere with a menu including close to 200 varied items.

A brand means different things to consumers on different occasions: at home or away from home; morning, afternoon or

Larry Light
Arcature LLC,
3 Stamford Landing Suite 300,
46 Southfield Avenue,
Stamford, CT 06902,
USA

Tel: +1 203 967 4900;
Fax: +1 203 967 3977;
E-mail: info@arcature.com

evening; breakfast, lunch, dinner or snack; late night, weekday or weekend; with kids, on a business trip, on a cruise, at a family gathering or at university.

For example, McDonald's addresses a relevant need for convenience, affordability and fun for a mother and her children on Saturday at lunch. It represents a different need for a sales executive on a business trip going through the drive-through to get a quick breakfast. It is a different experience for a group of young adults looking for something to eat late at night. It is a different experience in the suburbs of New York City than it is on the Ginza in Tokyo. Yet, it is all McDonald's.

At the time, the idea of brand journalism created quite a controversy. There were opinion columns and letters to the editor. For die-hards of traditional positioning, there was general outrage that marketing might be evolving and taking a new tack in connecting with consumers. The hard-liner, tradition-bound positionists refused to see that brand journalism was not harmful to brands but hugely helpful. Like Galileo's clerics, they declined to look through the telescope to see the wonders of the new marketing universe.

The idea of owning a single-minded, distilled word in the customer's mind worldwide is an out-of-date brand management idea. Marketers do not own the customer's mind. In this era of co-creation, sharing and engagement within marketing, the idea of owning the customer's mind is marketing arrogance.

Underlying brand journalism is the idea that a brand is not merely a simple word; it is a complex, multi-dimensional idea that includes differentiating features, functional and emotional benefits as well as a distinctive brand character. In this digital, mobile marketing world, no single communication can possibly relate a standardised brand message to every customer

that is relevant at the right time for the right reasons.

The concept is to think like a journalist. Think of the ongoing communications as the creation of a brand 'magazine', where each article is different, each edition is different and in each region it is different: different subjects, different topics, different messages; all coming together in a dynamic, interesting, relevant and coherent manner.

The Huffington Post, for example, It has sections, such as News, Lifestyle, Tech & Innovation, HuffPost Live and Best of HuffPost. Each section deals with different topics. Yet, *Huffington Post* has a coherent style and character. The stories are written in a different manner from the stories in *The Atlantic*.

Brand managers are brand journalists, who look not only at the subject matter, but also the brand style. A story about Bruce Springsteen for *Rolling Stone* must be written in a very different style than if it were written for BBC News. Yet everyone knows which is which and to which each belongs.

Brand journalism is about communicating a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted, complex set of brand messages in an integrated manner. There is an editorial policy, a brand framework of brand-defining non-negotiables within which marketing teams have the responsibility to be locally relevant and the flexibility to address individual differences.

In December 2009, Advertising Age listed brand journalism as one of the top ten most important ideas of the previous decade: 'It's arguably the most realistic description of marketing today — perhaps ever'. According to the writer, Matthew Creamer more marketers and agencies should be revisiting [brand journalism] ... in an age of instant customer feedback'.¹

Today, brand journalism has evolved from an adaptation of flexible marketing

communications to an even more journalistic approach for communications. As Brian Kress has stated: 'Brand Journalism is one of the top digital trends and is one of the most important trends for online marketers'.²

For example, when Cisco, the technology company, adopted brand journalism, it focused resources across multiple channels, seeking out great writers and stimulating, connective content. Cisco aims 'to lead a conversation about the industry, it represents'.³

As the world changes, brand journalism is evolving to reflect the new personal, digital and mobile environment. As a communications approach, it is an increasingly important tool for marketers, who must navigate through the forces that are altering this environment.

THE CHANGING WORLD

The forces of global, local and personal

Previously in the *Journal of Brand Strategy*, Larry Light has addressed the marketing challenges at the intersection of three powerful forces: globalisation, localisation and personalisation.⁴ How can marketers build consistent powerful brands in an environment that demands global consistency, local differentiation and personal relevance all at the same time?

Increased globalisation is a marketing reality. In a digital, mobile world, what happens anywhere can be known everywhere. There is no place to hide. A globally coherent brand strategy is an imperative, not an option.

Globalised marketing does not mean marketing standardisation. Regionalisation and localisation must also be respected. Ignoring regional and local differences is a perilous brand strategy. Cultural, legal,

social, demographic, behavioural, distribution and media pertinent to a specific locale are important differences that challenge a global brand plan.

This ever-morphing world is creating a great opportunity for an evolved approach to brand marketing. How can brands achieve personalisation in a globally coherent manner that also reflects regional needs?

Personalisation of customer experiences is a growing customer expectation. Added to the mix today is the accelerating growth in consumer desires for individualised experiences that reflect personal needs, attitudes and situations.

The marketing world is globally interconnected, regionally differentiated and personally individualised all at the same time. Winning brands will manage these three forces so that they develop a coherent brand promise.

The inclusive individualist

There is also an important development in customer values and behaviours. The customer wants to be respected as an individual and wants to feel they belong to something bigger than just themselves: feeling independent and interdependent at the same time. This is called a need for 'inclusive individuality'. Customers want to be respected as unique individuals and they do not want to feel uniquely alone.

The explosion of digital and mobile channels provides marketers with the ability to cater to the need for 'inclusive individuality'. Everyone has the ability to personalise and predict with hyper-relevant content. Customers have the ability to individualise their experiences and also share these experiences with the various global, regional and local 'communities', to which they choose to belong.

The 'Age of Me' and inclusive individuality

The focus on increased personalisation is not the same as it was in the consciousness-raising, self-focused, self-absorbed, self-actualising era of the 1960s and 1970s. Then, it was 'all about me': 'let me do my own thing' and 'what's in it for me?' It was a self-centred, self-interested, self-obsessed era. Everyone hailed non-conformity, breaking with the past, with anti-establishment, rejection of family values and structure. No wonder it became known as the 'Age of Me'.

Advertising during the Age of Me reflected this 'me mentality'. The now defunct Braniff Airlines ran an advert featuring Andy Warhol and Sonny Liston using Liston's mantra: 'If you got it, flaunt it'. Nice 'N Easy Hair Color said: 'It lets me be me'. Hertz said: 'Hertz puts you in the driver's seat'.

Historian Richard Miller wrote that the 1960s 'was about liberty, meaning the absence of physical, mental, emotional, cultural, and even biological restraint. . . . This idea . . . is Autonomy'.⁵

This age of 'inclusive individuality' is different. There is the intersection of individuality and the simultaneous desire for inclusiveness: 'instead of the world revolving around me, I want a world that includes, understands, respects and recognises me'. People savour individuality and they desire inclusivity at the same time. People want to be independent yet want to be interconnected. Individuality is important. Commonalities are important. People want to be unique and they want to share their uniqueness with like-minded people.

MARKETING IN TODAY'S WORLD

With all these changes, modern marketing requires an approach that informs and maximises both individuality and

inclusiveness. Consumers want a constant, continuing flow of valuable, relevant and engaging content — articles, blog posts, live events, videos and social media. They want to respond as individuals and they want to share as members of a community of common interests. This digital, mobile mind set is great news for brands. Digital allows content to be rich and engaging. As David Aaker states: 'An engaged audience will be susceptible to listening, learning, believing and behaviour change'.⁶

When it comes to communications in the current world, a single, standardised, inflexible brand message with oversimplified content is suicidal frankly, when the customer is thinking: 'I am an individual with unique individual wants and needs. And my needs are different depending on my current situation. But, I am not alone. I belong to a local/regional/global community of people who are just like me'.

Digital connections make this all possible. Everyone is an independent individual who belongs to multiple, virtual communities. People have gone from self-magazine to selfies. People have left counter-culture for connected culture.

With the many social media opportunities available today, brand journalism makes any brand a media publisher in the vast sense of what publishing is in this age of inclusive individuality. Brand journalism enables marketers to address the challenges of the global-regional-personalised marketing world. For example, Coke Zero created a 'my favourite dance moves' social media event that aligned inclusive individualists around the world.⁷

The inclusive individualist is the new marketing tsunami. How can marketers make the global-regional-personalised approach work to develop powerful brands that engage the inclusive individualist?

Over the course of the past ten years, marketing has experienced a significant

change. In 2004, when brand journalism was born, the dominant approaches to marketing communications were still standard television, print newspapers, promotional flyers, music, outdoor boards and packaging. Digital and mobile content were still viewed as 'experimental'. True, everyone had a mobile phone; and they actually used them to make phone calls.

Given the ever-evolving, digital, split-second, techno-laden, app-overloaded, real-time, location-based, mobile world in which people now live, brand journalism is even more important as a marketing platform. It also helps to create the sense of 'insider-belonging' that an inclusive individualist desires because it cultivates curiosity about the brand. As Business2Community.Com articulated in 2012:

'Brand journalism represents a new type of content creation that businesses are clamoring to get a grasp of. Quality content that enables a more intimate conversation between brands and their target audiences is beginning to prove more effective than almost any other online marketing strategy.'⁸

BRAND JOURNALISM AND THE INCLUSIVE INDIVIDUALIST

Brand journalism is perfect for the inclusive individualist because it creates multi-channel, multi-layered communications that, over time, tell the whole story of a brand in the consumer's global-regional-personal context. Brand journalism today is the marriage of brand management and storytelling. Brand journalism takes both skill sets and merges them into a communications platform. It allows for the creation and curating of information, while encouraging sharing and generating engagement. Brand journalism educates, brings continued interest and encourages loyalty. It enhances the brand experience, adding depth and relevance.

The defence contractor, Raytheon, takes brand journalism very seriously, and hired writers to bring the Raytheon story to life. Chris Hawly came from Associated Press (AP). He says:

'I'm helping to build a news operation. We are working at Raytheon like an AP beat to find interesting stories and tell the world about them in a way that engages. We have bureau chiefs in all of our four divisions. They have certain products that they want to talk about so we try to find new and interesting ways of exploring those stories. And we refine the story ideas, assign writers and we're doing a lot of training on editing and getting those stories out.'⁹

Brand journalism brings focus to the convergence of branded communications in a time when carefully crafted, engaging content is critical. Brand journalism demands much more than a repetitive communication of a standardised inflexible, uniform, simplistic brand message. It is about creating and communicating an ongoing, flexible, interesting brand story that is globally coherent, regionally differentiated and personally relevant.

At the 2014 World Economic Forum in Davos, Richard Solomons, CEO of the Intercontinental Hotels Group (IHG) discussed the implications of a new IHG report describing the opportunity for global brands by harnessing the intersection of global coherence, local relevance and personal differentiation. It stated:

'For 21st century consumers, the global and local dimensions of brands no longer offer enough on their own. Global brands must be personal, too, by adapting product and service experiences that are different from one person to the next. Consumers want the familiarity, reliability, safety and authority of global brands. They want the reflection of their local and regional values.'

And, they want their personal uniqueness respected and addressed.'

Managing the intersection of these forces requires the marketing skills of brand journalism.¹⁰

IMPLICATIONS FOR BRAND JOURNALISM MARKETING

First, brand journalism should play a role in global brand marketing. Using brand journalism, an evolving brand story can communicate its consistent global character, its local differentiation in each and every country or county or city and its personal relevance by segment, by micro segment, by individual.

Brand journalism allows local and/or regional teams the power to prioritise their activities and tell relevant brand stories that create genuine consumer engagement. At the same time, brand journalism strengthens the global brand through coherent brand messages building global credibility.

As recently pointed out in 'How to choose the right digital marketing model', 'Consumers increasingly demand marketing messages and offers that are highly personalised, relevant and targeted'. So, Virgin customises the entire journey from purchasing through flight to destination experiences. 'Virgin is investing in a more interactive and personalised in-flight experience that is tailored to different segments of travellers'. If someone is heading to Paris, they could have in-flight messages regarding the best new restaurants. Who they are will dictate the kinds of entertainment they receive.⁷

Secondly, brand journalism forces marketers to be conversationalists. There is a recognised new emphasis on engaging consumers rather than preaching to

consumers. During the 1990s, moving from monologue to dialogue was a popular mantra. Today, the move is from dialogue to 'multi-logue' communications. With multiple formats providing personalised content in a sharing environment, dialogue has morphed from two-way communications to a multiplicity of shared opinions, expertise, editing, aggregation and openness. Instead of just two-way communications, this is a world of multi-way communications with consumers and prospects.

The MSNBC cable newscaster, Brock Meeks, now manages Ideas Lab, a website run by Atlantic Media Strategies but owned and paid for by General Electric (GE). Ideas Lab is an online site for 'thought leaders' in the 'advanced manufacturing space'. It is Meeks' job to generate content and gather and then coordinate ideas submitted by industry leaders. He also checks in with GE. GE provides this discussion forum for issues of great interest to thought leaders while at the same time, providing GE with a dialogue-platform and an arena for breakthrough thinking.¹¹

Joe Pulizzi, the founder of the Content Marketing Institute, says: 'Every company now must also be a media company. If you want to connect with your customers, you'd better be where they are online, and you'd better have some interesting information to share with them'.³

Thirdly, brand journalism enhances the overall brand experience and generates fuller consumer engagement. Through personalised, relevant, interesting and insightful information, people form deeper relationships with a brand. As Kevin Burke, Chief Marketing officer for Visa said at the Ad Age Fall 2013 Digital Conference, media's goal is to create 'irresistible shared content that will generate mass, shared reach'. Visa evaluates marketing by asking: 'Why would a consumer care?'¹² This is the purpose of brand

journalism. Why should the inclusive individualist care? Why should they pay attention, be interested, become engaged?

Brand journalism engages customers by providing personalised online experiences. In 2013, Karen T, Fondu of L'Oreal Paris USA, said:

'Loyal customers want the opportunity to engage on a deeper level with brands they are passionate about. Investing in digital, rewards our current customer base by providing them with the customised online experience they deserve, and serves as a tool to entice new customers.'¹³

Engaging pet owners and creating personalised experiences for owner and pet is at the heart of Purina's Just Right dog food brand. This online customisable brand asks the owner questions about the dog and its health. Then Purina provides food personalised for the pet. 'We built this brand on the belief that the best nutrition is personalised', says Brian Lester, Purina's director of marketing for innovation.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

Some marketing commentators claim there is an inevitable decline in brand loyalty. Certainly, there is an inevitable decline in the effectiveness for those marketers who continue to hang on to traditional, but out-of-date marketing ideas. Today's consumers want to be known, recognised, respected and valued as individuals. They want to feel special. Yet, they do not want to feel alone. They want to belong. They are savvy enough to know when the content is a pre-packaged, standardised, mass marketed sales pitch disguised as personalisation. Instead, they want a personal, engaging brand that puts the consumer's needs at the centre.

Since the launch of brand journalism in 2004, it is now a remarkably changed

media landscape with new abilities to make brand journalistic connections across all kinds of devices and geographies. As Hoque and Baer say: 'we're living in a global, increasingly interconnected economic and social environment. New technologies are changing fundamental relationships at an ever-accelerating pace'.¹⁵ Brand journalism provides the consumer with timely, relevant, focused, personalised content that helps in making better brand decisions in real time.

Brand journalism can be the most valuable tool in the marketing toolbox. Brand journalism captures the interests of the interconnected, inclusive individualists who want customised, connective content. Brand journalism offers the right messages to the right person in the right situation at the right time with the right content in the right format for the right device.

Now and forever, mass marketing is a mass mistake. Brand journalism allows for multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, multi-device, evolving brand stories. Brand journalism offers a solution to the challenges and opportunities created by media digitisation and the proliferation of social and sharing sites and virtual communities.

Marketers have the chance of a lifetime to connect and engage consumers with journalistic brand storytelling that they will want to consume. In this new era of inclusive individuality, brand journalism will be an increasingly important part of marketing's future.

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