

Shift **this**

Leveraging the paradigm shifts that are changing the face of business marketing

One in a series dedicated to the proposition that change is more than worth embracing.

It's worth cultivating.

Because, despite its challenge, if you play your innovations right, you can take advantage of change. Before it has a chance to take advantage of you.

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Whole lot of shiftin' goin' on

Dramatic paradigm shifts in the very nature of how we do business are redefining marketing, branding and communications.

Your customers and prospects are driving them. In fact, they're gravitating to them faster than the cast of *Saturday Night Live* goes to their cue cards. And they're now harder to contain than a rash at a swingers convention. But more importantly, they reach into every aspect of what business marketers and communicators do.

Here's our shot at an overview of what's going on these days. Read on to see our take on how to deal with many of them. And more importantly, take advantage of them.

	Shift from	Shift to
control of information & communications	▶ manufacturer to channel	▶ customer
purchase process	▶ sold	▶ bought
what	▶ products/services	▶ value offerings
how valued	▶ quality, price, convenience, utility	▶ economic emotional informational
transaction	▶ purchase	▶ reciprocal exchange of value
brand function	▶ promote products/services	▶ align company internally & externally
basis of brand	▶ company aspirations	▶ customer ownership & perceptions management direction employee delivery & expectation
role of communications	▶ tell manufacturer's story ▶ tell customer what to believe	▶ listen ▶ engage ▶ respond
form of communications	▶ monologue	▶ dialogue
what communicated	▶ products/services	▶ brand offering brand value community
messages	▶ interruptive	▶ sought out for value content
delivery	▶ media	▶ access
communication influence	▶ awareness ▶ familiarity ▶ preference	▶ awareness ▶ familiarity ▶ preference ▶ trial ▶ conviction ▶ purchase ▶ repurchase ▶ relationship ▶ advocacy
communication measures	▶ awareness ▶ familiarity ▶ preference ▶ perceptions	▶ ROI ▶ brand network ▶ behavior ▶ transactions
channel conflict	▶ own the customer	▶ customer owns the brand
end game	▶ purchase/repurchase	▶ reciprocal relationship based on two-way value

What used to work doesn't

anymore

Because the world has changed. Shift has happened, my friend. Whether you recognize it or not, you've stepped in it. It's all over your shoes.

What a bummer. The communications techniques, programs, media and approaches that you relied on to perform in the past are working about as well as the Celine Dion cover version of "Whole Lotta Love."

Have you noticed? If you have, then we have even worse news for you, Spanky. They probably won't work at all in the future. At least not in the same way they have in the past.

The reason is deceptively simple. The world you're sending them into has changed. Dramatically. In many ways.

They don't need you anymore

Just one example. Conventional direct marketing methods and targeting have greatly improved over the last decade. They've allowed communicators to send more relevant, more customized messages to individuals. Yet the average response rate is still around two percent. Those "improved" methods are simply balancing out the overall resistance to an out-of-whack paradigm. A model that says that business people will respond to interruptive messages as long as they are personal and relevant.

They don't. And increasingly they won't. Because they don't have to in order to get all the information they need and want to make business buying decisions. That's not to say that direct marketing is passé. It's not. It simply means that the way we do direct communications must change.

Because the world has changed. Shift has happened, my friend. Whether you recognize it or not, you've stepped in it. It's all over your shoes. And things will never be the same again.

The world takes a power shift

Somewhere between the inventions of distributed computing and the Mosaic browser, the age of information arrived. And with it, the biggest and most important power shift in communications control in history began.

This is what you'd call a mammoth, major, mother-of-a-paradigm shift. And if you fail to recognize this change in who controls communications, you'll create a divide between your brands and your customers and prospects not seen since Carly Simon last yawned in public.

To understand the importance of this shift, take a look at these historical communications models developed at Northwestern University by Don Schultz of Agora. They represent how marketers have historically operated based on the power they held in the marketplace. Power that is a result of control over information and communications.

Historical marketers

Historically, marketers have exercised their power of communications by controlling information. They develop inward-looking aspirational brands. They release only the information that is favorable to their product or service. They send that information down a highly controlled, usually mass-media channel to customers and prospects.

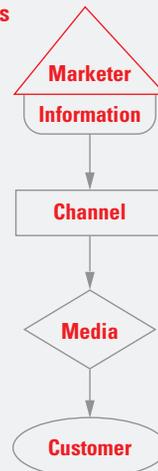
Most marketing and communications approaches and techniques used today were developed for an old out-dated model.

In reality, these messages are not communications at all. They are monologues. Most of them are based on the premise that if you tell customers and prospects what they should believe and repeat it enough times they'll believe it. So send out those monologues that are as self-serving as an Ikea store. And as interruptive as Bill O'Reilly on a bad day.

Most marketing and communications techniques and approaches that are used today, including some of the new ones, were first developed for this model. Based on this paradigm of how communications happens.

And that's why they're not working. Because the world of business communications doesn't look like that anymore.

Historical Marketers



Current marketers

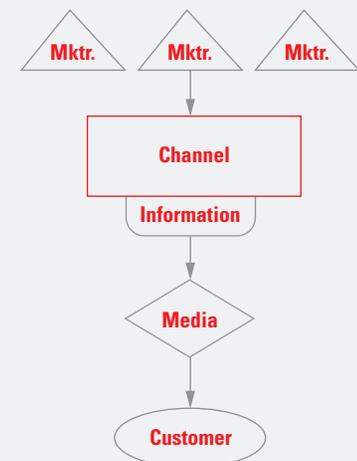
Halfway through this dramatic shift in communications control, channels, dealers and distributors have gained control from historical marketers in many industries.

They're able to do this for one simple reason. They are closer to the customer. And as a result, they understand their needs.

They have more information, knowledge and understanding of what the end user, customer and prospect wants. And they leverage that knowledge into customer need-oriented product/service offers. This consolidation results in even more power as they play one manufacturer against the other like Pam Anderson with a backstage pass to the Lollapalooza festival.

The result is a war over who owns the customer. But hold on to your hat, Squiggy, you haven't seen anything yet.

Current Marketers



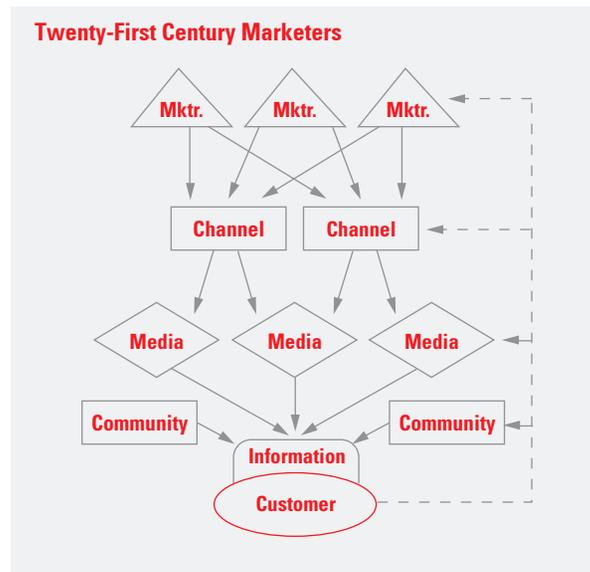
The name of the game for business brand-builders and communicators in this new world is listening and responding.

Twenty-first century marketers

Thanks chiefly to computer technology and the Internet, the power to control information, communications and the purchase process has moved through the channel and now is in the hands of your customers and prospects.

As people have become even more connected with businesses, media and networked communities, we've entered the age of perfect information. A new age where customers have access to uncensored information and non-mediated conversations about your products, your service, your prices, and your corporate doings.

And you are but a small part of all this buzzing.



Guess who's in control now

The model is no longer a one-way, marketer-driven monologue. Rather it's made up of webs of interconnected dialogue between everyone—channels, end users, media, communities and marketers. All accessed and orchestrated by the customer.

The shift has hit the fan, Bucky. Your customers and prospects control the communications process now. And things will never go back to the way they used to be. So you can stop hoping that the next incremental change you make in your old, tried-and-no-longer-very-true methods will make a big difference in anything. Especially your sales.

If you want to make a difference, change your paradigm.

Shift or get off the pot

The name of the game for business brand-builders and marketers in this new world is listening and responding. And as a result, creating experience and relationships.

It's no longer sending monologues down the channel, repeating the same finely edited messages over and over and over again. It's no longer pushing and shoving and cramming the message down customers' throats until it magically imbeds itself in their brains.

It's no longer about what you want them to believe about your brand and product/service offerings. Now it's about what you actually are and what they want to hear.

It's about entering
into a true dialogue
with customers
and prospects and
building a relationship
that will last.

Can you paradigm?

It's not about what you want to tell them. It's about them having access to more information about your company, your products, your performance and your competitors than you do. Faster than you do. More completely than you do.

It's all about listening and responding. It's about establishing mutual relationships based on reciprocity. Which, by the way, is being redefined in terms of value.

It's about entering into a true dialogue with customers.

It's about building long term reciprocal relationships with both customers and potential customers that result in recurring revenue rather than one time transactions.

It's about realizing that if what you're doing doesn't fit into this new paradigm it will continue to not work as well as it used to, until it doesn't work at all.

The last four pages in bullet points

If your head's spinning from all of this, here's the quick-and-dirty summary:

- For the first time in history, customers and prospects control information and communications, and they will determine when, where and how they will access your brand and product/service information.
- Brands must be based on what customers/prospects believe is important in making a purchase or use decision, and their perceptions of competitive brands.
- Messages move from being disruptive to being accessed by customers and prospects for their information and empowerment value.
- Communications becomes a dialogue with customers and prospects based on listening and understanding needs, and responding to specific requests for information rather than one-sided monologues controlled by the marketer.

Disintegrating brands

and their decaying messages

The new imperative is to develop a dialogue with customers and prospects that is highly identifiable, relevant, consistent and engaging.

The emergence of ultra-specialized trade publications, 124-channel cable, automated inbound-outbound telemarketing, movie product placement, blogs, data-triggered CRM messaging and push/pull interstitial Internet email bombardment have provided enough marketing stimulation to keep most business people higher than Andy Dick on a four-day weekend.

But enough is never enough

Oh, no. We want more. So today you've got your micro sites, your mega sites, your mini micro sites, your marketplace sites, purchasing sites, your RSS feeds, your tweets, your social networks, your e-this, that and the other, as well as wireless phone displays. Even the screen in the office elevator.

And watch out, world. We're buying space on your fruit, coffee-cup sleeves and urinal cakes.

Why, there are so many new channels for communicating to customers and prospects and so many competing forces jockeying for position on them that the resulting pea-soup cloud of clutter makes it difficult to get through to anyone. And the cloud grows bigger and thicker each day.

If your job is to get through to people, then you have every right to be as nervous and jerky as a Baghdad parking valet.

And you haven't seen anything yet, Scooter. As technology gives customers more access and more choices of how they get the information they want, the way they want it, wherever they want it, whenever they want it, things will only get worse.

And even if it doesn't (like that's going to happen), it's already wreaking havoc with business communications and branding programs around the world. Why, there are more b-to-b marketing casualties out there over this one issue than there are in the director's cut of "Reservoir Dogs."

But let's get the issue straight. It's not so much that there are so many new and different media to deal with. (Even though many of them are untried, untested and undecipherable.) It's not even the fact that they're emerging so fast it's almost impossible to keep up with it all. That's not the real problem.

Clutter is not the problem

The real issue for business marketers in this new paradigm is that messages are being fragmented like an overripe watermelon at a Dave Letterman fruit drop from the 82nd floor. Splat. Kaboom. Vaporize. Disintegrate.



“We are racing against the point at which the advantages of diversity and individualization are canceled by the complexity of the buyer’s decision-making process.”

-Alvin Toffler

And when messages go from being segmented to diluted to broken apart to pulverized until they turn to vapor and disappear completely, then brand promises and brand image, and even brands themselves, can’t be far behind.

Time famine sweeps the planet

But wait, there’s more. Add to all that a little ditty we like to call time famine. It goes something like this: There simply isn’t enough time to assimilate the growing mass of messages. There isn’t enough time to cope with the volume of traffic going through our brains. There isn’t enough time to sort out the valuable from the mundane.

So increasingly we let it all pass through like a bad bean burrito. Only in this case, it passes through unnoticed.

Complexity and overchoice reign

And if that’s not enough, let’s add another idea from Alvin Toffler called “Overchoice.” He says, “We are racing against the point at which the advantages of diversity and individualization are canceled by the complexity of the buyer’s decision-making process.”

There are simply too many messages coming from too many sources, chasing after too few openings in your buyers’ minds.

Which means you can’t expect a series of unfocused, disjointed, single-medium campaigns strung together by strategy to add up to long-term gains any more. Your audience simply has too many choices and too little time

to pay attention to high-frequency, low-imagination, irrelevant, not-very-memorable, inconsistent, non-engaging, uncreative messages and brand stories.

Out of the quagmire

The new imperative is to develop a dialogue with customers and prospects that is highly identifiable, relevant and engaging, and that looks, feels and sounds consistent from one medium to another. In other words, your messages will have to stand out like Drew Carey in a Day-Glo thong and be as inseparable as Louie Anderson in a wet suit.

The idea is to use information and emotion to create value around your brand that customers will actually seek out. The paradigm has shifted from controlled, interruptive monologue bombardment to two-way, sometimes even three-way conversations, with customers and prospects when they want and need to talk. Dialogue, if you will.

Through the prospect’s decision process

Throughout this process, relevance, creativity, emotional engagement and executional consistency are the ways out of the morass of slimy, smelly, decomposing messages and brands. But how do you do all that all at once?

First, you might want to start with a firm understanding of your customers’ and prospects’ buying processes. That includes knowing who is involved, what role they play and when in the process they play it. And of course, what’s important to them when they make a decision.

Goosing is knowing what's important to them and what they want to hear at each stage of the purchase process and giving them enough to push them to the next stage.

No dumping

Secondly, you should consider posting a "no dumping" sign on all your communications. That's because you simply can't dump on people all the brand information you'd like them to retain all at once. Otherwise they'll be more confused than Al D'Amato on Celebrity Jeopardy.

The goal is to know what's important to them and what they want to hear at each stage of the purchase process and give them just enough information, incentives or offers to push them to the next stage. We call this goosing.

With each goose down the purchase path, customers and prospects deepen their knowledge and involvement with the brand through experience rather than interruptive corporate belching. They begin a relationship.

The "no dumping" law includes:

- Simplifying messages at the early stages of the buying process to engage them in dialogue.
- Dividing all brand information up into component parts.
- Prioritizing messages according to their relevance and importance to different audiences who are at different stages of the process at different times.
- Spreading them out along the buying path to take each audience from awareness through purchase and repurchase and to build and deepen involvement in the brand to create advocates.
- Making each and every message highly memorable, engaging and identifiable with your brand.

Hit them when they need you

Of course, the most effective way to do that is to hit them when they are most susceptible to each message. This usually has a direct relationship to when, where and why they enter the decision process.

What emerges from this analysis are unconventional media that are much more effective because they are totally relevant. Not only in message but also in time.

Customers and prospects initiate many of these communications. And all of them deliver the right message and opportunity for dialogue when the audience is dealing with that relevant issue through the medium that is as close as possible to their stage of the decision process.

Don't go quietly into that dark cesspool

All of which means that fighting the slime of info-glut, clutter, and disintegration means truly integrating your messages across all media, threaded together with a central, unique, compelling, creative buying concept that is executed memorably and consistently in every medium.

But it also means making those messages stand out instead of blend in. And that requires you to make them more relevant, interesting, engaging, believable and emotionally resonant to the people you want to reach. (A principle of communications efficiency we call creative leverage.)

New technology and new techniques are widening and deepening the giant quagmire mistakenly called “communications clutter.”

Stand out of the quagmire, don't sink into it

Because every day, new technology and new techniques are widening and deepening the giant quagmire mistakenly, in our opinion, called “communications clutter.”

Make no mistake about it. It is much more than that. It's more sinister and disruptive than mere clutter.

It is really message and brand disintegration on a giant scale.

And unless you develop a strong, consistent, unique, relevant, consistent, impactful, consistent, easily-recognizable-in-every-medium, memorable, consistent, comprehensive, consistent and, of course, consistent presence out there it's going to be glug...glug...glug time.

So, what's it all mean, Alfie?

Here's the cheat-sheet on what you need to know about disintegration:

- You can't bombard customers and prospects with all the information you want them to retain.
- You have to know enough about what's important to your customers and prospects to deliver just the information they are interested in at the decision stage they're in.
- Develop hierarchies of information, messages and incentives to move audience segments to deeper understanding and involvement with brand.
- Distribute these simplified, prioritized messages across media, purchase stage and audience segment.
- Hit them when they are most susceptible.
- Use the purchase path as a guide.
- Use relevant and compelling information, offers and incentives to goose them to the next purchase stage.
- Information and messages must be highly identifiable, recognizable and consistent.

Business products are bought not sold

If you rely solely on your sales force to move people along the purchase path your sales will start disappearing faster than a pack of smokes at an AA meeting.

Contrary to popular belief, business products and services are not sold anymore. They are bought.

This bit of blasphemy flies in the face of traditional thinking. But then, in this new age of marketing and communications, a lot of things fly in traditional thinkers' faces.

Welcome to the end of the world as we know it

Increasingly, the exchange of goods and services between companies is not a selling process. It is a buying process. It is a procedure that is initiated by prospective customers and current customers and controlled throughout by them.



Conventional wisdom says that sales people seek out prospects, convince them of the excellence of your products and persuade them to buy.

That seldom happens these days.

If you don't believe it, take a peek at the averages from audits that we and some of our clients have made. Or better yet, do a survey of your company's sales cycle. You might be surprised at just how little control your sales force really has over the buying process these days.

- In contacts that lead to a sale, 75% of prospects took the initiative that began the sales process. The sales force initiated only 25%.
- And the buyer keeps the initiative throughout the decision-making and buying process.
- A measly 30% of buyers and influencers ever even see a sales representative. Which means your sales people only have access to a handful of real decision makers.
- Today, sales reps only spend 10-30% of their time with customers and prospects.
- Of the time spent with customers and prospects, only 15-25% is devoted to actual sales presentations.
- And, of that sales presentation time, a full 70-90% is spent talking to existing customers.

Truly integrated branding and communications programs dramatically reduce the number of in-person calls required to make a sale.

Four lousy minutes

Based on these survey numbers, the average sales person spends about 4 minutes a day improving his or her company's market share. Four minutes a day trying to keep prospects moving toward a sale. No wonder prospects and customers take the initiative. They have to.

No matter how many sales people you have or how professional, competent or aggressive they are, you'll never change this fact of modern and future business life.

And if, in this new world, you rely solely on your sales force to move people along the purchase path your sales will start disappearing faster than a pack of smokes at an AA meeting.

There's something that you can do about it

Under the bought-not-sold scenario, the prime responsibility of marketing and communications in this new world is to move prospects through each stage of the purchase cycle from awareness to knowledge, preference, conviction, purchase, repurchase and advocacy. That is the true purpose of integrated marketing. Not just to make every communication look and feel like it came from the same company.

To put it more poetically, it's like manure. You want to keep it moving. You want to spread it out. A constant flow. You don't want people piled up in the awareness stage. Push them over to the knowledge stage. Fast. Then on to preference and conviction. And so on. Don't let anything back up. Because if they start piling up you could be asphyxiated.

And as the laws of motion state: "Bodies set in motion down the purchase path do not stay in motion. Unless you goose 'em."

A new kind of sales effort

Such a program doesn't replace your sales force. It makes them more efficient and effective in basically three ways.

First, it reaches out to buyers and gives sales people access to decision makers and influencers with whom they do not have direct contact and day-to-day working relationships.

Second, it leverages the emergence of multi-disciplinary buying committees by reaching and appealing to different needs and concerns of different members who may be at different stages of the purchase process. If you're experiencing the buying committee paradigm shift, you know that some of those very influential spec-setters don't know your company and have absolutely no idea what you do or what you can do for them.

They are clueless

When it comes to your company, they are in a malaise that makes a bout of Epstein-Barr seem like a Laker Girl doing the Watusi after four triple lattes with a Dexatrim chaser. And you have to do something about it before they'll ever entertain anything close to a sales call.

Which brings us to number three. Integrated branding and communications programs can dramatically reduce the number of in-person calls required to make a sale. And they do it at a much lower contact and communications cost. In fact, when qualification techniques are part of the program, it enables sales people to focus their time and effort on closing sales.

Engage prospects and customers in a dialogue about their needs, their concerns and where they think you can add value.

You're being stealthed

Right now, at this very minute, your prospects are using the Internet like Stealth bomber pilots to check out you and your competitors at 50,000 feet without being detected. And the main reason is to learn and compare on their terms and at their convenience without having to endure a sales call.

Sure, your sales reps will get in to see them. When they're good and ready. After they've done their homework. If, and only if, you pass the stealth test.

Truth is

Your sales people aren't out there banging on doors like a short-changed Chinese food takeout guy. And if they are, that approach just won't hack it anymore anyway.

As we've seen, your sales people simply don't spend as much time in the field as you may think. And when they do get out there, they spend a vast majority of it with customers dealing with problems. The result is they simply don't have time to move prospects through all the stages of the sales process all by themselves.

Access, buying committees and more bang

A truly integrated program provides all three of those sales support functions by targeting different segments of your audience from all angles. Through every phase of the purchase cycle. With an arsenal of traditional and unconventional media handpicked to deliver appropriate messages at the appropriate time, based on the stage of purchase they're at, in order to push them to the next stage. All tied together by one consistent, compelling central creative selling idea. Along the way, truly integrated programs establish contact with prospects and customers and engage them in a dialogue about their needs, their concerns and where they think you can add value.

Integrated, schmintegrated

So what can you expect from all this integrated unity, perseverance, planning and goosing?

For one thing, a lot more for your marketing dollar. Because you're leveraging brand image and loyalty with every hit, driving home the same central message and promise.

And most importantly, you'll speed the purchase cycle, by targeting audiences across time, their places in the purchase process and across media. And targeting different messages, incentives and offers to them at different stages to move them to the next step of the buying process, faster.

The implications for new-paradigm marketers

To take advantage of the bought-not-sold shift, memorize these handy-dandy bullet points:

- Integrated brand and marketing communications will be responsible for both building the market and making sales.
- Information and incentives architected across media and brand contacts can be used to move people through the purchase process.
- Messages must connect with what customers and prospects are interested in at a specific point in the purchase process.
- Information and messages must be highly identifiable, engaging, recognizable and consistent.
- The program must engage customers and prospects in a dialogue based on what they value—not a monologue based on what the marketer wants to tell them.

The Web changes everything

the Web changes nothing

Technology is making markets conversations again. And that will require us to continue to change the rules of business branding and marketing.

Of all the seismic marketing and communications changes, perhaps none has shaken things up like the Internet. In fact, the Web is fundamentally changing the way we build, position, communicate and integrate business brands. And not just on the Internet. Across all media.

Because the Web changes everything

For the first time in history, your customers and prospects control the amount, flow, source and speed of brand and product information. For the first time, you can learn about individual customer's and prospect's needs and perceptions and understand what's really important to them. And how your products and services can help them from their point of view. For the first time you can connect directly with their heads and hearts and respond to them in real time.

And as a result, some business marketers are more rattled than a cocktail shaker in a Noel Coward play.

Because for the first time, business communications is all about listening and responding. Not about sending things out. Not about pushing carefully edited, censored, tailored, prepackaged messages down a channel. For the first time it's about dialogue. Not self-serving monologues.

For the first time...well, except for a few thousand years ago when markets were truly markets...

Now it gets really bazaar

You remember markets? When traders returned from faraway places with spices and silks and precious magical

stones. When people woke early and went there for coffee and vegetables, eggs and wine and Doric columns, bloodletting leeches and soothsaying. For pots. For toys. For love. For rope. For soap. For wagons. For bleating goats and evil-tempered camels. They went there to look and listen and marvel, to buy and to be amused.

But mostly they went to meet each other. And to talk.

That's because the first markets were filled with people, not abstractions, demographic profiles or statistical aggregates. They were the places where supply rubbed up against demand. Where buyers and sellers met, laughed with each other, yelled at each other, expressed their opinions and shared information and connected.



Interactivity can transform the nature of your brand and your relationship with customers and prospects.

The first markets were filled with talk. And guess what, Sparky. We're shifting back again.

Some of the talk was about goods and products. Some was news, opinions, gossip and advice. But all of it was straightforward, direct, real and very human.

Because the Web changes nothing

Back then markets were essentially conversations between people who sought out others who shared the same interest.

And they're about to be the same again. We are coming full circle. Only this time the marketplace is the world.

Technology is making markets conversations again. And that will require us to change those steadfast rules of branding and marketing. It means we have to rethink how we communicate with customers and prospects in all media.

The Internet isn't about information or communications per se. Rather, it brings one totally unique and transforming thing to both those functions that nothing else ever has.

Interactivity is the thing

Interactivity is the defining characteristic of the Web.

In fact, in the future, if you can't interact 24/7 with all your customers and prospects, you'll net about as much as a Philly cheesesteak concession at a k.d. lang concert.

Interactivity will define what works on the Internet and what doesn't. And the future of brand communications revolves

around your ability to present your brand in such a way that customers and prospects can interact with it.

That interactivity creates brand experience. And, if done correctly, it can be used to empower your customers and prospects around your brand. To help them do their jobs better, faster or more effectively through your offering.

And it's even bigger than that

The influence of interactivity goes far beyond the Internet.

Interactivity is a powerful metaphor for the patient/doctor or student/teacher relationship. You describe your symptoms. The doctor diagnoses your situation, prescribes the appropriate treatment and gets you in touch with fellow sufferers as a support group. That is the kind of interactivity, dialogue and empowerment that's possible on the Net.

More important than that, however, is interactivity's ability to create this same kind of thought leader/helper relationship with customers and prospects across the board. Interactivity can transform the very nature of your brand, your brand experience and your brand relationships across all media.

But beware the digital dump

Despite the Web's awesome potential to bring people together, to connect, to talk directly, to ask questions, to reply, to respond, to empower, to build powerful relationships the business community has managed to turn it into one humongous barn door that everybody's throwing their communications cow pies up against to see what will stick.

The Internet is a real place where people go to learn and to talk to each other and to do business. It is a bazaar where customers and prospects look for wares and advice.

Unfortunately, any business marketer with a PC and some cheap software now has the power to speak to the world and populate their communications with all kinds of irrelevant content and digital gewgaws.

You've got your streaming video. You've got your 7,000 PowerPoint files. You've got your "lobby cam." You've got your rollovers. You've got your live audio streaming. You've got your flash animated mission statements. You've got trouble. Right here in Cyber City.

Conventions in the birth canal

The problem with all this stuff is it's more distracting than Star Jones in a g-string. And people are losing track of the true transforming potential of the Web.

What's really frightening is, if you listen closely, you can hear a lot of business marketers and communicators settling into these conventions like a fat guy in a hammock after Thanksgiving dinner with double-dip yams and Baskin-Robbins mega-gutbuster pumpkin pie parfait sundaes.

"The Internet is just another medium like direct marketing or TV. You integrate it into the mix like you do any other channel," they yammer. And squeak and moan.

Get real

The Internet is a place. We buy books and tickets and pneumatic drills and computer chips "on" the Web, not over it, beside it or through it. To call it a medium or distribution

channel or a platform denies its fundamental human hospitality. What happens on the Web is more than commerce, more than content, more than push and pull and posts and clicks and hits and traffic and e-anything.

The Internet is a real place where people go to learn and to talk to each other and to do business. It is a bazaar where customers and prospects look for wares and advice. Where merchants present goods and services and ideas for display. And where people gather around topics that interest them.

It's a whole pile of shifts

As a matter of fact, it's a fundamental shift in how we gather, use, evaluate and communicate brand information. It is a conversation. And that goes much deeper than technology, technique or media. It's about being real.

For example, brand positioning has traditionally been an expensive sojourn into corporate chest-beating and aspiration spinning. And the resulting communications no more than a big sloppy corporate belch.

Consultants spend time with one company leader after another, listening to the company line, the corporate wish list, the market commands from on high. Basically, they perform the role of corporate shrink.

Based on the incestual information they collect, an inward looking positioning statement is written about what the brand will become. No matter what people already think.

To be successful in this new environment, your brand is going to have to be customer-centric enough and real enough to empower your customers and prospects.

Bend over and kiss your aspiration goodbye

In the new world, brand positioning is about discovering who are as a business. Discovering your identity, not inventing a new one. In the Internet age, positioning should help a brand become what it is, not something it is not.

And if you want to know what that thing is, there's an easy way to find out. Shut up and listen. Listen to what your market says you are. How they perceive you and what you can do or not do for them.

That understanding of customer and prospect perceptions is important, because in this new world customers and prospects decide just about everything.

So if the market's view of you is not to your liking, think long and hard before you assume they're wrong. That they're a bunch of deaf, dumb and blind dunderheads who don't understand the inner you.

If you don't like what you're hearing, then the branding and marketing task at hand is not to change the market's idea of who you are, but actually to change who you are.

That's because the real power and potential of the Internet is not technology. It's not a message delivery system. It's not banner ads or click-throughs. It's not tweets, blogs, or hogs.

It's about empowerment

It's like the invention of the automobile. It changed the world because it empowered individuals. For the first time, people could go wherever they wanted to go, whenever they wanted to go there, however they wanted to go there.

Because of its unique interactive quality, the Internet lets us do the same thing with information and communications and brand experience. And most importantly, with relationships.

It's about them

It invites your individual, unique and diverse customers and prospects in to talk, to laugh with each other and to learn from each other. Connected together, they reclaim their voice in the market. But this time it has more reach and influence than ever before.

In order to function in this new environment, your brand must be real. It must deliver what your customers are looking for in the way they're looking for it. Your brand must be more about them and their perceptions of the world than it is about you.

For real

To be successful, your brand is going to have to be customer-centric enough and real enough to empower your customers and prospects. It will have to help them do what they need to do faster, better, cheaper or more effectively. It will need to empower them with tools that make them better at their jobs. Tolls that make their professional lives more compelling or just more fun.

It's not about sales pitches. It's about two-way conversations.

It's not about sending messages. It's about listening and understanding and responding to people's needs.

It's not about selling a market. It's about becoming part of the community and sharing your insights.

It's all about making your contribution in your brand's unique voice to make the community's job easier.

Or, in other words

So remember these key points as you try to get jiggy with the Web:

- Don't think of the Internet as a medium.
- It is a totally new thing anchored in interactivity that requires a new way of thinking.
- Think of it as a place that people go to do things.
- Think of it as a place you can direct customers and prospects in and out and in again:
 - In—to do interactive things with the community or brand that they can't do any other way.
 - Out—to refer to long-term, retentive things.
- Focus your attention on interactivity.
 - How can the place enable the user?
 - How can it encourage dialogue?
 - How can it create experience, not just communication?
 - What enabling or empowering interactive tools can it provide?
- Think of it as an interacting community.
- Integrate interactivity into your total communications plan to create brand experience.

Who owns the customer?

In this shifting world, power resides with those who have the best understanding of their customers, prospects and end users.

The way elbows are flying between manufacturers and resellers, today's emerging customer-controlled marketing model is starting to look like a Sunday afternoon at the Roller Derby.

In the pink satin shorts, you've got your channel of distributors, dealers, resellers and retailers, who transact directly with customers, prospective customers and end users and gather truckloads of data directly tied to purchase behavior.

In the blue satin shorts, the manufacturers, who historically controlled information flow about their products and services by sending one-way messages down a simple, clearly defined channel of retailers and media to customers and potential customers.

Let the games begin

In the first period, manufacturers dominate because they have unique or differentiated products and services that are in high

demand. Thanks to their unique offerings, distribution systems or dominant brands, the manufacturers are able to control and dictate how the brand is sold, at what price and, to a certain extent, even control demand.

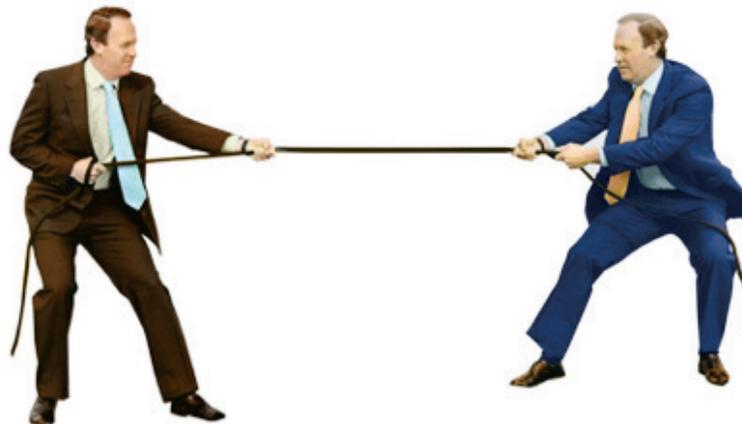
But about two minutes into the second period, big mo starts to shift. The guys in the blue shorts see their power erode. A hard check into the rail here. A knee to the groin there. But did the manufacturers adjust to the pink-shorted distributors power play. Did they make massive substitutions? Bring in a new front line?

No. Most continue to market as they always have, often with declining success and increasing costs.

Whack, bam, boom

The channel team in pink is wrestling control from the manufacturers because they're getting more information, knowledge and understanding of the people who actually buy the manufacturer's products than the manufacturer themselves.

That includes the simplest of things, like a list of who is buying and using the product. (Something many manufacturers still don't have.) It also includes some pretty sophisticated data processing technology that tells them what, how much, when and why end users are buying.



The channel is reducing risk for customers and in return customers are transferring their loyalty to the retailer's brand.

All of this provides tremendous contact with the customer and understanding of customer wants and needs.

More powerful than a speeding power slam

This marketplace power shift gives the channel team more control over the blue satin manufacturers than Ralphie Valladares on an uncontested breakaway. In some cases, they even dictate distribution outlets, sales channels, pricing, packaging, merchandising and contacts with end users. All because they are closer to the customer.

If you're a manufacturer gliding around the track during this paradigm shift, watch out. You can be blindsided with a mammoth hip check that will send you sprawling. In fact, if you want to know how bad it can get, we've got two words for you: Wally World. Check out the power play Wal-Mart is putting on consumer manufacturers.

To make things worse for the guys in the blue satin tights, manufacturers see brand loyalty waning. The hometown fans go silent. The crowd is out of the game.

"How can that be?" whines the manufacturer's coach in blue as he hurls a folding chair across the track.

Able to leap customer expectations in a single bound

Well, maybe it has something to do with the channel communicating better, more directly, more compellingly and taking better care of manufacturers' customers than the manufacturers themselves do.

For example, many customers no longer look to manufacturers to stand behind their brands. Dealers, retailers and distributors with no-questions-asked return policies and warranties are taking over this role, making exchanges and then demanding credit from their suppliers. And this is just one of the situations that is transferring brand loyalty from manufacturers to the channel and increasing channel strength. As a result, there's now so much mistrust and paranoia between the two parties it makes the war room in "Dr. Strangelove" look like the Jacuzzi room at Hedonism III.

Winning by taking care of the customer's business

In other words, the channel is reducing risk for customers and customers, in return, are transferring their loyalty to the retailer's brand rather than the manufacturer's brand.

And now, as technology pushes control of information toward the customer, a fourth period Battle Royale is erupting between the two warring camps for contact and control of the sales process.

They're lusting after the same customers like Donald Trump on a double dip of Viagra. They're both chasing the buyer and breaking all the rules along the way. Yessir fans, it's another no-holds-barred, slobber-knocker coming at you from the Coho Arena.

So now you've got dealer chains and distributors tussling with manufacturers over customer data. Manufacturers trying to block the channel by selling direct and setting up shop to go head-to-head with their own resellers. Heaven forbid.

This new paradigm demands that manufacturers begin a dialogue with customers and end users and listen to their input.

And there goes another one over the rail, fans

But where in the world does that leave business marketers and communicators going into the fifth period?

If you're a reseller, it means two things.

First, you might want to think about using the customer data you have to integrate products and services into solution offerings that are based on bundled customer needs all consolidated in one location. And then incorporating that concept into your brand and your communications.

Round and around the brand they go

And speaking of brand, that's number two. Many channel organizations are building or trying to build brands or private labels to help gain even greater information, communication and customer relationship power.

For manufacturers, shoring up your brand will be paramount. But not in the old, conventional way.

The new paradigm requires data about your customers/end users, their needs and buying behavior. It demands you begin a dialogue with these folks and listen to their input. And it means developing brand relationships that are based on reciprocal value and loyalty.

It's not about owning the customer

In either case, you're going to have to look at this issue from a totally different perspective. Things have changed. And you should consider changing the way you think about customers. If you don't you're going to end up like those whiny dweebs who got to the cocktail party twenty minutes late and all that's

left are those little wieners and a half-empty bottle of Zima.

In this new age, when the customer controls communications and information, it's better to have the customer own you than you owning the customer.

The customer needs to own you

And that has to do with branding that's based on customer and prospect buying perceptions. It's about listening and responding. It's about developing a dialogue and a relationship, not a transaction. It's about connecting customers with other customers and prospects who share the same product applications, problems and opportunities.

But at the heart of it all, it's changing your perspective of what a customer is and changing the way you talk and interact with them.

Once people become customers you need to stop thinking about them as part of the market. They are not the market. They are your customers and you need to look at them and communicate with them in a different way than the market.

And it's not over yet

The battle to get the customer to feel total involvement, interaction and ownership of your brand has just begun. Hey, it's the Roller Derby. It's not over until the final jam. And sometimes even then it's not over. There's always a surprise at the end.

This time it's yet another shift in how we think about brands. And if you're not careful this one could create a divide between manufacturers and their channels so large the late Ted Kennedy could have dropped an Oldsmobile into it.

Customers take personal ownership of strong, empathetic brands that will empower them.

Historically, brands have been based on a promise that customers can count on the brand because of the attributes of the offering. But now a new kind of branding is emerging, where the promise is that the brand knows you as an individual customer better than anyone else. And as a result, you can trust the brand to assemble the products and services that meet your unique needs. Even for products and services beyond the initial category. Think Virgin.

One more kick in the groin for old times' sake

Contrary to conventional one-to-one marketing thought (one vendor dealing with one customer at a time) this approach is based on the new-paradigm market of connected customers. In a networked, interconnected marketplace where everyone has access to everyone and the customer controls the buying process, what customers want are many vendors to choose from.

They want to leverage the full capability of the network to access whatever resources they need from wherever they are. And they want them put together for them in ways that are convenient and accessible and tailored to them as individuals.

How's that for an elbow to the head and a skate to the midsection?

A recap for the slightly befuddled

If you find yourself tussling over customers, remember these pointers:

- It's better to have the customer own you than to try to own the customer. Customers take personal ownership of strong empowering brands.
- Understand customer and prospect needs and what is important to them through listening, engaging, soliciting a response and responding in return.
- Collect customer and end-user data.
- Think customers, not markets.
- Develop interactive dialogue with customers around the brand.
- Create brands that have a great deal of empathy with customer segments.
- Connect customers directly to their peers and your product advocates who share their product applications, uses and issues.
- Information and messages must be highly identifiable, engaging, recognizable and consistent.

Prodvices and servducts

There's no such thing anymore as selling a static product to a customer and then forgetting about them.

It's happening all around you. Products and services are merging. Buyers sell and sellers buy. What used to be neat value chains are messy connected economic webs. Homes are offices. Cars are offices. Starbucks are offices.

And if you're a business marketer caught in the middle of these basic market shifts you're probably as flustered as Les Nessman reporting from the MTV Malibu beach house.

Age of the hybrid, the halfbreed and the bastard child

On every front, opposites are attracting and their offspring are unsettling mutants. At least to traditional thinkers.

As a result, old approaches to selling and marketing these offerings aren't just dying, they've been cremated and Woody Harrelson is smoking their ashes in his lucky skull bong. New paradigms are redefining our businesses, what we communicate, how we communicate it, when we communicate it and to whom we communicate it.

How could this happen to you

It's happening in three fundamental ways.

First, almost instantaneous communications and computing power are shrinking time and focusing almost all business transactions on speed. Speed. And more speed.

Secondly, connectivity is putting everyone and everything online with each other in one way or another. In fact, we're so intertwined we make a Twister game between the casts of Cirque du Soleil shows look like a Busby Berkley chorus line. We're so interconnected distance is no longer a factor in anything. Let alone business.

Thirdly, intangible value of all kinds, like service, information and emotion are growing so fast they're reducing the importance of tangible mass. Meaning, the physical product itself is becoming less important than the ancillary things it makes possible through its intangible benefits.

Speedy, connected mutants everywhere

Speed is driving products and services to resemble each other in a lot of different ways. For one, product lifecycles are now shorter than the attention span of the guy from "Shine" hooked up to a Jolt Cola IV. In turn, rapid obsolescence demands continual upgrading or replacement.

So now there's no such thing as selling a static product to a customer and then forgetting about them. The people who are your customers today will be your customers again in six months—or in six days—or in six minutes— and if not, then they'll be someone else's customer.

Connectivity means that customers will maintain ever-closer links to the creators and marketers of the goods they use. As a result, the product is becoming simply a service waiting to happen.

The point is, when you're dealing with the same customers over continually upgraded, changed and customized products, you begin to qualify as a service business.

The need for speed is also causing a lot of people in the service business to feel like they're selling products. That's because everybody wants their services fast. Whether it's a burger or a branding program it has to happen quickly. Quicker. Faster.

Under this kind of time pressure, there's no way services can be totally tailored to each and every customer. So even when they're customized, at their core they still have to be standardized, modularized, packaged and embedded in software. In other words, they start looking a lot more like products.

Everybody's hooking up

Chiefly, though, products and services are merging because of connectivity. Not only the connectivity of all users and possible users to each other, but the connectivity of users directly to makers, the connectivity of users and possible users and makers to an Internet of perfect information, and the connectivity of product/services that link to information bases.

That's a lot of connecting going on out there. And it creates a lot of opportunities for service. It's crazy. One day you're playing Pong, the next thing you know, Wes, the gas meter guy with the eye patch, has an uplink to a satellite on his tool belt.

Connectivity means that customers will maintain ever-closer links to the creators and marketers of the goods they use. And as a result, the product is becoming simply a service waiting to happen. And the service is simply the product in action.

No product, no service, no compendo

Kind of confusing isn't it?

That's because in this new world, it doesn't make sense to think of things in terms of products or services any more. Especially when it comes to marketing and brand communications.

Instead you should be communicating the benefits of product-service hybrids. What we will ingeniously call value offers.

Essentially value offers are "productized" services and "servicized" products. Their value comes from both areas.

Value offers are solutions to customer problems without the distinction of product or service labels because the solution becomes so paramount that you can no longer tell what part of it is product and what part is service. In a true value offer they become totally interdependent.

Wake up and smell the value offers

And if you don't think this is beginning to happen to you, right now, in your market, check it out. You may be more out of it than Amy Winehouse on a little brown jug of Nyquil.

And you can't afford to be. Because in this new environment, companies that knowingly (or unknowingly) communicate and brand themselves as if they are selling unsupported, unconnected products will be viewed as no better than snake oil salesmen. And firms that communicate unpackaged and unleveraged services will be perceived to be concerned only with running up their billable hours and unconcerned about fulfilling the customer's desires.

If you think you're in a product business or a service business, think again. To survive in paradigm-shifting markets you must be in both. Simultaneously.

A new mindset			
	Product	Service	Value Offer
communication time horizon	▶ time of sale	▶ period of contract	▶ life of customer need
chief buyer concerns	▶ price, delivery, convenience	▶ ongoing support	▶ upgradeability as needs change
chief functional characteristics	▶ fixed, uniform quality	▶ customization	▶ learning, adjusting
communications objective	▶ brand loyalty	▶ relationship building	▶ community building

Beyond bundling

The successful design and communication of value offers requires a new kind of thinking. You have to start thinking simultaneously about what it is and what it does but also, most importantly, what it enables to happen.

That goes way beyond bundling products and services, Bucky. Bundling is a step in the right direction because it recognizes that businesses buy product/services because they have needs that only these things together help to fill. But ultimately bundling is not nearly enough.

It's not enough to just toss together a bunch of complementary goods and services, and stick a brand and price tag on them. The real value comes when these things are blended so they can't be separated and can't exist independently of each other.

You're in the mutant business

If you think you're in a product business or a service business, think again. To survive in today's and tomorrow's paradigm-shifting markets you must be in both. Simultaneously.

For business marketers and communicators, that means you have to change your mindset about the very nature of what you're branding and what you're communicating.

You need to wrap existing products in intangibles like service, information and emotion and make services tangible by making them real, physical, touchable and branded.

To summarize...

To capitalize on the products/services muddle, tattoo the following points on your forearm:

- The distinctions between products and services are dissolving as speed, connectivity and instantaneous access to information push products to be “servicized” and services “productized.” To the point that methods used to communicate products vs. methods used to communicate services are moot.
- As products and services merge, you need to focus branding and brand communications on value offers—interrelated product/service hybrids that offer unique value because they are seamlessly combined to create unique customer solutions—not products and services.
- To communicate and develop value offers, you have to think simultaneously about what the offer is, what it does and, most importantly, what it enables.
- This requires business marketers and communicators to develop a whole new mindset about communicating offers as opposed to products and services.
- Customer/prospect buying concerns shift from price, delivery, convenience and ongoing support to upgradability as needs change.
- Communication time horizons shift from time of sale and period of contract to the life of customer need and require integrated communications that extend the life of the relationship.
- Communication objectives move from brand loyalty and relationship-building to community-building based on reciprocal value.

Value shift

Thanks to the rise of intangibles as a source of value and the spread of connectivity; transactions are anything but straightforward any more.

It used to be so simple. You had sellers and you had buyers. The seller brought a product or service to the table. And the buyer brought money. The transaction was straightforward. The price was the price.

But now an increasing number of business dealings are as fuzzy as Donald Trump's eyebrows. You can't tell who's the buyer and who's the seller. Heck, a lot of times, each are both. And even when the roles seem clear, the form of payment is more convoluted than the plot line of any of Quentin Tarantino's last five films.

If you look closely, you'll see that people are being compensated not just in money and products, but also in things like information and emotional well-being.

Intangibles are in

Thanks to the rise of these intangibles as a source of value and the spread of connectivity; business-to-business transactions are anything but straightforward any more. In fact, about the only thing you can be sure of is that the price is no longer the price. And the product is no longer just the product, or the service just the service.

Things other than monetary payment—specifically information, connectivity and emotional engagement—make up a growing proportion of the value being exchanged.

Simple buying and selling is out

So much so that the terms "buyer" and "seller" aren't accurate anymore. In fact, in this new paradigm they're about as relevant as Bob Dylan's tuning fork.

They imply that the only exchange going on out there is the traditional, two-way affair where money is swapped for goods and services. The truth is, there are more kinds of value being tossed around and flying back and forth in this new connected marketplace than cream pies at a Soupy Sales Fan Club reunion in the Sara Lee company cafeteria.

And if you don't want to get one in the face, you need to stop thinking about price-for-product transactions and start thinking about the mutual, reciprocal exchange of many things of value. Including intangible things.

This is no time for conventional wisdom

The problem, again, is conventional wisdom based on an old paradigm. It says that buyers come from one direction bearing money, while sellers come from the opposite direction with a product or service. And they meet in the middle.

In reality, value is shifting to look more like a multi-level, intertwined freeway interchange. The right lanes convey economic traffic. The middle lanes zip along on informational exchanges. And the passing lanes speed past carrying exchanges of emotional value.

“The most successful communications are relationship oriented and not hard-driving product ads.”

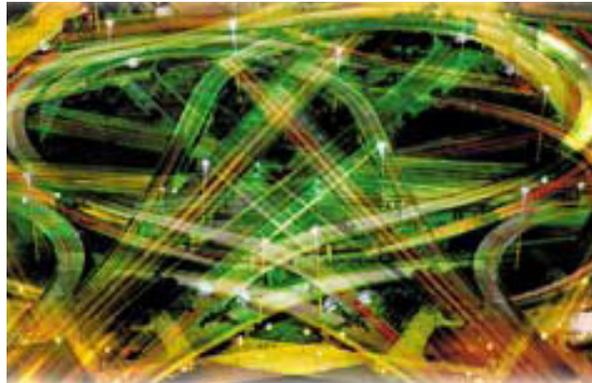
Driving in all lanes at once

The economic lanes are still made up of goods and the money to pay for them. But now it's a more complicated flow because it includes variations that didn't exist before.

In other words, you've got people changing lanes and moving across the flow quicker than Mario Andretti on a pot of espresso. The interactions that all this movement between lanes initiates are new forms of economic value created by connectivity, speed and intangibles.

And where the exchanges of value are getting really wacky is in the information lane.

Companies who used to simply provide goods and services are finding that the information content that comes back to their customers from their offerings is the highest source of value added and the driver of higher profit margins. Not to mention a main source of competitive differentiation.



Shove it into reverse

So now these wackos are driving in reverse. They're discovering the value of information that comes back from buyers and goes directly back into the front lines of their company. And as a result, they are more eager to listen than to inform. They actually ask for customer input on an ongoing basis. They evaluate it and implement it to add value and reap additional premiums for their brand.

The key to leveraging this value is to construct mechanisms in your brand, brand contacts and communications that actively hear and respond to the voice of the market.

Wanted: Drivers with heart

Like information, emotional value has always been around but generally subjugated to economic transactions. In fact, at most business-to-business companies it was paid about as much attention to as Money Penny at a Bond girl reunion.

But now that customers and prospects control the purchase power some business marketers are beginning to realize that their audiences place real value on emotional intangibles such as loyalty, esteem, support, learning and engagement. Even highly technical, spec-oriented marketers are starting to get the message.

As one CEO of a stat-obsessed mutual fund company has reported, “The most successful communications are relationship oriented and not hard-driving product ads.” On days when such communications run, the company receives hundreds of additional calls from investors.

Your buyer now exists in a connected world of perfect information and speed and is easily able to get all the specifics they need and want about competitive products instantly.

There's sap all over the highway

Emotional value doesn't just come from conventional media. Good vibes all around a brand lead to loyal repeat purchases. So new-paradigm marketers are learning to engage customers in a true give-and-take of emotional value. The Apple brand is a good example.

In fact, if you want to see emotional value come into its own as a currency of exchange, check out a business-related discussion forum on the Internet. These conversations can get pretty ebullient and by turns pretty vitriolic.

And companies with these kinds of listen/respond mechanisms imbedded in their brand communications in all media will have a greater capacity to tap into the power and value of all that emotion. And turn this paradigm shift into a competitive advantage in their markets.

In this new world, customers and prospects are co-creators of the value offering and of defining the value being offered. Without these kinds of reciprocal relationships revolving around communications, your brand equity is going to drop faster than a pair of tube socks on Kate Moss.

Bottom line

In the old industrial model, the economic benefits of mass production created a one-way relationship in which business marketers defined the product, set the price, established the time and place of purchase and filtered the product-positive information to prospects down a simple channel through monologue communications.

Well, things have changed, Bucky.

Your buyer now exists in a connected world of perfect information and speed and is easily able to get all the specifics they need and want about competitive products instantly. Even better, they can quickly and easily talk directly to users and makers of these offerings.

They don't have to wait until you're ready to communicate to them anymore. That's one of the reasons the game has changed so dramatically. And it's the main reason that the things that constitute value are being redefined.

Start changing lanes and your point-of-view

As a result, business-to-business markets are becoming true markets again. Filled with conversations between what used to be called buyers and sellers around the mutual exchange of what they value.

These new markets will belong to companies that change their points-of-view and enter the market conversations. Companies that engage prospects and endear customers to them with human emotion. Companies that learn to respond rather than send one-way messages down channels. Companies that provide value through information that helps people do their jobs better, faster and more effectively.

And most important, these new markets will belong to companies that are able to integrate these intangible things that customers value with what used to be called products and services into value offerings that they strongly brand.

Shift in brand communications

	Traditional Transactions		New Transactions
	Seller	Buyer	Exchange/Interaction
value role	▶ create	▶ consume	▶ both create and consume
value received	▶ money	▶ product/service utility	▶ economic, emotional & informational value
communications roles	▶ sender	▶ receiver	▶ interact
information role	▶ control	▶ limited access	▶ shared access and creation
relevant time	▶ business	▶ business	▶ continual and connected
communications sales space	▶ point of sale	▶ marketplace	▶ connected anywhere
communications strategy	▶ monologue	▶ compare competitive monologues	▶ listen/respond, dialogue

The bottom line

For the time-challenged, here's all you really need to know about this shift, in nine fabulous sentences:

- Things other than monetary payment are making up a growing proportion of the value that is and will be exchanged between businesses.
- Many providers of goods and services are seeing the information content of their offerings as the highest source of value added and major driver of higher profit margins.
- This paradigm shift gives marketers and communicators the opportunity to build tangible brand value by incorporating the reciprocal exchange of information and emotional support into communication relationships with customers and potential customers.
- You must engage prospects with human emotion to win permission to communicate information of value.
- Marketers and communicators must learn to respond to customers' informational and emotional needs rather than send one-way messages down a communications channel.
- Customers value and will pay for information that will help them do their jobs better, faster and more effectively.
- To mine this value, marketers and communicators must integrate information, emotional support, products and services into value offerings.
- Integrated communications programs require building mechanisms to hear and respond to the voice of the market.
- Business brands will begin to shift to emotional branding.

Finding customer value

Most business brands and messages don't take into account what prospects are really buying.

Business-to-business marketers are spending millions on communications and brands that have about as much chance of reaping rewards as Jimmy Swaggart has getting backstage at a Marilyn Manson concert. That's because most of the business messages and brands out there don't take into account what prospects are really buying, what they're interested in hearing and what they already think of the marketer's product/service offering.

Instead, business branding is overpopulated with messages that are so inward-focused they amount to little more than companies telling themselves how great they are.

Of course, the awful truth is that that doesn't matter anymore.

Welcome to the land of me, myself and I

All that really counts out there in the market is what your customers and prospects think. What's valuable to them.

Because they own your brand. They control information, communication and the purchase process. They make the buying decision. And they determine value.

So even though statements like "America's largest whatever" or "the industry's premier what-cha-ma-call-it" may warm the hearts of your management, they mean very little to your prospects. (Except, perhaps, conceit.) In other words, they are irrelevant ideas.

They are, in fact, corporate belches. Loud noises which no one is particularly waiting to hear. And aren't much impressed with once they have.

Pull my finger

In fact, at this very moment, thousands of business marketers all over the planet are devising sophisticated strategies to tell prospects all the things that they (the marketers) want them (the prospects) to know about their (the marketers) products and services.

Unfortunately, these are seldom the things they (the prospects) are interested in hearing.

So they (the prospects) don't. They ignore them (the messages and the marketers).

Wrapped up somewhere in that mess of mismatched messages, expectations and beliefs are two implications for business-to-business marketers.

Value, value, who's got the value

The first is that eventually you're going to have to put anything you want to communicate to customers and prospects in terms of what's of value to them. And you can't find out how to do that unless you listen to them.

But, in the process, you must also delineate a position for your offerings and company that's relevant to the way your potential customers see their businesses. Not the way you view yours. And you can't find out what they truly value to create that position unless you listen to them.

Understanding what makes up customer and prospect value is the key to developing powerful business brands.

Align what you sell with what they buy

Finding out what people value most when they make a buying decision is vital whether you want it to be or not. And it's vital no matter what you sell. Or more accurately, what they buy. Even if it's one of those amazing, handy-dandy, super knives that can saw through a suspension bridge and still do delicate radial keratotomy eye surgery.

A business software client of ours believed that they were selling sophisticated geodemographic computer mapping programs to marketers. But marketers they were selling it to, we discovered, didn't see it that way.

Your back-end may be out of alignment

To them, their job was not about making maps. Their job was to make decisions. So they weren't interested in buying sophisticated, high-tech mapping software. But they were very interested in buying "decisionware." Because that's what they valued.

Simply put, the primary role of an integrated brand or communications plan should be to align what you say and sell with what your audience wants to buy and hear about.

An amazing space-age discovery

There's a way to get to that. It's an amazing space age technology we call Shut Up and Listen.

And when you listen for value, it can do some amazing things to align your front-end and your back-end.

The purpose of this exercise is to disengage the corporate mouth with its highly developed belching apparatus long enough to let your market speak to you.

But speak to you in such a way that you understand what customers and prospects value when they make a buying or use decision. And that includes understanding how they view your brand and your value offerings as well as their perceptions of their other brand purchase options.

Scan a mind

We've developed a process that we call MindScanning. It defines the criteria buyers use when making a purchase and how important each attribute is to their decision. The MindScan also shows how buyers perceive each competitor's performance on each important criterion.

We use this map of the buyer's mind to identify positioning opportunities, develop the most audience-relevant messages and set brand network objectives and measurements.

Answering these questions helps build a brand position that addresses the issues customers and prospects value most.

Answer eight key questions

Whatever research technique you use to listen with, it should answer some basic value questions.

Most importantly, it should answer them strictly from your customers' and prospects' points of view. And it should answer them without any prompting from you.

Remember, it's called Shut Up and Listen.

1. What is the buying process they go through to identify sources, evaluate them and approve purchase decisions?
2. Who is involved in this process and what role does each play in each stage of the buying process?
3. What problems, concerns or challenges do they face that an offering like yours could help solve?
4. What specific criteria or attributes do they use to make a buying decision? (Easy, surface answers like price, quality or service don't count. Dig deeper into their meanings and look for connections to both functional and emotional criteria).
5. How important is each criterion to them?
6. What/who do they consider to be competitive buying options to your brand?
7. How do they rate each competitor's performance on their most valued functional and emotional buying criteria?
8. How do they rate your offering's performance?

Discover value-based market segments

If you do it right, you can slice and dice the information you've collected in a lot of different ways to aggregate customers and prospects and market segments into value segments based on their common behavioral values.

You can look at what's important to different audiences (functional job titles). And you can identify differences in criteria between buyers, influencers and deal-killers. Not to mention unique criteria to different markets.

Slice, dice, segment, aggregate and julienne fries in a snap

This is the first step in developing messages that will resonate with different audiences who are at different stages of the purchase process.

It also gives you a good idea of the kinds of messages and information that will engage customers and prospective customers in a dialogue that's of value to them.

Get brand direction

Careful analysis of this information will also uncover growth opportunities for your brand in its category.

You'll begin to see where your customers and prospects are willing to take your brand. Based on their perception of value and the definition of the brand they've assembled in their heads, where can you extend the brand? What are the brand limits? What are the opportunities left open by their perceptions of their competitive brand choices?

In a world where customers and prospects control information, communication and the buying process, it's in your best interest to think about things the way they do.

Handy-dandy brand direction

These open opportunities are based on the customer and prospect beliefs about your brand category and the unmet needs and wants most valued by customers and prospects that you can address. That includes those that competitors may already be talking about in their communications but have not seeded in your audiences' minds.

Answering these questions helps you build a position that addresses issues that your customers and prospects value most. And as a result, your brand and your messages will resonate with buyers at the moment of truth. When they make a buying or use decision.

Check your frame

The process also forces you to look at competitive brands from customers' and non-customers' points of view.

That's important because they may define your competitive frame much differently than you do. Whether you consider the brands they identify to be your competitors or not, you might want to rethink your frame.

Because in a world where customers and prospects control information, communication and the buying process, it's in your best interest to think about things the way they do.

And that includes how you define your own competitive set.

The process can also help you develop product/service solutions ("value offers" if you will) that you can deliver through your brand. These offers often include intangibles like special information, advice and community that can be integrated into your product and service to make your brand more valued and distinctive.

Make me a value offer

Ultimately, the process can provide direction to help you change the relationship that you have with customers and prospects. You can more easily focus on helping them solve their problems and empower them and their businesses around your brand and its offerings.

This understanding of what makes up customer and prospect value from their point of view is the key ingredient in developing powerful integrated business brands.

What's a Mobium?

It would be nice to say we're an agency. Or brand consultants. Or a research firm. But we can't. Because we're not.

We're mutants.

We're none of those things. And we're all of them. We're a squishy blob of media agnostics united by brand, marketing and communications principles, paradigms and processes, and focused on helping business marketers turn change into a competitive advantage in their markets.

We change things

We believe in change. We see things differently, think differently and do things differently.

In fact, we're dedicated to business marketers who want to change the outmoded conventions of their industries. We help change agents craft their brand strategies, create authentic brand experiences and powerfully communicate them inside their organizations and outside to the world.

We transform things

Most importantly, we help change agents go beyond incremental improvements to the things that transform companies and brands.

Things like helping them find and create uncontested market space where they don't have to compete as a commodity. Or helping them disrupt market conventions to make room for disruptive new business models. Or helping them to take their marketing to a whole new level in a new marketing world by better understanding the passions and drivers of technical buyers.

We're the end of the world as we know it

Mobium is the product of revolutionary information and technology changes that are creating a new age of business marketing and communications. In fact, we're part of a revolution to change the very nature of work. To do work that really matters. That makes a difference.

We're not traditional in any way, including the way we're organized, the way we work or how we relate to one another. We do virtually everything together. As collaborative colleagues.

We're change freaks

So we're always evolving. In fact, we've been altered more times and in more ways than Drew Carrie's tuxedo. And we're proud of it.

We're hard to categorize because we're a new kind of thing. And if that's not confusing enough, we're always reinventing ourselves.

Right now, we're consultants who do everything to execute. We don't have departments. Our organization chart looks like a flower instead of a pyramid. We're strategy process freaks who only care about creative work. And all we want to do is change almost everything about conventional business marketing, branding and communications.

Organized chaos

In other words, Mobium is slightly organized chaos in the service of change. So it's difficult to compare us to what's already out there. And if you do, you'll become as disoriented as Woody Allen at a family reunion.

Developing comprehensive, transformative brand and marketing programs to meet the broad range of our clients' business-to-business needs is what we do. Developing and creating these programs to turn change into a competitive advantage for our clients is what we do best.

Buddy, can you paradigm?

This New Paradigm series of e-books is just one way we invite you to learn about how to cultivate the power of change. Our website is another. Our blog dedicated to agents of b-to-b change (www.wasiswillbeblog.com) is yet another. You can follow us on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. And you can see and hear thought leaders on business marketing change on our website or YouTube channel. So join the revolution. We'd love to hear your experiences, opinions and insight.

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More Mobium e-books

Change is ugly, freakish, hard to face and downright frightening. But paradigms are shifting all over the place. To the point that business marketing these days isn't just about change. It's like riding the bus. It requires change.

That's the purpose of this series of little books.* To share a shiftload of what we believe you'll have to confront, whether you want to or not. Because they'll dramatically affect the way you'll have to market and brand in the future.

In our travels down these new roads, we've discovered that some of the guideposts have changed dramatically. Some have not. And probably never will.

As Bill Bernbach said, "It took millions of years for man's instincts to develop. It will take millions more for them to even vary. It is fashionable to talk about changing man. A communicator must be concerned with unchanging man, with his obsessive drive to survive, to be admired, to succeed, to love, to take care of his (or her) own."

The key is to make room for the things that change without tossing out the principles that never will. And then to integrate the two together. These, then, are the principles that we believe in, applied to whole new paradigms in business communications today.

To help make sense of it all, we've created a series of little e-books on interrelated subjects.

Actually, we believe these disciplines are more than related. They're inseparable. They are interdependent. You won't be able to excel in one without the others and still succeed. Especially in today's wacky world of change.

The New Paradigm Series

Shift This

Leveraging the paradigm shifts that are changing business marketing

Brandwidth

Increasing the power of business brands to generate sales in a changing world

Goosing

Integrating your communications to move customers and prospects to purchase in a new age

The Age of Engagement

The role of creative impact in a world of business marketing change

Hugs

Building stronger sale relationships with customers in the new age of business buying

Interactivate

Developing digital dialogues with buyers in the face of business marketing change

Follow the Money

Measuring the return on your marketing investment in the face of business change

If you'd like a copy of any of the other e-books in the series, just call 1.866.2MOBIUM. Or visit us at www.mobium.com.

*Beyond the obvious self-serving desire to get your work by demonstrating that we can help you turn change into a competitive advantage in your market

mobium

integrated business branding

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