

go000osing

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

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.

Contents

The sad state of integrated marketing	4
Twelve steps to a more fulfilling integrated life	9
Goosing: The little mental wedgies of integrated marketing	17
How information spreads	21
Finding the base for your integrated marketing program	24
Building, integrated dialogues: Integrating by listening, understanding and responding	29
It's the age of engagement	34
Where content fits in	42
Shift to advocate selling	44
Finding brand advocates	47
Goosing buyers into advocates	49
How to treat brand advocates	52
It's all about the brand	55
What's a Mobium?	57

The sad state of integration

There are now more permutations of integrated marketing than there were of the late Michael Jackson's face

Well, its official. "Integrated marketing is now broadly embraced by marketers."

So declares the Association of National Advertisers. They say that 74 percent of marketers now employ integrated marketing campaigns for their brands.

But wait, Um Diddle Diddle Diddle Um Diddle Ay

The same online survey of 200 marketers says that only 25 percent of those marketers rate their integrated programs as "very good" or "excellent."

And you can see why. All you have to do is take a good look at what's happening out there in the marketplace where integrated programs have to live on their execution. They're blowing up all over the place. In fact, there are so many violent detonations going on it makes *The Hurt Locker* look like *Mary Poppins*. And out there in the marketplace, my friend, things are not supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

They're bombing for a variety of reasons. Most of them revolve around three soft spots in IMC thinking and execution that can be documented.

Put another way, there are three things you can do to greatly increase the effectiveness of your integrated marketing or branding program's ability to generate sales.

Thing one: Everything is changing. Always

Thanks to technology, your customers and prospects are taking control of information, communication, brand experience and the buying process. And they are doing it

with a tenacity not seen since Paul Prudhomme attempted to tie his own shoelaces.

As a result, they now define when, where, how, how much and what kind of information and buying relationship they want to have with you and your brands.

They are in control now, Bucky. And nothing will ever be the same again. Accept it. Embrace it. Thrive.

Even the present isn't what it used to be

At the same time, messages, brand promises and even brands themselves are being segmented, fragmented and pulverized until they disappear. All because there are now more ways for business people to gather, evaluate and act on information than there are coffee nomenclatures at Starbucks. (Don't you just want to slap anybody who takes more than six words to order a cup of coffee?)

As a result, business products and services are no longer sold. They are bought.

In fact, they're no longer just products or services. They're mutants, half-breeds and bastard children. Hybrids of products and services oriented to stated customer and prospect needs. More like value offerings, if you will.

Integration isn't what it used to be, either

In addition, integrated communications have evolved from the '90s version of truth management, reality styling and fact reconstruction foisted off by dinosaur ad agencies to generate income to their holding companies' independent advertising, digital, direct mail, social media, public relations, brand consulting and design profit centers.

True integrated marketing is a process of dialogue, interaction and learning with the purpose of providing value to customers and prospects and cultivating long-term, reciprocal relationships with them

Doesn't sound very integrated does it? Well, don't kid yourself, Sparky. It's not.

True integrated marketing is an executional process as well as a strategic one.

And that execution needs to permeate the entire organization, rather than being seen as a campaign from the marketing department. Every point of contact with customers, prospects and other stakeholders (including employees) must be identified, analyzed and integrated creatively to build profitable relationships.

This kind of integration is about as much like the packaging and transmitting of traditional one-way marketing monologues that speak in "one voice" as a Tiffany's bracelet is to a cubic zirconium from Fred's Mattress City, Home Center and Leisure World.

Saying no-no to the mono

Instead of surface-level marketing spin and creative misdirection, true integrated marketing is a process of dialogue, interaction and learning with the purpose of providing value to customers and prospects and cultivating long-term, reciprocal relationships with them.

True integration drives sales, brand value and repeat purchases, and builds and enhances long-term customer relationships and lifetime customer value.

So if you're interested in truly integrating your marketing in this day and age (both inside and outside your company) you'll have to learn how to take advantage of all these

power shifts, role reversals and change. Before change takes advantage of you.

Granted, all of this may seem bleaker than Ingmar Bergman listening to an acoustic set performed by Leonard Cohen.

But cheer up, frappuccino-breath

This shifting new world creates all sorts of wonderful new opportunities for your integrated marketing program to play a much more effective and efficient role in delivering measurable business results. That is, if it is truly integrated to take advantage of all the changes in how business people use, evaluate, adopt and spread brand relationships. And how they now engage with business brands in this changing new world.

If your program is built around these changes, it can move your prospects through each stage of the purchase process to not only create sales, customers and more profitable relationships, but also brand advocates.

On the other hand, if your marketing effort (integrated or not) is not doing that for you, then you should probably look very closely at giving it a focus and synergistic direction by integrating all of it.

Thing two: Avoid the big black hole in IMC's approach

For most business marketers integrating "all of it" seems to mean all of its strategies.

But what about the rest of "all of it?"

The problem is that companies and traditional agencies are still organized and staffed by specific media specialists and not by “integrationists”

Execution of integrated marketing programs is still a monumental mess. Filled with creative efforts that have no common buying idea or brand point of view. Or no distinctive, human, brand voice. Jam-packed with tactics functioning in their own individual spheres, unconnected to others and to the whole.

The fact of the matter is your integrated marketing may not be as integrated as you think it is. And that may be another reason 75 percent of marketers who say they have an integrated program are unhappy with it.

What’s wrong with this picture?

A recent survey of 200 marketers conducted by CoActive Marketing Group among members of the Association of National Advertisers lists the biggest barriers to effective integrated marketing.

Here they are. Read carefully, there will be a pop quiz at the end.

1. Functional silos (59%)
2. Lack of strategic consistency across communications disciplines (49%)
3. Insufficient marketing budget (36%)
4. Lack of a standard measuring process (36%)
5. Lack of needed skill sets among marketing staff (36%)
6. The need to develop the “big creative idea” that can be leveraged across different media disciplines (32%)

What kind of cosmic bunny hole have we fallen through?

Call us addle-brained, but don’t you think numbers 1,2,4,5 and 6 all have a direct relationship to one another?

We think they do. As a matter of fact they are symptoms of the same problem. Companies and traditional agencies are still organized and staffed by specific media specialists and not by “integrationists.”

This is especially true of interactive, on-line, direct marketing and social media. And of course, business marketers own marketing departments. These specialists tend to function in the mode of the old adage, “To a person with a hammer everything starts to look like a nail.”

And so it will remain as long as industry publications, trade associations, traditional agencies, specialty agencies (including old line agencies that are still just agencies but now call themselves integrated marketing companies) and, of course, business marketers themselves keep talking about their integrated direct programs and their integrated online campaigns.

What insanity.

What are we, oxymorons?

In a truly integrated marketing world those are all oxymorons. And this kind of oxymoronic thinking is all over the place. In fact, here’s a more complete list of these kinds of nonsensical terms you hear all the time.

- Integrated event marketing
- Integrated social media
- Content marketing
- Integrated advertising
- Integrated digital campaign
- Integrated tradeshow program
- Integrated direct marketing

IMC has become a bigger catch-all than the front of Rush Limbaugh's shirt after an all-you-can-eat nacho blowout

Each one is an oxymoron and further proof of the bastardization of the concept and principles of integrated marketing.

What you can do

There are four things you can do to pull your program out of this hole and move on to a more satisfying integrated life:

- Tear down the silos that currently exist in your marketing department. Pull up and pulverize all the turf that people war over. Make it easy, interactive and mandatory that people talk to each other.
- Get everyone on the same page with a holistic, functional definition of what IMC is.
- Hire a highly collaborative team whose members are trained, encouraged, processized and culturalized to be integrators.
- Embrace work processes and team organizations designed to protect integrated work from being reinvented every time it goes to a different medium.

Thing three: Get a functional definition of IMC

In there somewhere between the 74 percent adoption of IMC by marketers and the 75 percent dissatisfaction with it lies a fundamental difference in how integrated marketing is defined. If you define IMC functionally, based on what it does rather than simply what it is or could be, then you'd probably have a much higher satisfaction level.

But the sad fact is there are now more permutations of integrated business marketing than there were of the late Michael Jackson's face.

Is IMC just a bunch of media strung together with a common look and "one voice" messaging? Or is it much more strategic, robust and encompassing? And more than that, is it merely strategic or does it rely on consistent creative execution to generate the synergy it takes to be truly effective in a new over-saturated media world?

In other words, the problem with IMC is it's become a bigger catchall than the front of Rush Limbaugh's shirt after an all-you-can-eat nacho blowout.

God is (or in this case isn't) in the definitions

In fact, if you'd like some how-to enlightenment on the subject, just look up the definition of integrated marketing. That should help, right? Well, don't count on it.

Alas, poor Yorick, here are a few of the extremely valuable insights you'll get about how to execute a successful integrated b-to-b marketing program.

According to The American Marketing Association, IMC is "a planning process designed to assure that all brand contacts received by a customer or prospect for a product, service, or organization are relevant to that person and consistent over time."

The Journal of Integrated Marketing Communications at Northwestern University says, "IMC is a customer-centric, data-driven method of communicating with consumers. IMC – the management of all organized communications to build positive relationships with customers and other stakeholders – stresses marketing to the individual by understanding needs, motivations, attitudes and behaviors."

Is IMC merely strategic or does it rely on consistent creative execution to generate the synergy it takes to be truly effective

A lot of integrated mumbo jumbo

The Marketing Power Dictionary says, "Integrated marketing communication can be defined as a holistic approach to promote buying and selling in the digital economy. This concept includes many online and offline marketing channels. Online marketing channels include any e-marketing campaigns or programs, from search engine optimization (SEO), pay-per-click, affiliate, email, banner to latest web-related channels for webinar, blog, RSS, podcast, and Internet TV. Offline marketing channels are traditional print (newspaper, magazine), mail order, public relations, industry analyst relations, billboard, radio, and television."

If you're actually trying to execute a successful integrated program these definitions are about as clear, concise and easy to understand as Bob Dylan reading *Finnegan's Wake* in a wind tunnel.

IMC in one sentence (sort of)

So here's our shot at a definition. Why not? Everyone else seems to have one.

A truly integrated b-to-b marketing or branding program

- targets different audience segments...
- through each stage of their purchase process...
- with the messages and brand experiences that customers and prospects consider valuable and distinctive in terms of their most valued functional and emotional buying criteria and to which they are most susceptible at that stage...

- delivered by the media that:
 - are most appropriate for the message...
 - and to which the audience is most receptive because of time, place or purchase path stage and personal preference...
- containing information, incentives (both functional and emotional), brand experiences and offers designed to initiate and maintain a dialogue that builds a brand relationship and moves them to the next stage of purchase or repurchase...
- all tied together through a unifying creative buying concept anchored in the brand's promise...
- and presented in a highly recognizable, unique and consistent look, voice, point of view and brand personality...
- that is internalized and communicated throughout your organization based on the customer's point of view
- and measured in perceptual, behavioral and financial terms.

There you go. A functional definition of IMC in one sentence. Okay, a complex, ungrammatical, run-on sentence. But at least it says something.

Problem is, it's easier said than done.

The fulfilling integrated life

Twelve steps that will bring you marketing sobriety, organizational happiness and brand success beyond your wildest dreams

When it comes to integrating your marketing program in this new paradigm, the fact of the matter is you'll fail unless you have some very specific tools and methods that everyone agrees with, believes in and uses.

Without them, things will careen out of control faster than Billy Idol on Ecstasy at the Hawaiian Tropic model finals. You simply won't be able to keep everything and everyone focused and on target.

Oh no, another 12-step program

Hey, we know. We haven't seen one of these since we left the clinic either. Nonetheless, they work.

So here are 12 actions that are important to a truly integrated program. A program planned to move prospects through each stage of the purchase process. A program developed around what customers and prospects perceive to be important and distinctive when they make buying decisions. A program implemented around one unifying, creative buying concept that leverages a brand promise to push prospects along with relevant and engaging content and brand experiences. And a program that captures the voice of the customer and sends it back into the organization.

In other words, a complete program that apparently includes a lot of incomplete sentences.

1. Shut up and listen

Why should you spend the time, effort and money to listen to your customers and prospects? Because they, not your internal constituencies, are the people with the money.

So whatever research technique you use to listen to them, it should answer some basic questions that will reveal what they value when making buying decisions. Most importantly, it should answer them strictly from your customers' and prospects' point of view — without any prompting from you.

- What's their buying process — not your selling process
- Who's involved in it
- What are their concerns and worldview
- What criteria do they use to make a decision
- How do they perceive their brand choices based on those criteria
- How do they want to be engaged

You'll find a more extensive list of questions in the *Finding Your Program's Base* article on page 24.

Integration is not about using a logo, color palette, type treatment, design format or “one voice” consistently. It’s the consistent use of a single, overriding compelling buying idea

The answers to these questions form the basis for integrating your communications messages. And thanks to a deceptively simple research technique we call MindScanningsm, you can answer every one of them.

What’s a MindScan?

A research analysis method that allows you to define the criteria buyers use when making a purchase (and therefore the things they are interested in hearing about) and how important each criterion is to their decision. The MindScan also shows how buyers perceive each competitor’s performance on each important buying attribute. This map of the buyer’s mind is used to identify positioning opportunities, develop the audience-relevant messages and set perceptual objectives and measurements.

By taking this one small step, you’ll make a giant leap toward more effective business marketing, branding and communications in an age when customers and prospects control information. You’ve just become relevant to their concerns, needs and perceptions of the buying landscape. You’re closer to making your marketing efforts, brand experiences and communications focus on what they’re interested in hearing and engaging in.

2. See things the way your customers see them

Out there in the marketplace, there’s only one point of view that counts—your audience’s. Not yours. Not your agency’s. Not your company president’s.

So no matter what you say, you better figure out a way to say it that fits your customers’ and prospects’ current

perceptions—what’s important to them. Because if you don’t, they’ll simply ignore you.

Of course, the second path to being ignored is to tell people that they are wrong. We like to listen to things that we don’t know. New things. And we gravitate towards messages and experiences that reinforce what we already believe. But we experience brain freeze and emotional vomiting when told that what we believe to be true is not. And that, somehow, it is our fault.

You can see this misguided approach in action in many “you might think of us as _____, but we’re really _____” campaigns that flood business communications.

These kinds of messages, strategies and self-serving points-of-view go beyond being ignored by customers and prospects and catapult you into the realm of being disliked. They can do irreparable harm to your brand.

If you don’t think that’s a problem in your industry, just pick up a trade publication or surf your way through a few industry websites. You’ll have to dodge more corporate belching than John Belushi in a rerun of *Animal House*.

3. Don’t be blinded by what you think you sell

You might be wrong. It’s not so much what you think you’re selling, but what they believe they’re buying.

Yet, it happens all the time. It happens everywhere. Companies think they are selling one thing, but buyers are actually buying something else. Often something that’s driven by emotion as much as by logic. And as a result,

You simply can't dump all the functional information, brand experiences and emotional support people need to make a buying decision on them in one big, sloppy projectile vomit

they buy something way beyond the physical properties of a product.

In the reality of their world, you don't sell products and services at all. Because they don't buy products and services. They buy solutions to their business or professional problems.

More and more, those solutions are really a combination of products and services fused together around things customers and prospects value—a value offer, if you will. In other words, a brand.

And to make things worse, you have to straighten out all this what-are-they-really-buying stuff before you can create a truly cohesive integrated marketing program.

Simply put, the primary role of an integrated marketing or brand plan, in this new world, is to match what you say and sell (a value offer) with what your audience wants to buy, engage in and hear about (what they value).

4. Understand what those other bastards are up to

Rifle through every trade magazine. Poach direct mail pieces. Surf the depths of their websites. Illicitly obtain sales brochures. Dive into the Twitter stream.

The purpose of all this covert activity is to identify your competitors' positions and message strategies. You can then scope out where you overlap and where you differ. If you've done MindScan analysis, you can tell which of those messages are hitting and which are still open.

Based on that, you can analyze where they're most susceptible. Where their messages don't align with audience needs and interests or market perceptions. And even more importantly, where your brand's opportunities are. We call this a Message Audit.

What's a Message Audit?

A comparison between verbatim competitive messages and what customers and buyers perceive they are buying. This helps identify specific message openings and opportunities and allows you to align your client's buying and brand stories with the things your audiences are most interested in.

Just one word of warning: Make sure you know who you're really competing against, from your customers' and prospects' point of view. Danger lurks in your own definitions, my friend. Make sure your competitive frame is large enough to include other industries that might compete for your audience's time, attention or budget.

5. Understand the visual environment you're going into

Perform a visual audit of all the materials your audience is exposed to. What does their world look like? Editorially. Ad-wise. Competitive-ad-wise. Web-wise. Social-wise

Compare your look and feel to the position you want to occupy in your prospect's mind. You can't appeal to Neiman Marcus types with Kmart fixtures. Or vice versa.

Only in marketing communications can you do all the strategic stuff right and then watch it all go right into the dumper because its execution didn't have enough impact to get noticed

The idea is to begin to develop an attitude, a point of view for your brand that fits with the world your customers and prospects live in. But one that is uniquely yours and stands out from everything that will surround it in that world.

6. Know your audience's purchase process

The core of your integrated communications plan is knowing which audience segments to reach with what messages and brand experiences at what time in the buying process. So you're going to have to know who buys what, when, how and how often. And of course, who influences whom, how, how often and why.

This has never been a very straightforward or simple analysis for business marketers because of the complexity of business-to-business buying. But the rise of buying committees has made it even more complex.

And at the same time, the dreaded buying committee has made it much more important to go through this excruciatingly painful exercise.

Because whether you like it or not, your sales force probably doesn't have access to many of these interdepartmental influencers. Some of these people know little about you. Some of them don't know what you stand for. Or what you do. Or even who the heck you are.

So you had better define who these people are, what role they play in the process, what they are interested in and, most importantly, how they see the world. Then and only then can you determine when and how to reach them. As well as exactly how to engage them in a dialogue that's meaningful and valuable to them.

We bring all this stuff together through a proprietary process we call a Purchase Process Matrix and personas that go beyond demographics to describe each audience segment in terms of the unique way they see the world.

What's a Purchase Process Matrix?

An analysis of the decision process that your customers go through to make a purchase. The matrix defines who is involved in the purchase process, what role they play and what kind of basic messages they are most interested in hearing. The matrix helps target messages to different influencers (user/buyer, deal-killer, etc.) at different stages of the initial buying and repurchase process.

7. Assign each medium a function

It's now time to divvy up specific communications tasks to specific media. To make each element of the program responsible for achieving something specific and measurable in the grand scheme of things.

But before you get too excited, Scooter, remember—nothing is as easy as it seems.

You not only have to look at the special talents of each medium, but also each medium's relationship to the buying process, and which target audience is most susceptible to which messages, delivered by which medium.

The answer to this riddle lies in defining the brand contact points you have with various customers and prospects.

The idea is to develop an attitude, a point of view, for your brand that fits with your customers' and prospects' worldview and the actual world in which they live

Where are they when they need your offering? Under what conditions are they most likely to need and seek out information? When and where can you be of most benefit to them? Where do they naturally turn for information, guidance and advice?

What emerges from this game of “what if” and “twenty questions” is a variety of unconventional media. They may not be what you’re used to, but they’re probably much more persuasive. Because, if you do it right, they speak to individuals as individuals.

But more importantly, if you’ve done it right, you’re speaking to customers/prospects about what they are most interested in hearing at key points in their journeys down the purchase path. And you’re doing it through the medium that’s most meaningful to them at that time.

We have a proprietary process for analyzing and sorting out all these issues for each unique client and market shift situation. We call it an Integration Map.

What’s an Integration Map?

Defines the motivational path that your customers and prospects go through to make a purchase or repurchase (from being aware through preference and conviction, etc.). It establishes the media that will be used to push them through each stage and assigns specific functions to each vehicle used in an integrated marketing program.

8. Develop a content map

Look at your total sales story. (We’d rather call it your purchase story, but call it whatever the heck you want.) Get to know its chapters and hierarchies. Its headlines and ledes and subheads and supporting benefits and features.

Determine the key brand messages and experiences buying for each audience segment at each key point in the buying process.

(By the way, you’ll never be able to do this really well unless you do Step One to figure out the customer/prospect perceptions of value and what truly differentiates brands in their minds).

Then chart all that stuff across all communications vehicles you’ve decided to use by audience segment across different stages of the purchase path.

It’s a dirty job, but somebody’s got to do it. Because it is the critical step in reaching the right people with the right message and brand experience at the right time in the way they want to be reached.

These contact possibilities will determine what will best be communicated. In this new customer-controlled communications paradigm, that means that the conditions under which these engagements, dialogues or brand experiences can take place are as important as the message content. And, in fact, the situation determines the content to a great degree.

The conditions under which these engagements or dialogues can take place are as important as the message content

For example, if the best time and place to enter into a dialogue is during a tennis tournament that you're sponsoring, then the amount of content and its tone are greatly influenced by its setting. But the look, feeling and point of view of that brand contact should be consistent and connected with the other contact points of your integrated marketing program.

Content maps define the engagement messages and brand experiences to be delivered and the dialogue content carried by each medium given the context (the contact situation) in which they occur.

9. Target media and messages across the purchase cycle

The idea is to move your prospects and customers through each stage of the purchase process by pushing them along the way with the right promises, the right information, the right brand experiences, the right kinds of dialogue, the right offers, the right emotional incentives, the right reminders and the right appeals.

Right?

Right. Because you simply can't dump all the functional information, brand experiences and emotional support people need to make a buying decision on them in one big, sloppy projectile vomit. Or in a never-ending procession of the same projectile vomit.

You have to figure out what kinds of messages and experiences will engage them in dialogue and keep them involved. By responding to them with information, experiences, offers and incentives they become more

knowledgeable about your offerings and build a relationship with the brand as you push them through the purchase process.

The technical term for this is "goosing."

10. Craft a compelling idea that ties everything together

Integration is not about using a logo, color palette, type treatment, design format or "one voice" consistently. It's the consistent use of a single, overriding, compelling buying idea that creates the powerful synergy of truly integrated marketing programs.

What's a compelling buying idea?

An influential, memorable idea started with a consistent personality and point of view that's based on customer and prospect needs and perceptions designed to capture and maintain a presence in your audience's minds. This idea unifies all brand contacts by creatively and consistently demonstrating what you can do to meet your audience's needs as they define them.

Every part of the program should reek of it. It should be based on how your customers and prospects view their business. Not how you view yours. It should be unique so you can own it. And to make it look and sound familiar, you should create a highly visible and recognizable visual and copy style that is unique to you.

Layouts and typography won't pull your program together. Only a unifying creative buying concept will do that.

What emerges from this game of “what if” and “twenty questions” is a variety of unconventional media and brand contact experiences that speak to people as individuals

In an attempt to overcome the ever-expanding diversity of media choices that are pulverizing their messages, business marketers are increasing their spew of corporate braggadocio, borrowed interest and irrelevant minutiae like a candy conveyor belt operated by Lucy Ricardo on methamphetamines. All of it under the guise of social media and integrated marketing.

In actuality, you should do just the opposite.

In order to capture and maintain a presence in your audience’s minds, you’re going to have to present a compelling, memorable and consistent personality and point of view that’s based on customer and prospect needs and perceptions. In other words, you’ll have to address what you can do for them. Then you’ll have to use this overriding idea (brand essence) to unify all marketing, communications and brand relationships.

And if that’s not enough for you, in order to drive significant sales gains (to move the needle, as they say) this idea must fulfill five additional requirements. It must be unifying. It must be compelling to your customers and prospects. It must be unique and creative. It must relate to the audience’s functional and emotional buying criteria and worldview. And most importantly, it must be an actual, real conceptual idea. That would make it a unifying, compelling, creative buying idea.

Requirements of a buying idea

unifying	has the ability to encompass and give meaning and common identity to many specific messages
compelling	has the power of relevancy and directness to claim enough attention and memorability to move large numbers of prospects and customers to take action
creative	represents a new way of looking at audience issues and talking to them about the solutions
buying	implies and communicates a reward for action—“buy this and you’ll get this in return”
concept	brings visual/verbal meaning and synergy that neither can communicate individually: speaks a third, more memorable language

Your integrated marketing program should never end with a purchase

11. Make it memorable

What a wacky business. Only in marketing communications can you get all the strategic stuff right and then watch it all go right into the dumper because its execution didn't have enough impact to get noticed, understood and remembered.

The cruel reality is that no matter what you do up front, you're still going to have to compete with a zillion other messages for your audience's attention and interests.

You have basically two choices to overcome that one. Either you can repeat your messages over and over and over and over and over again until they finally sink in. Or you can say them in such a fresh, surprising and relevant way that people can't forget them.

We recommend the latter. It's a lot less expensive. And a lot more effective.

Without creative impact, your messages and brand experiences are relegated to the slow seep that is called frequency. And when you rely on frequency, you not only waste money, you also lose lots and lots of valuable time.

But beyond that, memorable execution is a major factor in engaging customers and prospects in dialogue. Creative execution is the personality that they respond to.

So in this new world, maybe you should measure the efficiency of your communications by its impact. And impact is a direct result of how fresh, original and relevant

your creative is. Because people always react strongly to something they've never seen before. They will always be engaged by messages and responses and experiences that are fresh and direct and relevant and human.

Always.

12. Recycle your customers

Your integrated program should never end with a purchase.

Because it pays to get warm and cuddly with your customers. In fact the return on your marketing investment soars when one-time buyers turn into true-blue repeat purchasers. Not to mention cross-buyers.

But to make these relationships flower, you have to remove customers from the market and think about them and treat them in a totally different way.

In order to do that you'll need to plan and implement unique marketing, brand and communications vehicles to dialogue with them when, where and how they want.

You'll also need to act upon their feedback and integrate the customer's voice back into the organization. Just as you goosed prospects into buyers, you're now going to need an organized, integrated way to migrate buyers into loyal customers and brand advocates.

If you'd like to explore these ideas in more detail, check out our free *Hugs* e-book.

Little mental wedgies

Truly integrated marketing programs move prospects and customers through each and every step of their purchase process

The days of ad branding are gone. The Unique Selling Proposition is a thing of the past. The days of “one voice” integration are numbered.

In fact, right now Rosser Reeves and David Ogilvy are spinning over in their graves so rapidly they’re thinking of hooking them up to a turbine to light up the Vegas strip.

They’re not enough anymore

The world has changed. And in a world where your customers and prospects have no time and little attention, and at the same time control information, communication and the buying process, the role of integrated marketing changes dramatically.

In fact, the opportunities for business marketers to take advantage of these changes are as overwhelming as Donald Trump’s hair and ego combined.

In this new environment, integrated marketing and branding programs can go beyond their old conventional roles of building brand awareness, familiarity and mere communications consistency.

They can create brand experience at each stage of your customers’ and prospects’ purchase process, not just brand exposure. And as such, they now have the power to turn people who have never heard of your company or brand into prospects, then into buyers, then into customers, then into long-term brand advocates.

Tiptoeing down the purchase path

These migratory abilities result in real, measurable business outcomes, including increased revenue streams, expanded brand equity and accrued brand assets.

Truly integrated marketing programs move prospects and customers through each step of the purchase process. From unawareness to awareness to knowledge to preference to conviction to evaluation to trial to purchase and then to repurchase and advocacy.

That is their real purpose in this paradigm-shifty world.

The fine art of goosing

They do it by goosing prospects along the way with the right amount of the right information (not all the information), the right benefits, the right offers, the right reminders, the right incentives, the right appeals and the right brand experiences to push them to the next stage.

Kind of like little mental wedgies that push people along quickly in the direction you want them to go.

Each of these goosing components is targeted, of course, to reach the right influencers at the right time through the right media. So here are seven sample geese (or geese) that you might want to keep in mind.

Your customers and prospects have no time, tiny attention spans, and complete control of information and the buying process. In that new environment, the role of integrated marketing changes completely and dramatically

Goose one: let them know you're there and can deliver

Woody Allen was right. At least 80 percent of success is just showing up.

And in this case, showing up with consistent, broad-based communications that's going on at the right time. Which is whenever they need you.

In the early stages of the purchase process, target messages and brand experiences to keep potential buyers informed that you're in business and able to deliver. This is a continuous process. Otherwise, the odds are pretty good they'll forget to ask for you when they really need something.

Goose two: establish contact

Contact as in contact cement.

Later in the buying process, pay special attention to contact media. These are media that have direct connections to your audience or that make it very easy for prospects to contact you. Social networking is a good example. More about that later.

This does not mean a direct sales call. It means making it easy for prospects to get the kind of information they want, how and when they want it. Which at this early stage usually means without a sales rep attached.

In tactical terms, it means things like a truly interactive website, a single 800 number, a bounce-back with interactive closest dealer directions, coupons, blogs, email blasts, e-newsletters or and social contact points like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn.

Goose three: make a concrete offer

The idea is to build credibility, involvement and dialogue through some sort of action device and rationale. This is sometimes known as "a reason to believe."

In this stage of the purchase path, you need to give prospects a reason to believe that your product or service offer can be relied on to deliver the brand promise or benefit. At the same time, you have to focus on ways of making it easier to buy from you than from your competitors.

Goose four: don't say it, be it

As prospects get closer to evaluation time, you should stop just telling them what your brand will do for them and start showing them what it will do. And how it will do it.

Moving from "saying it" to "being it" involves more than conventional tactics like sampling. Or product demonstrations. Or testimonials. Or case histories.

In this new age of integrated business marketing, it includes finding any excuse you can muster to get your prospects' hands on your brand. To experience it. Even if it's a computer simulation of the product. Or a spreadsheet program that can show the specific dollar-and-cents impact of your product on their business. "Being it" is interacting with cutaways of the product on the Internet.

As prospects get closer to evaluation time, stop telling them what your brand will do for them and start showing them.

Goose five: information is our friend

Give qualified leads all of it you can.

Give them enough information to help them make up their minds about whether what you have to offer is what they want to buy. Enough information to give them every possible excuse and rationalization to act on the emotional brand decision they probably have already made.

When in doubt, give them more information. Even if most prospects won't read it all, some will. Some, in fact, will suck it all up faster than an Oreck in the hands of the guy from the movie *Shine*.

They're the ones who will become your customers.

Goose six: help them sell their boss

Buyers have to sell, too. If they're about to spend the company's money, chances are they must justify their decision to someone else.

Find out who that someone else usually is and build benefits for them into your marketing and communications activities in the latter stages of the purchase process. And while you're at it, make it easy for them to get all those higher level benefits into their boss's hands.

Goose seven: sell the committee

The word's out. Companies are looking to consolidate their suppliers. As a result, they want to simplify things. They want to do business with fewer full-service vendors.

Sounds good, doesn't it? Now it's going to be easier to get more business from each account.

Au contraire!

The fact of the matter is, every time a company moves to fewer full-service suppliers, the next step is the establishment of some sort of buying committee to ensure that the diverse needs of the organization are met.

Some of these people know little about you. You've probably never worked with them before so they don't know what you stand for. Or what you do. Or even who the heck you are. Or why they should care.

And to make things worse, your salespeople probably don't have access to many of them. Neither, we'll bet, does your finely-tuned, pinpoint-targeted CRM database. Because many of these purchase influencers are hidden deep inside the organization. Unseen by your sales force and your databases. Forgotten.

The committee as a clueless deal-killer

A client of ours, who's as close as you can get to selling a commodity, has done a wonderful job of differentiating themselves. They've added integrated services so they can help their customers improve profitability all the way through the customer's value chain. They're right on track with the emerging trend in their industry for buying groups to look at the whole value process, not just the procurement part.

Problem is, they only have access to purchasing managers.

The people who can really appreciate what they're doing and push the full-service purchase their way, like

These migratory abilities result in real, measurable business outcomes, including increased revenue streams, brand equity and brand assets

operations and marketing people, know little or nothing about them. Let alone how their integrated services can benefit each area represented on the buying committee.

This is called irony

And if it weren't for broad-based communications, it would be called stick-a-fork-in-us-'cause-we're-done.

In addition to broad-based media like trade publications and websites aimed at specific job disciplines, there's also dialogue-oriented ways of reaching different members of the committee. Things like productivity seminars, road shows, sneak previews, trend readouts and events.

Social networks like professional discussion groups on LinkedIn and communities of interest within trade organizations and industry websites offer great opportunities if you know what you are doing.

At the very least, you can be sure to include benefits that will resonate with each member's concerns in your literature. You can customize direct marketing packages and email efforts to them according to their job functions.

You can also create special paths through your website to address each member's focus in the buying process. Give them special information and tools that can help them deal with their decision responsibility.

How information spreads

In this new world,
you have to give to
get. Like a bad beef
burrito, it will come
back to you

Today, information about your products, services and brands is like fertilizer. You have to spread it around before it will do you any good.

In fact, you should treat information like you'd treat manure. Divvy it up. Keep it moving. Do it quickly. Whatever you do, don't pile it up or restrict it. Because if you do, it will asphyxiate you.

After all, no one is particularly attracted to or deeply engaged with a big pile of poo. Well, no one you'd probably want as a customer.

How to give a shit

Whether you like it or not, in this new world you have to give to get. You have to share and spread freely and genuinely to build a position for your brand.

And just like a bad beef burrito, it will all come back to you. And more. In fact, the more you give, the more you get back. In terms of success that is, not in terms of manure or disgusting beef burrito stuff.

Today there are more ways to get your brand out there than ever before. You can blog it. You can whitepaper it. You can Slideshare it. You can e-book it. You can Tweet it. You can Facebook it. You can YouTube it. You can LinkedIn it. You can webinar it. You can email it. You can newsletter it. You can virtual trade show it.

Beyond the tweet

Why, there are more fragmented media options flying around out there than Tiger Woods paternity suits. And at the heart of this media shift storm are two recent and

major trends that have affected the way information spreads today:

- Text-based buzz through social networking and media has reached a massive scale.
- Your customers have ever-richer ways to communicate with each other, including audio and video technologies as well as tools that give them more opportunities to observe each other.

The purpose of integrating all these non-traditional media efforts into your integrated marketing program is to seed the market with information about what your brand can do to help customers and prospects do their jobs better. But the key is to do it in such a way that will spread third-party recommendations throughout the marketplace.

Find the sneezers

But, let's be frank, that's not easy in the social world.

Because that world is populated by a seemingly unending parade of circus geeks and sideshow oddities that would give even Federico Fellini a case of grade-A, toss-in-your-sleep, ate-a-garlic-cheese-and-sushi-Calzone-right-before-bedtime nightmares. And that's just the tweeters.

We're not saying that they all suck like airplane toilets. But the chances are the good ones – the ones who can get your information out there with authority – can be counted on the one hand of a bad woodshop teacher.

So the key is finding the sneezers. The serious people with influence who can spread your information to large

Social networks are powerful because they tap into your customers' and prospects' favorite source of information — peer advice

groups of potential buyers quickly. As fast and as broadly as a “ha-chooo”. Once you find these sneezy people, build a relationship with them.

A method to all the madness

So once you find them how do you approach creating this kind of integrated buzz?

There's actually a method to the effort.

- Identify opinion leaders who function as network hubs. Many of these people will be industry thought leaders, or trade association officials in different markets. The idea is to make specific connections with those who have access to large networks of people.
- Qualify the identified network hubs. Of this identified pool, who is the most “connected?” In every market there are connectors who have the common trait of actively promoting and pushing new ideas. Pay special attention to this group of idea connectors.
- Provide information and analytic tools to all opinion leaders and network hubs through social media. That includes materials that will inform and get them passionate about your brand solutions, things like white papers, source research, video documentaries, etc. Let them in on the next great idea first. You'll find that they can't wait to share their knowledge with others.
- Provide special tools that opinion leaders and network hubs can readily distribute to others, i.e. PowerPoint presentations, white papers, discussion forums. All of these can be delivered by digital and social media into the hands of others with the leaders' endorsement.

- Most importantly, integrate these efforts into a holistic marketing program that includes traditional media and online interactive media and digital tools.

Beware of myopic tweetage

But just a word of warning, General Custer. Right now, every business marketer appears to be enamored with social networking. They are ready to march in with guns blazing. That's because by comparison, every other medium looks about as exciting to them as the corn dog concession at the Ringworm Brothers Carnival compared to a stint in the double-0 sector of Her Majesty's Secret Service.

But hold on there, 007

Yes, social networks are powerful when used right because they tap into your customers' and prospects' favorite source of information -- peer advice. But despite marketers' enthusiasm, social media are not the be-all and end-all to your marketing challenges. Even if those challenges revolve around a depressing lack of budget.

The real issue is how are you going to integrate these new opportunities into your total program?

Buzz in the land of twits and tweets

In this new market environment, eight principles are at work that determine how effective this kind of buzz can be for a business marketer in the era of LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter.

You have to make your integrated marketing program stand out, not blend into the ocean of other content that is drowning business people all around the world

Without understanding them and implementing them when you integrate social media into your marketing efforts, your so-called integrated program will be as unstable as a hostage situation negotiated by Crispin Glover.

But answer these questions in the affirmative and you're on your way to integrating social media into an effective IMC program. If you can't, then it would be a good idea to figure out the steps you'll have to take so you can.

Because this stuff is not going to go away

1. Are you focusing on the right product, service or value proposition ... one that impresses people enough to get them talking about it?
2. Do you have the right approach ... an attitude of honesty, directness, transparency and networks?
3. Are you listening ... to customers, prospects, to the end users and to the market buzz?
4. Are you working with network hubs ... connected people who talk more than most people?
5. Have you considered all possible techniques for building buzz ... including grassroots seeding, sneak previews and surprise?
6. Are you engaging people ... helping them to create something, participate and involve themselves in brand experiences?
7. How can you keep the buzz alive ... can you keep the offering new and associate it with innovation?
8. Are your ads building buzz ... research has shown that the right kind of advertising substantially increases buzz?

But it has to contain more than content

Amidst all the talk about social media, there seems to be an assumption among many business marketers that content in the form of blogs or whitepapers or other thought leadership material supported by tweets and Facebook pages is audience engagement.

Well, we've got news for you, Bucky. It is not.

Engagement is about integrating those eight questions into your branding and marketing program and using many media and experiences to create brand relationships.

All of them centered on a relevant, compelling, human voice that makes people want to talk to you.

Pure, raw content, no matter how it is spread, is not engagement. It never has been. It never will be.

You know what happens when you ass u me

You have to make that content engaging in one way or another or your customers and prospects will pay about as much attention to it as Money Penny at a Bond Girls reunion. And as a result, no one will ever get to your brilliant, savvy advice and ideas.

First you have to make your ideas and your brand spreadable. Then you have to help them spread. But most important, you have to make them stand out, not blend into the ocean of other content that is drowning businesspeople all around the world.

Finding your program's base

The primary role of an integrated brand or marketing plan should be to align what you say and sell with what your audience wants to buy and talk about

As we all know, marketing is the most important job on the planet next to keeping Gary Busey off the nation's highways.

Without marketing the world would never experience the finer things-in-life like, industrial strength blenders that can turn an iPod to dust in 15 seconds...The Flowbee haircutting system...The Clapper...cutting edge streaming video technology that serves humanity and the porno industry simultaneously...deep fried cheese...rain ponchos for dogs...beer can hats...and the epitome of modern technology and design, The Slanket.

Beware the dark side

But for all our accomplishments, there is a powerful, inexplicable force that seems to pull on us with all the magnetic attraction of a half-pound Baconator with double cheese on the set of The Biggest Loser. And if you're not careful this evil force will cause your integrated program to veer off in more wrong directions than Don King's hair in an electrical storm.

It is called corporate ego. The overwhelming force that causes companies to see everything from their own point of view and base their integrated marketing programs on self-serving messages, one-sided monologues and self-important self-inflated diatribes.

We must forgive our egomaniacal brethren. They are just following the age-old self-preservation instincts that are woven as deep in our brains as our irrational need to watch Norm Abram in This Old House.

Walk towards the light

Having said that, we warn you to be vigilant against this seed of evil thinking at each point of your integrated program. It must be avoided like a blond at the Bates Motel. Because in this day and age when your customers and prospects control information, communications and the buying process their worldview is all you have to work with. That is if you're interested in success.

And the best way to do that is to base your program on one thing and one thing alone ... the way your customers and prospects see the world.

Your integrated program should be built on their worldview from the very beginning. It should be the foundation of every one of the twelve steps we've talked about.

But unfortunately most business-to-business marketers are spending millions on communications and on brands that have about as much chance of reaping rewards as Jimmy Swaggert has getting backstage at a Marilyn Manson concert.

You can't get there from here

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.

Business marketing is overpopulated with messages that are so inward-focused they amount to little more than companies telling themselves how great they and their products are

Instead, the world of integrated marketing is overpopulated with messages that are so inward-focused they amount to little more than companies telling themselves how great they and their products are.

Welcome to the land of me, myself and I

Of course, the awful truth is that doesn't matter. All that really counts out there is what your customers and prospects think.

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

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 with the one aim of telling prospects all the things they (the marketers) want them (the prospects) to know about their products.

Unfortunately, these are seldom the things that 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 prospects in terms of what's in it for 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 unless you listen to them.

Align what you sell with what prospects buy

Finding out what prospects and customers value most when they make a purchase or use decision is vital. And it's vital no matter what you sell. Or more accurately, it is vital no matter what they buy. Even if it's one of those amazing, revolutionary, life-altering, 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 the marketers they were selling it to, we discovered, didn't see it that way.

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

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 particularly interested in buying sophisticated, hi-tech mapping software. But they were very interested in buying "decisionware."

Simply put, the primary role of an integrated marketing or branding program should be to align what you say and sell with what your customers and prospects want to buy, engage in 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.

When you listen to what your customers and prospects truly value, it can do some amazing things to align your front end and your back end.

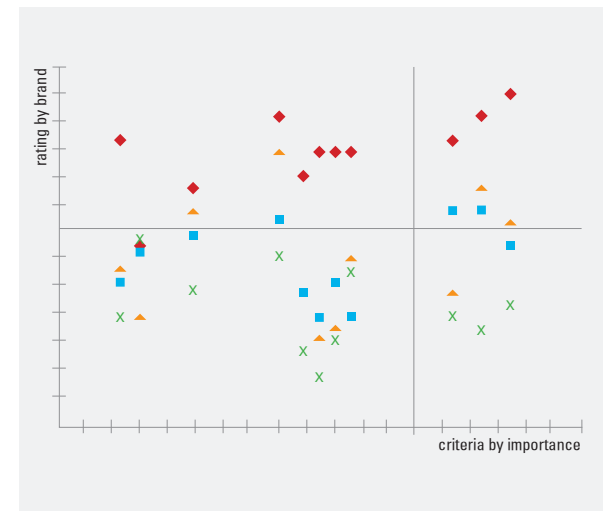
The purpose of this exercise is to disengage the corporate mouth with its highly developed belching apparatus long enough to let your market speak to you.

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 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 of their important criterion.

We use this perceptual map to identify positioning opportunities, develop the most audience-relevant messages and brand experiences and to set brand network objectives and measurements.



The purpose of this exercise is to disengage the corporate mouth long enough to let the market speak to you

Answer nine key questions

Whatever research technique you use to listen to them should answer some basic value questions.

Most importantly, it should answer them strictly from your customers' and prospects' points of view. That means without any prompting from you, Skippy. Remember, it's called Shut Up and Listen for a reason.

1. What is the buying process they go through to identify sources, evaluate them and approve purchase decisions? (This is not the same as your selling process.)
2. Who is involved in this process and what role do they play in it? (This list will probably go beyond people your sales force calls on.)
3. What problems, concerns or challenges do they face that your brand can help them solve?
4. What specific functional and emotional criteria or attributes do they use to make a buying or use decision? (Easy, surface answers like price, quality or service don't count. Dig deeper into their meanings and emotions behind them.)
5. How important is each criterion to them?
6. What brands do they consider when making a buying decision? (Chances are not all of these prospect sources will be on your list of competitors.)
7. How do they rate each competitor's performance on each of their buying criterion?
8. How do they rate your brand on each criterion?
9. What engagement media and brand experiences do they value at different stages of their decision process?

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.

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

You can look at what's important to different audience types (like different functional job titles). And you can identify differences in criteria between buyers, influencers and deal-killers. You can find the things all your markets value. And in addition you'll discover criteria that are of unique value to different market segments.

This is the first step in developing messages that will resonate with different audiences at different stages of the purchase and repurchase process. It will also point you to the kinds of messages, information and brand experiences that will engage 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 the definition of the brand they've assembled in their heads. It will show where you can extend the brand. What are the brand limits? What are the opportunities left open by perceptions of competitors?

This understanding of customer and prospect value is the key ingredient in developing powerful integrated marketing programs and business brands

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 communications but have not seeded in your customers' and prospects' minds. Which means they are still open.

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

Rethink your frame, Wayne.

The process also forces you to look at competitors and competitive brands strictly from a customers' and non-customers' point of view.

That's important because they may define your competitive frame much differently than you do. If that's the case, whether you consider the direct or indirect competitors they identify to be on your radar screen 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 your own competitive set.

The process can also help you develop new product/service solutions ("value offers" as we like to call them) that can be delivered through your brand. These offers include intangible things like special information, advice, analysis and community that can be bundled with products and services to make your brand more valued and distinctive.

Make me a value offer

And 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 customer and prospect value is the key ingredient in developing powerful integrated marketing programs and business brands in a world of customer and prospect control.

As such, it is the single most powerful base from which your integrated program should be developed and executed. Every aspect of your program should reflect it.

Build integrated dialogues

Dialogue has five requirements: value access, human attention, personal recognition and brand reinforcement

After several decades of information manipulation, reality spinning and one-way monologues carefully crafted to tell people what to believe about their products and services, most companies' emotional bank accounts with the people they serve are more overdrawn than an M.C. Escher doodle pad.

Crossing the credibility chasm

The disparity between what companies think they sell and what their customers and prospects really buy and are interested in hearing about is yawning wider than George Sanders watching a fishing show hosted by Alan Greenspan.

Repetitious, interruptive, self-obsessed messages about your products (as opposed to how you can solve customer problems) abound.

No wonder public opinion polls show that marketing and communications people have now attained the status of a pork chop at the Wailing Wall.

Shift to the rescue

Fortunately, for all of us, mega-shifts in practically all market dynamics are redefining the game.

Most of these alterations are driven by customers and prospects taking control of how buying information is gathered and evaluated, how and when and in what form communications takes place, as well as the rules of engagement for the purchase process itself.

If understood, all this shiftiness gives business marketers an unprecedented opportunity to claim pivotal positions in their customers' value chains. Positions that go beyond product/service offerings, into areas of value creation based on information, emotional support, connectivity, community and reciprocal relationships.

If you let it

In this new marketing order, listening, understanding and responding to customers' and prospects' information and value proposition needs are the means by which business marketers will establish unique and highly differentiated value positions with their customers.

We call the actions by which this listening, learning and responding take place "dialogue communication." It is the essence of the new integrated marketing.

Without this personal two-way communication, the chasm between you and your customers in this new paradigm will grow so large it'll make the Grand Canyon look like the space between Japanese rail commuters.

Dialogue as process

In its simplest form, dialogue communication consists of listening to customers and prospects, engaging them, soliciting a response, listening to their reply and responding in kind with additional information, advice, questions or brand experiences.

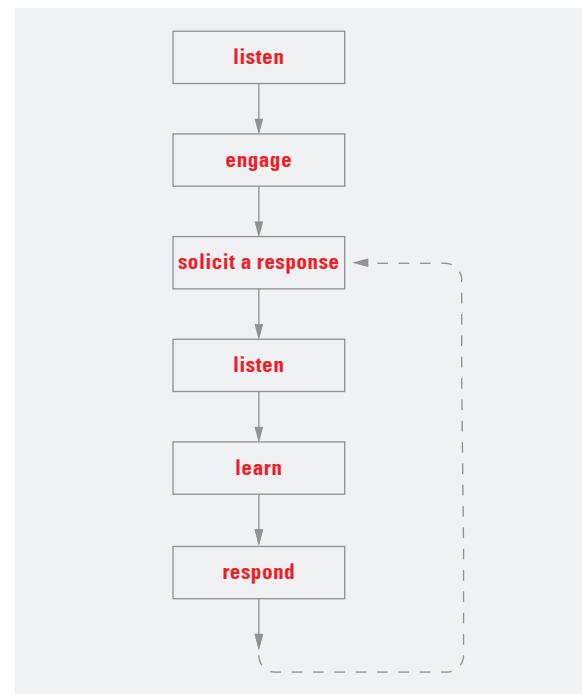
Without this personal two-way communication, the chasm between you and your customers will grow so large it'll make the Grand Canyon look like the space between Japanese rail commuters

Step one: Shut up and listen

As you can see, listening is a vital activity in several phases of the integrated dialogue process.

It includes listening to customers and prospects before you initiate communication so that you understand what's relevant to them and how they'd like to be communicated with. It's like good sex: listen before you initiate anything.

This initial listening is not difficult to do. You ask (through research, Web surveys and other means), they tell you.



Step two: Engage them

Based on this information, the next step is to engage them. It's kind of like asking someone to dance. You don't just grab them and begin the gyrations as many so-called "direct" communicators and the practitioners of CRM do.

No indeed, Sparky.

Tests conducted in singles bars and trendy clubs around the world have proven that you can dramatically improve your chances if you engage them in a little conversation first. Why? So they have a sense for who the heck you are and why they should be the least bit interested in you. That's why, Sparky.

These "engagement" messages have conventionally been called brand messages. Of course, we don't believe you can separate brand messages from any other kind of message. To us, they are all part of the integrated brand experience. So all messages are brand messages.

But for the sake of argument, let's call them messages designed to build awareness, familiarity and preference for your products and services linked to your brand.

Start with a little schmoozing

At this stage your messages don't have to be personalized. But they absolutely have to get your customer's and prospective customer's attention

Then they should solicit a response. Ask for a contact, ask a question, ask for a reply, make an offer. You can direct the reader to a microsite where you can more interactively

Starting a dialogue is like asking someone to dance. You don't just grab them and begin the gyrations. Ultimately, engaging people in a conversation is about creative execution

ask them questions, get their opinions, involve them in your products, services and brand. You can ask and answer questions through social networks and online communities that connect them with people who share their interests and problems.

These mechanisms for conversation must be built into your overall integrated marketing strategy and plan. Each forum for conversation may come at a different point in the purchase process. However, each forum must also have mechanisms imbedded in the communications vehicle itself to initiate a dialogue.

But engagement goes way beyond vehicles.

Engagement is about emotion and empathy. It's about developing a customer/prospect point of view that is delivered in a voice that makes people want to talk to you.

Ultimately, engagement is about creative execution.

Step three: Listen and respond

Of course, once someone acts, asks a question, answers a question, asks for more information or responds to your engaging solicitation in any way, the hard part begins.

Creative execution rears its squishy ephemeral head again. If you don't do it right, your responses will be received with all the enthusiasm of Matt Helm at a radical feminist poetry reading. And you don't want that.

So, you have to be prepared to respond immediately to specific requests or questions with personal, specific

engaging replies delivered in whatever form and through whatever media they want them.

But even more important than that, you have to have mechanisms in your integrated marketing program to listen for their responses and learn from them.

Having done that, you're now in a position to initiate other highly relevant communications with them based on what you've learned about them.

No matter what media you use to continue this conversation, they'll have to function interactively.

What constitutes a dialogue

To qualify as dialogues, your communications must:

- Offer personalized messages based on criteria such as name, job function, firmographics, customer purchase history or customer behavior.
- Answer specific questions posed by customers and prospects based on their profiles.
- Deliver information requested in the form (media) requested by your audience, in as close to real time as the requested medium will allow.
- Ask questions of customers and prospects and request a response that allows the brand to provide additional, more relevant information or engage in an ongoing conversation.
- Diagnose a situation and suggest remedies.
- Provide methods for customers prospects to add their own information and opinions to a community and receive feedback from others.

You have to be prepared to respond immediately to specific requests or questions with personal, specific replies delivered in whatever form they want them

Five requirements of dialogue

Beyond their structural characteristics, dialogue messages contain five intrinsic requirements.

Requirement one: Value

Your customers and prospects aren't interested in having their business lives interrupted by your marketing messages. Believe it or not, they don't want their voicemail bloated with your non-relevant telemarketing offers. Or their email inbox jamed with messages about you. Why, they're not even excited about continually being offered another line extension they don't think they need, but you do. Imagine that.

More and more, they resent these intrusive messages. And, as a result they are creating more and more defense mechanisms against them.

But they are willing to be part of a dialogue if it is clear to them that you respect them and their time and that you have something of value to give them.

In other words, to avoid being considered intrusive, a message must have an added value to the recipient. It also has to be received when, where and in the form preferred by your customer or prospect. Unless the message contains something they perceive to be of value to them personally, chances are they'll reject it.

Value, by the way, includes much more than relevant product and service information. It also includes things like entertainment, status, empowerment information and diagnostics, as well as a variety of job effectiveness and professional development help.

Value today has as much to do with what you can do for your individual buyers as it does with what your product can do for their company.

Requirement two: Access

An essential aspect of dialogue communications is making it easy for customers and prospects to contact your company at any time, from any place, for any reason.

The more ways they have to access your brand, the stronger their relationship will be. The easier it is for customers to get questions answered and problems dealt with, the easier it will be for them to develop a strong and supporting relationship with your brand.

Easy accessibility, particularly at the time when a buying or use decision is being made or when there's a problem or need for information, is an added value to customers and prospects. Having what they perceive to be special access goes a long way to strengthen that relationship.

Requirement three: Human attention

Merely providing customers with an 800 number, Web address or email contact does not qualify as response in our definition of the dialogue process.

Response is providing a company representative or system that can listen to your customer or prospect, put the conversation into a context of their profile and history, and stay with them throughout the dialogue.

As a result, this promise of human attention in a human brand voice builds a personal as well as an emotional

Your brand is the hook that connects and consolidates all the disparate customer interactions and conversations with your company

connection to your brand. One that goes beyond products and service to build true brand loyalty.

Requirement four: Personal recognition

Of course, once someone is a customer, he or she likes to be personally recognized. That's one of the first steps in establishing a relationship.

In terms of communications, that means much more than addressing them by name or personalizing content. When a company gives you its business, they feel that a relationship has been established, even if you see it as merely an "acquisition" or "transaction."

If you fail to recognize this perceived connection, then your customer will view the relationship as a weak one, and therefore not worthy of their loyalty.

So it becomes incumbent on you to treat your customers differently than the general market. Which means treating them individually and personally. Not only in the way you relate to them but in the kind of information, emotional incentives and value offers you make to them.

Requirement five: Brand reinforcement

If you have the impression that a dialogue with a customer or prospect is an ongoing, continuous, daily occurrence, then we've overstated things. Or you're living in another disconnected Shirley MacLaine universe somewhere.

Customers and prospects do not spend their business days obsessed with your brand, thinking about how they can break away for a few hours to talk with you over the Internet or Tweet their hearts out to you.

In reality, dialogues pop up now and then over time. When they need to. Where there is a need. When it's of value to customers and prospects. Not necessarily when it's convenient or efficient for you, but rather when customers and prospects want them to occur. Because, whether you like it or not, they're in control now, Sparky.

That means two things. Dialogues need to be reinforced. And conversations should revolve around your customers and prospects and their relationship with the brand.

When all is said and done it's the brand

The brand is the thing that connects your customers and prospects and their dialogues with your company. In their minds, they are communicating with the brand. Your brand is the hook they have in their heads that categorizes and consolidates all these disparate interactions and conversations.

And one of the important benefits of broad-based communications (that is, efforts aimed at building awareness and familiarity) is their ability to reinforce relationships with people who have already bought your product or service. In fact, some studies have shown that in many cases, the majority of ad readers are current customers.

Reinforcement of brand image and promises as well as key functional and emotional buying criteria should be the core of your integrated marketing strategy. It reduces buyer remorse and ties both customers and prospects closer to your brand in a way that makes them want to initiate dialogue.

Engage or die

Do we really believe that God is in the instructions? That the checklist is the solution? That serving up a bunch of strategies is communicating?

So this guy goes into a business-to-business marketing conference for a quick shot of integrated marketing enlightenment. What does he get?

First, he's served a direct marketing process, masquerading as integrated, where the only contact tools are mail, phone and personal sales.

Sips of stupidity

That's followed by an international guru with a nifty formula for global integration that sounds a heck of a lot like a public relations plan in disguise.

Next on the menu is a guy with a foolproof method for building integrated brand communications based on, of all things, response quotients.

If you want 90 percent brand building and 10 percent response, you put this device in this location on the piece. If you want 80 percent brand and 20 percent response you follow these handy-dandy instructions. And so on and so on in ten percent increments.

Gulps of gullibility

Amazing. Especially coming from a guy who couldn't create gas after a bean dinner.

And if you're not as disoriented as Woody Allen at a family reunion by now, you can pick up a chaser at the registration table—a book called "Words That Sell." This pithy little tome gives you all the time-tested phrases that "copywriters rely on to seduce audiences." All of them indexed by function from "snappy transitions" all the way to "enhancing company image."

Bring in the oxymorons

Oh, don't forget the guys with the nifty presentation on integrated online marketing. All you'll ever need to do to market your product or service and build your brand you can do right there on the good old Internet. To them, brand engagement is all about where you place the logo on the navigation template.

Have we all gone stark raving mad?

Is this what integrated marketing has come to? Piecemeal processes that impersonate integration? Do we really believe that God is in the instructions? That the checklist is the solution? That serving up a bunch of strategies is communicating? That managing content is engaging people in your brand, message and experience?

Not once in this orgy of content manipulating this pathetic formula fest, was creative execution examined.

Apparently, it's not a factor in getting peoples' attention or in making them interested enough in what you have to say to actually read your content or in developing a conversation and brand relationship with them. Heck, it was hardly even mentioned. Except, of course, to say, "Creativity is inherent in marketing."

What?

The new imperative is to develop a dialogue that is highly identifiable, relevant and engaging at every point of contact with your brand

We've got news for you, Sparky
It's not.

In fact, when it comes to integrated b-to-b marketing and brand communications, it's not even close.

As everyone who actually does integrated programs day in and day out (as opposed to just talking about them) knows, it's in the execution where most integrated programs fall apart. And don't kid yourself; they're falling apart all over the place.

Creativity: first rule of engagement

If your program fails to engage people emotionally and creatively in its execution, you'll be back to square one on the crash-and-burn game board.

Only in the land of marketing can you do all the up-front integrated strategy stuff perfectly and then watch it all go right down the dumper because its execution didn't have enough impact to get noticed. Or to involve your customers and prospects. Or be remembered.

Strategy isn't enough already

The cruel reality is that no matter what you do strategically, no matter how good and integrated your process is, out there in the marketplace where it really matters you're still going to have to compete with a zillion other rapidly disintegrating brand messages.

And if that's not bad enough, you're going to have to compete for an ever-shrinking span of attention and audience time in an ever-expanding universe of media.

The emergence of ultra-specialized trade publications, the blogosphere, the Twitterverse, 124-channel cable, automated inbound outbound telemarketing, movie product placement, 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 mall sites, your RSS feeds, your social networks, your Facebook friends, your Twitter followers, your LinkedIn connections, your e-this, that and the other. As well as wireless phone displays. Even the screen in the office elevator. And of course an app for everything.

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 for companies 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.

You can't expect
a well-planned set of
unfocused, disjointed
content strung
together by strategy
to move the needle

But you haven't seen anything yet, Scooter

As technology gives your networked customers and prospects more choices of where 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 marketing 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 indecipherable.) 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.

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. And by messages we mean your beloved content.

There isn't enough time to cope with the volume of it going through our brains. There isn't enough time to sort out the valuable from the mundane. And when that happens, content is in trouble.

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 customers' and prospects' minds.

Content marketing becomes impotent

Which means you can't expect a set of unfocused, disjointed content strung together by strategy to add up to long-term gains. Your audience simply has too many choices and too little time to pay attention to high-frequency, low-imagination, irrelevant, not-very-memorable, inconsistent, unengaging content.

The goal is to know what's important to customers and prospects and what they want to hear and experience at each stage of the purchase process

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 and at every point of contact with your brand. In other words, you'll have to stand out like Lou Ferrigno in a Day-Glo thong.

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.

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 and experience at each stage of the purchase process and give them just enough information, incentives, brand experiences or value offers to push them to the next stage. The technical term for this highly sophisticated process is 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 experience and message. This usually has a direct relationship to when, where and why they enter the decision process.

Engagement comes from presenting a relevant idea in a way people have never considered before

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 marketing experiences. And all of them deliver the right message and opportunity for dialogue when the audience is dealing with that particular 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 brand experiences 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 experiences 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 marketing efficiency we lovingly call creative leverage.)

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 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, it's going to be glug...glug...glug time.

Lost in a universe of noise

You have two choices to overcome that cesspool of brand disintegration out there. You can either repeat messages over and over and over again until they finally sink in. Or you can say them in such a fresh, new, surprising and relevant way that people can't forget them.

You can either continue to send out interruptive, repetitive monologues, or you can engage your customers and prospects in dialogue that is of value to them and their business.

Engage is the key word.

Engage your audience before your mouth

It takes creative impact to engage people. To make them want to talk to you and focus their attention on what you can do for them.

In this new world where customers and prospects control information, communications and the buying process, engagement through creative impact is a lot more effective than repetitive messaging.

In a world where
“content is king,”
creative execution
is where integrated
marketing programs
go to bore them-
selves to death

When you rely on repetition you not only waste money, you also lose valuable time. Without creative impact, your message is relegated to the slow seep of frequency.

Frequency is osmosis

Or evolution. You wait patiently for nature to take its course and for your messages to eventually seep in.

If they seep at all.

The fact of the matter is, in this new age of business communications, frequency is akin to waiting for the late Jimmy Stewart to recite the Mahabharata on the back of an arthritic tortoise in a hammock hung between two trees in the intensified gravity of the planet Jupiter.

It takes too damn long.

In the meantime, a competitor can zip past you at the speed of light and get into your audience’s heads with a new idea or benefit before you. Or even take a position or attribute or point of differentiation away from you.

All they need is the right integrated strategy and the powerful engine of creative impact.

Creativity is lightning

Maybe it’s time to start measuring the effectiveness of your integrated marketing efforts by their impact instead of just their methodology and cost-per-thousand efficiency. And impact, my friend, is a direct result of how fresh, original and relevant your creative is.

Despite the tremendous communications and marketing shifts that are going on out there, people will always stop, notice, connect and pay attention to a message that’s fresh and direct and engaging and human.

Always.

Because people react strongly to something they’ve never seen or heard before.

Creative impact is not for spineless weasels

Creating an integrated marketing or branding program that stands out and has impact means running risks. There’s no way around it.

If an ad campaign, blog or microsite is provocative, interesting, intriguing and engaging, it will create an adverse comment or two along the way. Sometimes in the marketplace, but more likely inside your company.

In fact, you can count on it. Somebody in your organization will become as nervous and jerky as Barney Fife on a triple espresso.

That’s when you know you’ve got something

Mark this down. Make a poster of this and hang it on your wall: “If the idea doesn’t make some company executive’s sphincter lock up tighter than Windows ‘98 on overload, than you’re probably not saying anything worth saying.”

And when his or her sweat hits the fan, that’s the time to pull a Dennis Rodman and start getting aggressive on the offensive glass. Don’t go gentle into this bad night.

For goodness
sake, do something
different. Be different.
Be unique. Be what
only you can be

When people inside get nervous it usually means your communication is being direct. It's taking a stand. It's taking on an issue that resonates with an important segment of the market. It has power. Mostly because it's not hiding behind the obscure, the obvious or the obtuse.

Check your guts

Engagement comes from presenting a relevant idea in a way people have never considered before. In fact, you can test your next concept for impact.

1. Does it upset the status quo?
2. Does it question conventional thinking?
3. Does it take people by the shoulders and shake them?
4. Does it remind them of how they felt, feel or want to feel?
5. Does it force them to reexamine their attitudes and their assumptions?

Being on the receiving end of any one of those brand experiences is unsettling. They rattle your brain. They touch your emotions. That's what makes them impactful. That's what makes them work.

The value of standing out

After you've lived in the integrated jungle for a while (as opposed to just talking about it) you learn that there are only two laws of survival.

Law one: If you don't want to be eaten alive, blend in.

Law two: If you want to attract a mate, stand out.

Unfortunately, most integrated business marketing today is desperately trying to keep from being eaten. So it doesn't attract anything—except maybe flies when it dies.

More standing around than standing out

If you don't believe that, just peruse any business-to-business medium, online or offline. It's like thumbing through wallpaper samples. One message blending into another. Visual wallpaper full of unimaginative statistics. Or simple regurgitation of stark, uninvolved selling points that the company thinks will automatically sell the product.

In other words, communications that simply put the product on a pedestal and describe it, and wait for the world to beat a path to its door.

And they're still waiting

There is a mistaken logic at work here. It goes something like this: "If my program is like my competitors' (a euphemism for the curse of 'best practices'), then I'll be considered a factor in the market and attract attention."

Nothing could be further from the truth.

If you want to attract and keep customers out there in the integrated jungle, you have to concentrate on standing out. In every medium. Not on blending in.

It takes creative impact to engage people. To make them want to talk to you and focus their attention on what you can do for them

You have to concentrate on being creatively distinctive and engaging so that people want to talk to you. Not drab, dull and transparent so people ignore you and have no time for you.

If you don't, your highly processed integrated program will hit the dumper harder than the Dudley Boys at a Texas tag team cage match with table seating.

Where content comes in

The purpose of content is to provide the base for dialogues with your customers and prospects over the things they value

There is a disturbing trend emerging from the shock waves of change that are shaking and reshaping our marketing, branding and communications world. People are treating content as if it were the end-all and be-all of the integrated marketing process.

The evil deception

Content strategies are being skillfully developed. Complex message platforms are being devised, revised and re-strategized. Elevator pitches are being crafted in one-minute, two-minute and ten-minute units. Content is being prioritized, hierarchized, maximized, minimized, mapped, scrapped and deployed.

And guess what, Skippy, no one who counts (as in customers and prospects), cares.

In an age of ever-expanding media, message fragmentation and ever-contracting time and attention, creative engagement is a requirement. Without it, the people who count never get to the content.

A few pathetic examples

In one category we know, marketers very precisely target many minute audience segments exclusively with online media to dump unbridled and, for the most part, unvisualized content on them. The net result of this precise projectile content vomiting is that awareness and familiarity of all the competitors in this market is less than ten percent per competitor.

Despite the fact these companies have been in the market communicating to customers and prospects for almost a decade, no one knows who these purveyors of online

content are. There is no perceived leader. And worse, people don't even know what the category is about. This is beyond pathetic. It borders on tragic. Especially in a category where sales are driven by prospects finding vendors to include in their consideration set for RFPs.

Follow me, I'm a twit

You don't have to look far to see other examples of the evil confusion of content and engagement. Go to Twitter and you can follow it. Every minute of every day.

One marketer wraps his followers in an orgy of ego that makes Donald Trump look like Mother Teresa. Apparently he thinks we have the time or the desire to care about where he is and what he is doing every hour of the day. Especially when it revolves around killing wildlife back home in Montana, being interviewed by various publications, and appearing on a variety of red carpets. Not as a celebrity, mind you, but rather crawling on all fours in the background as an almost invisible sponsor.

I tweet therefore I am

In the middle of the Twitter spectrum are those marketers with their own self-serving, well-planned content agenda. They push out the same stuff on a repetitive schedule driving people to the same self-serving blog content hour after hour. This is the modern equivalent of the old paradigm approach of telling people what to believe about your products and expecting them to accept it just because you said it.

None of this is engaging. It is content for content's sake. In and of itself it does not stand out and get attention, nor keep attention, nor sustain a dialogue.

Engagement consists of the creative elements that gain attention, keep attention and make people want to have a dialogue with you around your content

A special tweet

At the other end of the Twitterverse are people who use their tweets to expose us to information we never would have known without them. Some are about their products but many are not. In fact, most are not. They create a compelling personality for themselves 140 characters at a time by creatively providing what we value in an engaging voice that we want to follow.

We've been sold a bill of goods

As the digital world developed, someone declared that content is king. You can pretty much bet the declarer was a techno nerd with the creative flair of a C++ manual and the engagement quotient of a 35+ year-old guy who lives in his parent's basement with a bunch of goldfish.

Content is not engagement, my friend. It never has been and it never will be. Because without creatively and emotionally involving your audience they will never get to your masterfully developed content.

As a great man once said

"However much we would like communications to be a science – because life would be simpler that way – the fact is it is not.

It is a subtle, ever-changing art, defying formulation, flowering on freshness and withering on imitation; where what was effective one day, for that very reason will not be effective the next, because it has lost the maximum impact of originality.

Finding out what to say is the beginning of the communications process. How you say it makes

people look and listen and believe. And if you are not successful at that you have wasted all the work and intelligence and skill that went into discovering what you should say.

It's not just what you say that stirs people, it's the way that you say it."

Bill Bernbach

Content is a carton of eggs

We do not mean to denigrate content. Obviously, it is vitally important. It is the strategic base of all that a brand is and does. Especially these days. Because content now is not only what you say, it also includes the interactive devices and social interactions that make content more involving.

But before people will ever get involved in your content you will have to emotionally engage them. We define engagement as the creative elements that gain attention, keep attention and make people want to have a dialogue with you around your content.

Engagement is a soufflé

So let's get the two straight. To say that raw content is engagement is like saying a carton of eggs is a soufflé. It is not. It never will be. It is what you do with the content of the carton that makes it special.

Without this special, emotive element called engagement your brand and your integrated marketing will be about as interesting and involving to your customers and prospects as Ben Stein's audiobook narration of the tax code.

Shift to advocate selling

You can't manipulate customers or prospects with product, price, place and promotion like you used to

Here we go again. Another round of price adjustments. Another round of new product intros. Another round of promotions. Another round and around and around.

Of course, you get nowhere. At least, nowhere you haven't been before.

Around and around you go

You're caught in the old revolving door of marketing's "4 Ps," my friend. That ancient system that's pretty much defined business marketing actions since 1957.

It goes something like this: Companies are segmented into groups and become part of the market set. You influence and control the market's actions by manipulating product, price, place and promotion.

The problem is, using the "4 Ps" to guide your integrated marketing efforts in this new paradigm is like having Kevorkian teach you the Heimlich maneuver.

The methods haven't changed

Given the preoccupation with constant rounds of tactical adjustments to product, price, place and promotion, it's not hard to see why a lot of people have lost sight of the fact that customer relationships, not market relationships, are the only things that generate direct business value.

And whether you like it or not, you can't manipulate customers with brilliant moves in product, price, place and promotion like you used to.

That's because customers themselves are seizing control of these levers. And they are doing it faster than Heavy D seizing control of the burger machine at McDonald's.

The world has moved on

Price is no longer determined by the seller based on cost-plus. Instead, customers can name their own price based on new definitions of what is of value to them.

Products are no longer made in batches and pushed to customers. Now they are integrated with services to form unique value offers made-to-order in part through customer feedback. As a matter of fact, customers, and even prospects, are part of the product development process in some forward-thinking companies.

They're in control now, Scooter

The promotional monologue of advertising at your largesse and under your conditions is being replaced by dialogue centered on brand value that happens totally at the customer's desire and convenience.

And in case you've been visiting Anne Heche in some parallel universe somewhere far away and haven't noticed, even your old marketplace is being supplemented, and in most cases replaced, with a "market space" where your customers now determine the time, place and conditions of doing business.

You're in a new place now

We happen to think it's a better place. But whether it's a better place or just a different place, it's your place now, Bucky. You're in it whether you want to be or not.

Products are no longer made in batches and pushed to customers. Now they are integrated with services to form unique value offers made to order in part through customer feedback

And in this new place, if you're as deeply entrenched in the old, rusty "4 Ps" paradigm as Rush Limbaugh in a hammock, you've got a major problem.

Your integrated program does not end in a sale

For one thing, it's probably forcing you to consider your integrated marketing program complete when a prospect makes a purchase. Under the old "4 Ps" model, at that point the new customer returns to being lumped back into a market demographic. That's when the marketing process begins again and the relationship building process stalls like an old Ford Fairlane.

Conventions don't work here

Once a company makes a purchase from you they are no longer part of the market. They are your customers and you need to treat them differently than you do the market. You also need to not only communicate with them differently but to market to them differently.

In fact, the marketing imperative should shift to migrating them along a relationship path that moves them from a buyer to a brand advocate.

Stop marketing

To do that, you'll have to plan and integrate that part of your marketing program aimed at customers in a way that moves them through different states of repurchase, cross-selling, and up-selling.

In other words, just as prospects need to receive information, brand experiences and incentives (remember those "gooses") to move them through the purchase path from awareness through repurchase, occasional buyers need to be enticed to move through the retention path to become repetitive customers, loyalists and advocates of the brand.

Become a migrator

Those enticements include special information, special status, special offers or special membership in a community that they value and to which they can make a contribution. Essentially, they include whatever the heck it takes to functionally and emotionally involve your customers in your brand over the long run.

That requires two things. First, dialogue communications. And second, a totally different perspective on what customers really are and how they should be treated.

Shift your relationship

Both of these disciplines can help you shift the nature of your relationship from buying and selling to empowering customers around your brand. In other words, helping them do business better. Giving them information, tools and support (much of it emotional) to do their jobs better.

Put in a more philosophical way: "Give someone a fish and they'll eat for a day. Teach someone not to run a bass lure through their testicle and you'll have a deep and abiding relationship with them for the rest of their life."

Customer
relationships, not
market relationships
are the only things
that generate direct
business value

If you do it right, advocates will not only generate more revenue from their own transactions, but they can be turned into some of your best salespeople. In fact, they can actually bring in new prospects and give those prospects highly relevant and credible reasons for buying and using your products and services.

Hugging your customers is all about building close customer and stakeholder relationships at all levels of the company.

Finding brand advocates

Chances are amazingly good that 80 percent of your profit is coming from 20 percent of your customers

The first problem you'll probably run into when you try to add customer relationship marketing to your integrated program is your budget.

If your company is like most business-to-business firms, the budget for marketing to customers is probably emptier than Lindsay Lohan's mini bar at the Chateau Marmont. After all, communicating to customers is what the sales divisions are for. Right?

And by the way, that's the second problem you'll run into.

Oh yeah, there's a third. Not every customer is a good candidate to become a brand advocate.

Not all customers are created equal

Lucky for you, there is a way around all three of these problems. And that is, don't market to every customer.

Let the sales force cover them all if they really think it will pay off. You, on the other hand, concentrate the customer portion of your integrated marketing program on the people who will generate major revenue and profitability gains. Those are your best customers.

Not all customers are profitable

In fact, if you look closely, you'll probably find a bunch of customers you're losing money on.

Check it out. Do the math. You'll also discover that a surprisingly small number of customers account for a big chunk of the profits. In fact, the old 80/20 rule usually holds true. Chances are amazingly good that 80 percent of your profit is coming from 20 percent of your customers.

By identifying that 20 percent of the most profitable customers or customer segments, you can determine the amount of money you can invest in each of them. And of course, their returns can be measured.

Follow the money

This is a completely new approach to what used to be called budgeting. Now, with the right measurement tracking and ROI analysis, you can invest in customers rather than spend money on marketing. There's a big difference, my friend.

Remarketing and communicating

The first step in finding the customer types that you're most likely to turn into advocates is to keep track of each customer interaction in a database. This includes purchases, preferences, payments, returns, responses to promotions and offers, inquiries, satisfaction surveys, brand perceptions and complaints.

And most importantly, customers with high net promoter scores. These are the people who are most likely to refer and recommend you to others.

They're hiding in there somewhere

You may already have a lot more of this data than you think.

It's just in a lot of different databases across the company. Some of it is probably in finance, some in accounting and of course others in marketing, sales and customer service, not to mention business units, channel partners, syndicated sources and the United States Department of Firearms and Alcohol Enforcement.

Lifetime customer value is the true arbiter of how much money to spend on your integrated marketing program

Consolidate your base, Ace

By consolidating these databases (OK, except for the firearms thing) you can get a good handle on the profitability of individual customers and customer segments as well as their likelihood of speaking well of your brand to others.

You can also get a major headache. Bringing these disparate databases together is like trying to bring Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong back together without the aid of artificial stimulants. It's a major task.

The key is to start

Even if you can't get a total view, it's better than no view at all. Which is what most b-to-b companies are working with. Even if you start by testing a few assumptions, you'll be farther along than you probably are right now.

Analyzing purchase history is a good start toward finding potential advocates. But it can be as fuzzy as Bill Clinton's short-term memory without another important measure.

You bet your lifetime value

So before you jump to any conclusions about which customers to focus your integrated remarketing efforts on and how to segment them, each customer's potential lifetime value to the organization has to be estimated.

Lifetime customer value is the true arbiter of how much you can afford to spend on the customer portion of your integrated marketing program.

It's an assessment of how much revenue (or other forms of value) you can expect to get starting right now and going until the end of the relationship. In other words, it's the net present value of future profits from the customer.

Do the math

Put in academic terms, lifetime customer value is the valuation of the ongoing relationship you have with a customer in the form of the resulting income flows that come from them when they continue to purchase from you over a specific period of time.

For you formula freaks, that's:
[% repurchase] x [years] x [annual customer value]

Customer migratory patterns

But all of this analysis simply sets the stage for a process that turns buyers into loyalists and brand advocates. At the same time, it integrates the voice of the customer into the marketing actions of the company. And in the best case, it brings the customer's voice into the product and service development process of the company.

This is the first step in setting up a system to listen to customers in a collective sense. But to be effective, the voice of the customer needs to reach senior executives, middle managers and front-line workers as well.

Goosing them into advocacy

The goal of the customer goosing process is to develop brand advocates. In other words, to convert your best customers into your best salespeople

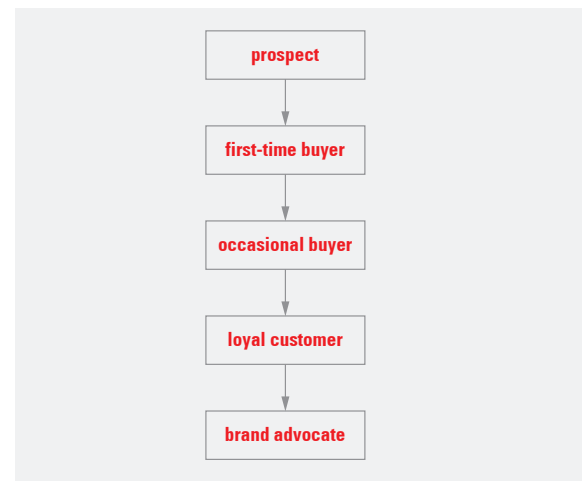
Goosing customers is more than simply communicating with buyers. It's much more than relationship marketing or snazzy, whiz-bang CRM technology.

Without the emotional, creative and engaging components of integrated marketing, all you have is a bunch of buyers' names in a database to whom you pump out messages.

In other words, all you've got is a bunch of buyers whose relationship with the brand is so cold when they open their mouths a light comes on.

It's about value, passion and respect

In fact, we think goosing your customers to repurchase goes way beyond building close customer and stakeholder relationships at all levels of the organization.



It's about using that relationship to migrate customers through stages to create advocates for your brand.

The four phases of customer goosing

The first dimension of this process involves identifying your most important customers based on their current profit contribution, net promoter potential and lifetime customer value.

The second is to develop an integrated program that leverages personal relationships and brand experiences to move customers from being first-time buyers to occasional buyers to loyal customers and then brand advocates.

The third part of the process is to establish ongoing forums, marketing activities, brand experiences and communications vehicles that engage customers, listen to their input, and respond directly to their questions and concerns.

Once they become advocates, the system should give them the information, incentives and platforms they need to refer you to others, and share their experiences and applications of your products and services with prospects.

And fourth, the process must send this customer information and feedback back into the organization to provide front-line employees with real-time direction that will guide their brand decisions and everyday actions.

Without a little hugging and goosing, all you have is a bunch of buyers' names in some database

Nothing like a fine whine

That means that even the discordant voices of customers need to be integrated back into the organization. Even when those voices are bitching so hard they make Beck sound like Anthony Newley. Because you can often learn a lot more from complaints than you can from compliments.

Things like satisfaction surveys, retention studies, complaints, inquiries, market research and other sources of customer experience information can be tracked and then widely shared within the organization.

Nothing like the other guy's shoes

In some cases, employees of all ranks and job functions get out and experience their company's products and services from the customer's perspective. They talk to customers in their own environment. They learn about their needs. They ask about their ideas. They listen to their gripes. And then they actually do something about it.

Only by listening in a collective sense can you build an ongoing, trusting relationship with each individual customer and at the same time anticipate the future needs of all your customers.

Stop marketing and start hugging

You can then reach out to these loyal customers and increase their reach to your prospects through a wide variety of special forums. Things like customer service web communities, social networks, newsletters, online videos, thought-leadership publications, user groups, seminars, customer advisory panels.

It's not so much what forums you use, but how you organize the effort. How you use and integrate each medium, experience and brand contact point.

Provide information, experience and incentives

Beyond circulating actionable customer information and feedback, the goal of your integrated remarketing program should be to develop brand advocates. In other words, to convert your best customers into your best salespeople.

To do that you'll have to give them two things: the information and incentives to make them knowledgeable and passionate advocates, and the platforms and forums to get them in front of your prospects.

It's no longer about buying and selling. It's now about helping people do their jobs better

Vehicles designed to share and spread

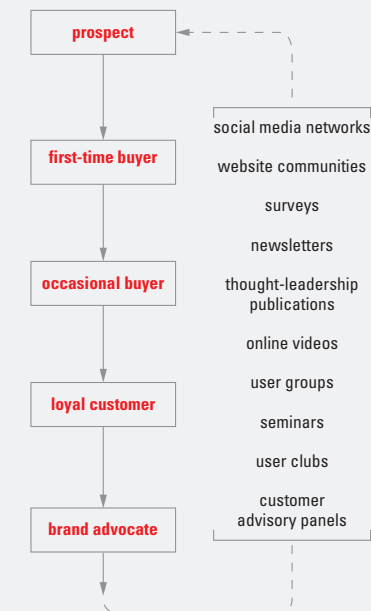
All these forums should be based on dialogue. That is, even broad-based communications should solicit their views on industry and product concerns. And those views should be circulated back into the community of customers and prospects. Some of those shared responses should include your analysis and some should be directly between your customers and prospects without your intervention.

An integrated collection of those vehicles can be used to transform customers into advocates and then direct their brand advocacy back to prospects and first-time buyers to strengthen their resolve, rationalization of their purchase to themselves and others in their organization and conviction that they have made the right decision.

A relationship designed to help

Most importantly, all this coordinated activity can fundamentally change your relationship with both your customers and your prospective customers. It will no longer be about buying and selling but about helping people do their jobs better. Empowering their work lives with unique information, tools and support. All revolving around your brand.

Vehicles designed to share ideas and solutions



How to treat advocates

The secret is first to actually believe that brand advocates are valuable and then develop systems and attitudes that treat them and communicate with them that way

To build a special integrated relationship with customers, you have to view them as special. And to do that you have to actually believe they are special.

In other words, you're going to have to view them differently than you view the market. Because they are no longer part of the market. They are your customers. And you need to treat them differently than the market.

Whip me, beat me, I'm your customer

You can experience a perfect example of the lack of this special point of view the next time you walk into your friendly neighborhood grocery store. Take a moment, survey the scene and this is what you'll see.

If you're a longtime customer who fills your cart up each week with a couple hundred dollars worth of groceries (high profit contribution, high customer lifetime value), you get to stand in a checkout line that's longer, slower and more somber than an inner-city hospital's emergency ward on a Saturday night and enjoy a brand experience that's roughly equivalent to the Bataan death march.

But if you're just some schmoe off the street with a hankering for a six-pack and a gallon drum of Beer Nuts, you can zip right through the express checkout.

Something is out of whack here

And to make it worse, those loyal customers have to suffer the indignity of watching Joe Six-pack waltz triumphantly through the express line unscathed.

But don't be smug. If you put your mind to it, you can probably think of three such indignities you're putting your customers through right now. All because you still view them and define them as part of the market and therefore not worthy of your special treatment.

Special status tactics

From an integrated marketing standpoint, you can begin to establish a special relationship with your key customers by integrating some key tactics into your overall program:

Dialogue

Don't just talk. Listen to your customers. Better yet, respond to them directly. Even better yet than better yet, evaluate their comments and act on them. And even better than better, better yet, publish their opinions, points of view and advice to other customers. And while you're at it you really should consider passing their advice on to your prospects.

Special offers and incentives

Applied at the right time and in the right place, that's often all it takes to get a repeat sale. But remember, incentives aren't just discounts or premiums. They also include special recognition where customers feel they are contributing to their professional community. Being part of a customer advisory panel is an incentive that pays double dividends.

Special information

This is information that's not available to everyone in the market. And it's not necessarily about your product or offering. It's expert information that can help them do their job better and more efficiently.

Incentives aren't just discounts or premiums. They also include special recognition, special information and special community relationships where they feel they are contributing to their profession

Special-member status

Give them perks. In fact, they should have more perks than the top drawer of Elvis' nightstand. Give them insider information (unless you're a financial services firm). Give them first crack at new offerings. Give them advice. Get their feedback and spread it around. Remember, it's a lot like manure—it only works when you spread it around.

Aggregating without agitating

A good place to start is to organize your customers into different constituencies.

They can be aggregated by the key things that everyone in the group shares with each other. For example, you can form constituencies around customers who share the same use of your product. Or who share common needs. Or interests. Or industry problems. Or product applications.

A funny thing happened on the way to your forums

Once the constituencies are organized, you play the role of a catalyst. In other words, you develop the forums and the logistics to bring the constituency together around some kind of easy-to-use communications vehicle.

Then if you have the guts, step out of the way and let your customers share their experiences with other customers around your products, services and, most importantly, around the functional and emotional attributes of your brand.

Know your role

Your role is not to take credit for this interaction, but to simply organize and begin it.

You can organize the direction of topics. You can introduce outside experts into the community discussion to generate conversation and dialogue among the participants and keep the conversation on track. Occasionally, you can introduce your own company expert to gain credibility for your brand. Especially if there are product questions.

But in essence these vehicles belong to the community.

Be a catalyst, not a pain in the butt

Don't worry, you don't have to take credit. You don't have to use these forums to directly promote your brands. If you do it right, you will get all the credit and promotion you can imagine without uttering one syllable of product puffery.

Most importantly, you'll get highly credible credit. Which is more credit than you could ever get by taking credit.

Your role is not to take credit for this community interaction, but to simply organize it, begin it and act as a catalyst to it

Bring in the prospects

These community forums can form around thought-leadership publications, user groups, webinars, live seminars, virtual conferences and a variety of dialogue and social networking vehicles.

As they develop, the next step is to bring prospects into them. The community and the communication vehicle around it form the platforms and the reach that advocates need to become salespeople for your brand.

If you don't believe this is a dynamic and powerful tool, just check out a discussion group on the Internet.

It's all about the brand

Today conventional, inside-out branding and integrated marketing methods couldn't be more full of it if they were Porta Potties at a Lollapalooza festival

Despite its pivotal importance to integrated marketing, the conventional methods for developing brands and the integrated programs that deliver them are so old-fashioned, inward-looking and aspirational they don't fit with what's going on out there in the market.

And what's going on is nothing short of a revolution in the way business people gather, process, evaluate and act upon information.

In this new paradigm, conventional, inside-out branding and integrated marketing methods couldn't be more full of it if they were Porta Potties at a Lollapalooza festival.

Don't be a potty mouth

Your brand is the thing that connects your customers and prospects and their dialogues with your company.

In their minds, they are communicating with the brand. It is the hook they have in their heads that categorizes and consolidates all these disparate interactions and conversations. It is the great connector of all the elements of your integrated marketing program.

Reinforcing brand image and promises, as well as brand buying criteria, is vital to your integrated marketing strategy for both customers and prospects. It reduces "buyer remorse." It ties both customers and prospects closer to your company. And it initiates and encourages long term dialogue.

It's a whole new world out there

Your customers and prospects now control not only the communications and information gathering process, they pretty much control the purchase process itself.

As a result, they determine what constitutes value in the things they buy and in the information you communicate through your integrated programs. And these days that goes way beyond what it used to.

Along with speed, transparency and connectivity, they're also redefining value beyond products and services to include offerings that fuse both with information, and emotional assurance to create new kinds of brand experiences. Most of them human, personal and interactive.

Same old, shame old

Yet with all the shifting, the way business-to-business brands and their integrated marketing programs are developed hasn't changed.

You know the scenario: Brand consultants sweep in, interview 50 senior managers and everybody with a "C" in their title, four good customers, no prospects and few if any front-line employees or stakeholders.

The net result is usually a logo, a theme line, a truckload of PowerPoint printouts and a lot of incestual information. But if you dig through all that information you'll find very little insight into what the brand really is, how it is perceived by people who make buying decisions or how it can be of value to different market groups and customers.

The brand is the thing that connects your audience dialogues with your company. It is the hook they have in their heads that categorizes and consolidates all of these disparate messages, interactions and conversations

Oh yeah, the market

You remember the market? That's where they actually buy or choose not to buy the brand. That's where the brand actually generates income flows and long-term assets. And now that customers and prospects are in charge of the purchase process, it's the source of brand leverage.

Beware of consultants bearing Band-Aids®

Which is exactly why the old-paradigm approach to branding doesn't work anymore in business markets. Because its communications output is so broad, general and inward-looking, it isn't relevant enough to customers' and prospects' buying needs to resonate with them.

In fact, your customers' and prospects' needs have about as much chance of being served by this old-paradigm approach as a loud Texan does by a French waiter.

That's why the world has been treated to such compelling business branding ideas as "we work with you." Or how about "behind every company." And of course that highly distinctive "innovative, integrated solutions partner."

These are just a few of the themes developed by conventional branding approaches that we've been asked to make meaningful in some way to the market.

So here's your first clue, Lou

If you've got to translate your stated brand promise to make it meaningful to customers' and prospects' needs and values when they make a buying decision, you've got a major problem, Spunky.

In a world where customers and prospects control things, you've got a problem so deep, dark and black it could suck all the light out of Times Square and still have enough black left over to provide a lifetime supply of turtlenecks to the Yale University English Department.

So if you want to develop a truly integrated marketing program that will resonate in this new age, we have a suggestion.

Start with the market

Consider an approach that revolves around customer and prospect perceptions from the very beginning. And then use that point of view to align employee expectations as well as management's vision.

Which brings us to the place we started. It's the circle of integrated business marketing life, Cimba. It's never over. It only looks like it is.

P.S.

For more information about a holistic, market-centric approach to business branding just request our e-book, "Brandwidth". Or visit mobium.com/brandwidth and download your very own free copy.

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.

www.mobium.com

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www.youtube.com/user/mobiumtv

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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

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