



Total Customer Immersion: The Rise of the Circle of Influence

THE SEVEN NEW PRINCIPLES OF PERSUASION

Given the control now exercised by consumers in the brand marketing arena, one could make the argument that any attempt at “persuasion” in the classic sense is chasing windmills.

That may be true with respect to interruptive, push style communications that by definition assumes the message can manipulate the outcome. In today’s world of brand transparency and two-way dialogue between brand and consumer, the map to communications success has been re-routed from “command and control” to “engage and assist.” It is through the co-mingling of interests and the authentic serving of consumer desires that bonds can be formed between brand and consumer.

Persuasion now moves from convince to help — helping a consumer believe something compelling about your brand. In the end the consumer will decide and the brand rests on its merits. Here now are the seven principles of persuasion appropriate to our brave new marketing world:

Soul

Strong brands have them. A soul is an over-arching inspiration based on a purpose that transcends mere commerce. The old world: products and brands exist to obtain money that in turn rewards investors. Today’s paradigm: money exists within companies to refine brands and products in order to

secure and retain customers. Profit and stockholder rewards are a benefit of this scenario when it plays out successfully. What is the brand’s purpose? And can it be defined at a level that has a chance to secure emotional meaning and value to its user.

Discovery

Red Bull’s remarkable rise as the creator and driver of energy beverages reveals a different approach to marketing — perhaps best described as un-marketing. The brand goes to great effort to help consumers feel as though they have discovered Red Bull. It is the antithesis of “hey look at me” shouting and interruptive clamoring that has been all too characteristic of go-to-market strategies for mainstream brands. Red Bull has regularly invested in understanding their core user and how to build a relationship, promote word-of-mouth by connecting the brand with experiences their target embraces. This more subtle and collegial approach permits the customer to experience the joy of discovery and a sense that the brand is their own.

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Immersion

Every point of contact the brand may have with the consumer matters. These points of interaction include not only those created by the company but also those created by consumers with regard to the company's brand, products and services. The theory behind Circle of Influence is built on the understanding that humans form their views from multiple sources and experiences that work to establish judgments and opinions. As we interact with a brand at home, at the store, on the Web, with friends, the sense of a brand's soul or lack of it is apparent. Total Customer Immersion looks at the brand/consumer relationship holistically and recognizes that everything matters – from the web site to 800 customer service line, the packaging, distribution, employee attitudes – all forms of public perception will register positively or negatively and should be considered in the context of a brand's public face – not just the PR.

Conversation

Perhaps one of the most troubling evolutionary conditions to rise up from the Internet era is the issue of brand transparency and the need for consumer dialogue. Marketing behavior has for years been built upon development of outgoing strategies, carefully crafted and executed to present the case for a product based on its brand DNA and product feature/benefit equation. Now consumers are talking back through blogs and other forms of populist journalism. It is uncomfortable at times to come out from behind the relative comfort of the one-way glass in focus group rooms and confront the consumer directly. If they don't like your ads, your packaging, your promotions, your business practices, you're going to hear about it. This is a good thing and should be welcomed. It's time to open up the corporate doors and invite the consumer inside. Co-creation of products with consumers should be entertained. Although great care must be taken, company blogs should be cultivated because of the mechanisms this offers for discourse and fast feedback.

Human

Is your brand real? Humans are naturally jam-packed with goods and bads, strengths and weaknesses. Will you allow your brand to have an honest relationship with consumers? If there are warts, can you be frank about it? Are you willing to admit shortcomings? Humanizing a brand involves the readiness to be candid about a problem. When you do this, it says you're telling the truth, all of the time. This kind of credibility is essential in the symbiotic brand/consumer relationship that must be built on mutual trust. Let your brand be human. We all make mistakes once in a while. It's refreshing when a company has the strength of character to be honest about it and to talk to the consumer like you would a valued friend.

Influence

Credibility and believe-ability are at the core of a successful brand's relationship with consumers. When the assertions you make about your brand are corroborated by a respected outside third-party it speaks volumes. Consumers come to the table expecting to be hoodwinked to some degree because they've been betrayed so many times. When multiple respected sources agree on something, it's a powerful endorsement of your brand's strength and positioning. Sources of influence include editorial media, experts, outside scientists, researchers and academics. Perhaps most important to the consumer is the measure of influence created by recommendations from friends they respect. Helping the consumer discover your brand creates the opportunity for ownership and this feeds word-of-mouth.

Community

Can your brand facilitate a sense of community among people with shared interests? Brand sponsored experiences that promote lifestyle interests and learning open the door to the kind of relationship that rewards businesses with early adoption of new products and forgiveness of occasional missteps. The transaction doesn't end at the cash register, it's just beginning. Look closely at your core consumers to determine where your brand and category can intersect directly or tangentially with their passions.

Invest in those experiences and bring their dreams to life!!

Help, educate and inform. Treat consumers like friends rather than revenue sources. Bring them together and help foster a sense of community. The relationships built here, again based on trust and co-mingling of interests, will help drive the revenue needle in a world that rewards relationship and punishes one-dimensional marketing.

These seven principles form the basis for marketing strategy in an environment the consumer controls. They can be found at the core of brand innovators who have shown that consensus building has more going for it than traditional one-way approaches. What are remarkable about these principles are the real, human qualities that a brand must adopt in order to do this successfully. In the end, a move in this direction helps brands become influential in the lives of users. The reward is increased sales.