

FINDING NEW MAGIC

HOW CAN BRANDS EARN TIME IN CONSUMERS' LIVES?

INNOVATOR FARIS YAKOB EXPLAINS HOW SCALE, EMPOWERMENT AND TECHNOLOGY CAN STILL DELIVER.

BY FARIS YAKOB

Advertisers are in a bind. Many fear they have too little to say to attract and hold consumer attention. In the past they could rely on traditional media owners to reach consumers. By advertising in commercial breaks around the edges of content they could take advantage of the audience that shows had aggregated.

Fragmentation has meant consumers are gathering in big numbers less and less and that the cost of taking advantage of the aggregation ability of others has become ever higher. The internet is the great disintermediator, connecting everything to everything, but this direct connection comes with a cost. Brands with little to say do not attract any attention in a world where communications are spread by consumer networks rather than broadcast ones.

However, the challenge isn't simply about distribution, it's also about the means of production. Until very recently, the ability to make something public, to publish, to a mass audience, was a privileged act. The powers that be historically outlawed the ability to disseminate information – unlicensed printing presses were illegal, as they still are under certain modern regimes, such as in Malaysia under the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984. When the age of mass media arrived, only governments, the

media industrial complex and the advertising industry were able to create and distribute culture. So when you saw such elements of culture, you couldn't help but be impressed.

The exponential impact of Moore's Law means that the computing power of a bespoke Silicon Graphics workstation, as used to create the special effects for Terminator 2 and Jurassic Park, can now be easily approximated on a consumer laptop. Digital technology has given every consumer the power to create content. The monetary power of brands no longer buys them uniqueness. We can all make films, we can all create web pages and we can all record our own music. The magic that exclusive access to this technology used to deliver has evaporated.

Content producers – the role traditionally taken by ad agencies in the marketing industry – no longer have exclusive access to the magic that is content creation. That isn't to say the quality of "consumer-generated content" [a tellingly oxymoronic term] is on par with Hollywood production. Rather, the gap between not being able to do something and being able to do it is infinite, but the gap between being bad and excellent is simply one of degree. It's hard to be amazed with any technical wizardry on film when you grow up



with iMovie at your fingertips. But all is not doom and gloom for smart brands. They still have strategic advantages in the eternal quest for consumer attention: technology and scale.

Technology provides a canvas that is yet to be effectively colonised by the amateur and, as Arthur C. Clarke famously pointed out, any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. Thus, technology provides a medium to amaze and cut through the clutter of content.

exclusively leverage the technologies for marketing. The problem with the blurring of the technology and the communications industries, however, is that they are divided by a common language. Words that should mean the same thing often mean something completely different to those on either side of the divide.

Take a simple word like platform. To a communications specialist it means an idea or theme that all messages fit into, but to a technology expert it means an underlying technology that enables other products

IN THE AGE OF THE EMPOWERED CONSUMER, BRANDS NEED TO IDENTIFY WHAT THEY CAN DO THAT CONSUMERS CANNOT, HOW THEY CAN ADD SOMETHING TO THEIR LIVES

Because technology companies often tout their latest tools to brands and media owners to help drive uptake, brands have first user advantages.

The Pepsi TEN project is an explicit manifestation of this advantage. The consumer packaged goods giant established a venture fund to support and partner with early stage technology start-ups in order to

or services to be built on it. This means that collaboration among disciplines can seem to be aligned when it isn't. At the extreme, creative directors trained in writing or graphic design find themselves being asked to review algorithms they can't understand, as code becomes a creative deliverable.

For brands to take advantage of technology and their first-access rights to new developments, they and their agents need to develop common understanding. Often it is the role of the strategist to translate business language into creative inspiration. Increasingly additional translations are necessary, evinced by the formation of new agency roles, reverse mentoring, and management training from groups like HyperIsland.

BRANDS DELIVER SCALE

The other area where brands still have an advantage over empowered consumers is their ability to deliver scale. Ironically this is often most powerful when delivered in traditional media environments. Digital channels may now deliver massive reach but the almost infinite nature of the web means it can lack the cultural impact of TV and the associated media that reports on it. Fragmentation leads to the counter intuitive fact that things can be incredibly popular on the internet and yet you may never hear about it.

Scale can be delivered in terms of audience. Doritos Crash the Superbowl campaign is

an old example but it classically leverages the consumer's ability to make films and incentivises them to participate with the opportunity to see their ad in the biggest TV event of the year.

Scale can be delivered via access. For all their digital tools, tablets and laptops won't get you close to the big stars, although Twitter disrupts even this advantage. Brands can leverage their corporate might to provide access to things that an individual's money can't buy. Coca-Cola experimented with an example of this when they sponsored a live, online 24-hour recording session with the band Maroon 5. The band composed and recorded a track, aided by feedback and suggestions from people online in real time.

Scale can also deliver empowerment. Pepsi Refresh is an unconventional example that allows consumers to get behind their favorite local group. Scale enabled them to gain access to funds that made a real difference to the causes their consumers cared about and as a result the campaign has been spread via their networks.

In the age of the empowered consumer, brands need to identify what they can do that consumers cannot, how they can add something to their lives.

Technology may be part of the answer, if brands and technologists can learn to speak the same language, but it could also be via the appropriate application of scale that gives consumers something that even the latest laptop, tablet or mobile cannot offer. The scale and complexity of multi-platform content presents a novel twist on the traditional competency – if brands can effectively harness transmedia storytelling, we may find a kind of content that consumers once again think of as magical.

@faris
www.farisyakob.com

Faris Yakob is Chief Innovation Officer at MDC Partners' kbs+ and co-founder of creative technology shop Spies&Assassins.



TECHNOLOGY PROVIDES A MEDIUM TO AMAZE AND CUT THROUGH THE CLUTTER OF CONTENT
