

embrace

Building stronger relationships with customers in a world of business marketing change



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

It's worth cultivating.

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

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Embrace your customers

Your old marketplace is being replaced with a 'market space' where customers determine the time, place and conditions of doing business.

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 relationship 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're doing it faster than Heavy D seizing control of the burger machine at McDonalds.

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 are now part of the product development process in some forward-thinking companies.

They're in control now, Scooter

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

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

Your customer relationships, not market relationships, are the only things that generate direct business value.

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.

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.

For one thing, it's probably forcing you to consider the marketing and communications process 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

Neither of those conventions works anymore.

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 communicate with them differently.

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

Become a migrator

To do that, you'll have to plan and integrate your communications to customers in a way that moves them from first time buyers to loyalists to advocates.

In other words, just as prospects need to receive information and incentives (we call them "gooses") to move them through the purchase path from awareness through purchase, occasional buyers need to be enticed to move them through the retention path to become recurring purchasers, loyalists and advocates of the brand.

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, those enticements 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 the nature
of your relationship
from buying and
selling to empowering
customers around
your brand.

Shift or get off the pot

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.”

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. In the next few chapters, you’ll find some practical insights and straightforward approaches to help you get there.

Identifying key customers

With the right kind of measurement tracking and ROI analysis, you can invest in customers rather than spend money on marketing. There's a difference.

If you're like most business marketers, your budget for remarketing and communicating to customers is probably emptier than Andy Dick's minibar at the Chateau Marmont.

That's a mistake of course, but you can overcome it. You don't have to develop a program that communicates with every customer to generate major revenue and profitability gains. You just need to develop relationship programs with your best customers. And remember, not every customer is a candidate.

Where are they?

The fact of the matter is not all customers are profitable. In fact, if you look closely you'll probably find a bunch of customers that you're losing money on.

Check it out. Do the math and you'll discover that a surprisingly small number of customers account for a big chunk of the profits. In fact, the old 80/20 rule 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.

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.

How to find them

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, most importantly, complaints.

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.

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.

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.

Before you jump to any conclusions about which customers to focus your efforts on, their potential lifetime value to the organization must be estimated.

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 further 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 relationship efforts on and how to segment them, each customer's potential lifetime value to the organization must be estimated.

Lifetime customer value is the true arbiter of how much you should spend, or can afford to spend, on a relationship with a particular customer.

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 that 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 over 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 communications actions of the company. And in the best case, it brings the customer's voice into the product service and marketing 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.

Migrate buyers to advocates

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

Hugging customers is more than simply communicating with buyers. It's more than relationship marketing or CRM technology. Without the emotional, creative and engaging components of hugging, all you have are 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 that when they open their mouths a light comes on.

The four phases of hugging

In fact, we think hugging your customers even 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.

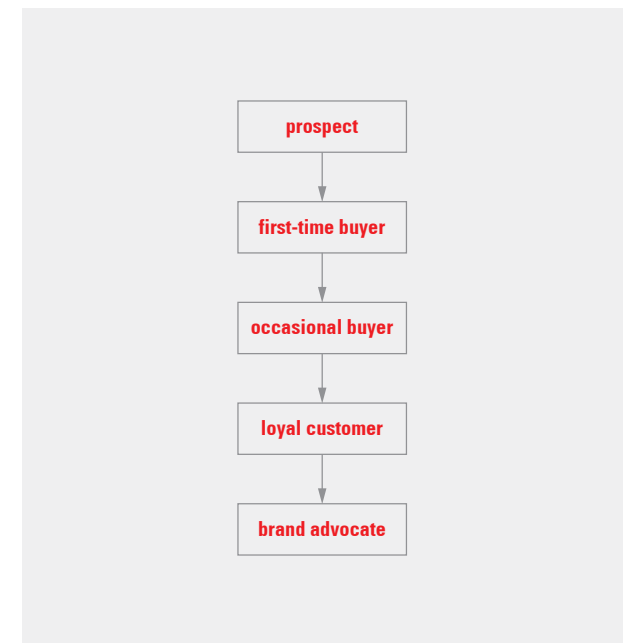
The first dimension of this process involves identifying your most important customers based on their current profit contribution and lifetime customer value.

The second is to develop an integrated marketing and communication program that moves customers from being first-time buyers to occasional buyers to loyal customers and then to active brand advocates.

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 your prospects.

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

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



Only by listening
in a collective
sense can you
build relations
and anticipate the
future needs of
your customers.

Nothing like a fine whine

So even the discordant voices of customers are 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 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.

In some cases, employees of all ranks and job functions get out and experience their company's offerings 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.

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.

What hugging leads to

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

It's not so much what you use, but how you organize the effort. How you use and integrate each medium and forum.

Provide information and incentives

Beyond circulating actionable customer information and feedback, the goal of the hugging process is to develop brand advocates. In other words, to convert your best customers into your best salespeople.

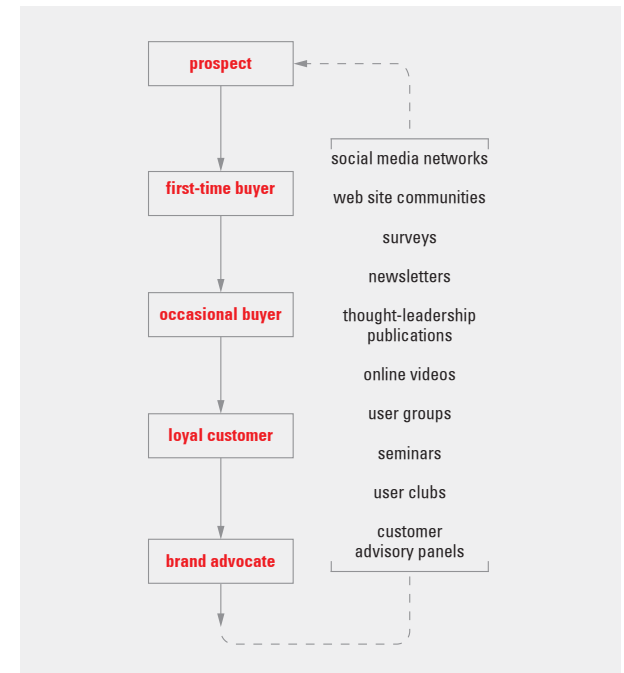
To do that you'll have to give them two things: the information and incentives to make them knowledgeable and passionate advocates, and the platforms and forums to get them in front of your prospects.

Even the discordant voices of customers are integrated back into the organization. Even when those voices are bitching so hard they make Beck sound like Anthony Newley.

Vehicles designed to share ideas and solutions

They should all be based on dialogue. That is, even broad-based customer communications should solicit their views on industry or 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 these vehicles can be used to transform customers into advocates and then direct their advocacy back to prospects and first-time buyers to strengthen their resolve, their rationalization, justification and their conviction of their buying decision.



Treat customers differently

If you put your mind to it, you can probably think of three indignities you're putting your customers through right now. All because you still view and define them as part of the market.

To build a special relationship with customers, you have to actually view them as 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.

Based on a different point of view

You can experience a perfect example of the lack of this special point of view the next time you go to the grocery store.

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 check-out line that's longer, slower and more somber than an inner-city hospital emergency ward on a Saturday night and enjoy a shopping experience that's roughly equivalent to the Bataan death march.

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

Whip me, beat me, I'm your customer

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.

Something is out-of-whack here.

But 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 and define them as part of the market and therefore sometimes not worthy of your special treatment.

Special status tactics

From a communications standpoint, you can begin to establish a special relationship with your key customers by bundling together some key tactics:

Dialogue

Don't just talk. Listen to your customers. Better yet, respond to them directly. Even better 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 seriously consider passing their advice on to your prospects.

Special offers and incentives

Applied at the right time and in the right place, they're 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.

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.

If you organize customer forums correctly, you will get all the credit and promotion you can imagine without uttering one syllable of product puffery.

Special-member status

Give them perks. Give them insider information (unless you're a financial services firm). Give them the first crack at new offerings. Give them advice, get their feedback and spread it around. It's a lot like manure: it only works when you spread it out.

Delivering special status hugs

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.

You and your hugees

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.

You organize community interaction

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.

But in essence these vehicles belong to the community.

Be a hugging 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 brand. 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.

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 vehicles 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.

Listen, understand, respond

When a company gives you its business, they feel that a relationship is established. Fail to recognize this perceived connection, and your customer will view the relationship as weak and not worth their loyalty.

Let's be brutally frank. That's always fun and appreciated.

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

A yawning chasm

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

Repetitious, interruptive, self-obsessed messages about how great your products are as opposed to how you can solve customer problems are about as popular as Marla Maples at a benefit screening of "First Wives Club."

No wonder public opinion polls show that marketing and communications people have now roughly 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.

In fact, business marketing is being altered more often and more dramatically than the late Michael Jackson's nose. 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 of the purchase process itself.

If understood, all this shiftiness gives business marketers and communicators an unprecedented opportunity to claim pivotal positions in their customers' value chains. Positions that go beyond even product/service offerings, into areas of value creation based on information, emotional support, connectivity 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 is 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 takes place "dialogue communication."

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

Your customers 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.

Dialogue as part of the hugging process

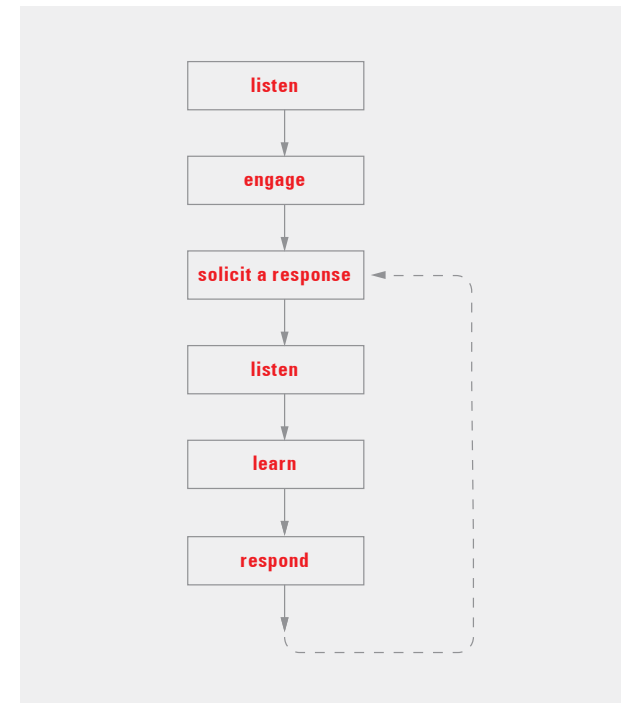
In its simplest form, dialogue communication consists of listening to customers, engaging them in a creative way that makes them want to talk to you, soliciting a response, listening to their reply, and responding in kind with additional information, advice, answers or questions.

Step one: Shut up and listen

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

It includes listening to them 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.



Engagement goes beyond vehicles. It's about emotion and empathy. It's about developing a customer point of view that's delivered in a voice that makes people want to stop and talk to 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. Things go so much better when they have a sense for who the heck you are, 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 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 customers' 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 Web site where you can more interactively 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 with people who share your customers' interests and problems.

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

But engagement goes beyond vehicles.

Engagement is about emotion and empathy. It's about developing a customer 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.

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

So you have to be prepared to respond immediately to specific requests or questions with personal, specific, engaging replies delivered in whatever form they want.

But even more important than that, you have to have mechanisms in your communications 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.

By the way, no matter what media you use to continue this conversation, they'll have to function interactively.

What constitutes a hugging dialogue?

To qualify as dialogues, these 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 based upon their profiles.
- Deliver information requested in the form (media) requested by your audience in as close to real time as the requested media will allow.
- Ask questions of customers 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 to add their own information and opinions to a community and receive feedback from others.

Five requirements of dialogue that hugs customers

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

1. Value

Your customers aren't interested in having their business lives interrupted by your messages. Believe it or not, they'd rather not have their voice mail bloated with your non-relevant telemarketing offers. Or their e-mail inbox jammed 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.

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. Unless the message contains something they perceive to be of value to them personally, chances are they'll reject it.

Customer dialogues pop up now and then over time. When they need to. Where there is a need. When it's of value to customers. Not necessarily when it's convenient or efficient for you.

Value, by the way, includes much more than relevant product and service information. It also includes things like entertainment, status and empowerment information, and diagnostics, job effectiveness and professional development help. Value today has as much to do with what your brand can do for your individual buyers as it does with what your product or service can do for their company.

2. Access

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

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. Having what they perceive to be special access goes a long way to strengthen their relationship with the brand.

3. Human attention

Merely providing customers with an 800 number, Web address or e-mail 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, 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 voice builds a personal as well as an emotional connection to your brand. That goes beyond products and services to build loyalty.

4. 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, not worthy of their loyalty.

So it becomes incumbent on you to treat customers differently than the general market. Which means treating them individually and personally in the kind of information, emotional incentives and value offers that you make to them.

Your brand is the thing that connects your customers and their dialogues with your company. It is the hook they use to categorize and consolidate all these disparate interactions and conversations.

5. Brand reinforcement

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

Customers 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.

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. Not necessarily when it's convenient or efficient for you. But rather when customers want them to occur. Because they're in control.

That means two things. Dialogues need to be reinforced. And conversations should revolve around the customer and their individual relationship to the brand.

When all is said and done they hug the brand

The brand is the thing that connects your customers 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.

And one of the important benefits of broad-based awareness and familiarity-building communications is its ability to reinforce relationships with people who have already bought your product/service offering. 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 part of your dialogue strategy. It reduces buyer remorse and ties both customers and prospects closer to the brand in a way that makes them want to initiate dialogue.

Bring your customer inside

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

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

The eternal disconnect

That's because most of the business messages and brands out there don't take into account what customers are really buying, what they're interested in hearing and what they already think of the marketer's product/service offering.

Instead, the world of b-to-b customer relationship programs 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 all that doesn't matter. All that really counts is what your customers 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 customers. (Except, perhaps, conceit.)

In other words, they are irrelevant ideas.

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

Pull my finger

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

Unfortunately, these are seldom the things that customers are interested in hearing about.

So they (the customers) don't. They ignore them (the messages, the brands, the companies and the marketers).

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

Value, value, who's got the value

The first is that eventually you're going to have to put anything you want to communicate to customers 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 customers see their businesses. Not the way you view yours. And you can't find out what they truly value to create that position unless you listen to them.

The primary role of a good customer relationship program is to align what you say and sell with what your customers want to buy and hear about. And you can't do that unless you listen to them.

Align what you sell with what customers really buy

Finding out what buyers value most when they make a purchase or a use decision is vital whether you want it to be or not. 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, 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.

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 brand or customer relationship plan should be to align what you say and sell with what your customers want to buy and what they want to 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 for what customers truly value, it can do 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 value most when they make a buying or use decision. And that includes understanding how they view your brand and your value offerings as well as their perceptions of their other brand purchase options.

Scan a mind

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

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

Answering eight key customer value questions helps build a position that addresses the buying and use issues that are of most interest, concern and import to your customers.

Answer eight key questions about what customers value

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

Most importantly, it should answer them strictly from your customers' point 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?
2. Who is involved in this process and what role does each play in each stage of buying and use decision making?
3. What problems, concerns or challenges do they face that an offering like yours can help with?
4. What specific 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 look for connections to both functional and emotional criteria.)
5. How important is each criterion to them?
6. What/who do they consider to be competitive buying options to your brand?
7. How do they rate each competitor's performance on their most valued functional and emotional buying criteria?
8. How do they rate your brand's performance?

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

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 market segments into value segments based on their common behavioral values.

Discover value-based market segments

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. In addition, you'll discover criteria that are of unique value to different markets.

This is the first step in developing messages that will resonate with different audiences at different stages of the purchase, repurchase and migration process. It will also point you to the kinds of messages and information 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 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 competitive perceptions?

Shutting up and listening is the first step in developing messages and brand experiences that will resonate with customers at different stages of the purchase, repurchase and migration process.

Check your brand, Stan

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

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

Rethink your frame, Wayne

The process also forces you to look at competitors and competitive brands from a customer's point of view.

That's important because they may define your competitive frame much differently than you do. 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 control information, communication and the buying process, it's in your best interest to think about things the way they do. And that includes how you define your own competitive set.

The process can also help you develop product/service solutions ("value offers" as we like to call them) that you can deliver through your brand. These offers include

intangible things like special information, advice, analysis and community that can be bundled with your product or service to make your brand more valued and distinctive.

Make me a value offer

Ultimately, the process can provide direction to help you change the relationship that you have with customers. 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 business brands in a world of customer control.

What customers really buy

In this new world, customers are co-creators of your value offering and of defining the value being offered.

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

But times have changed

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

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

Intangibles are in

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

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

Simple buying and selling is out

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

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

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

This is no time for conventional wisdom

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

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

Customers place real value in intangibles. Things like loyalty, esteem, empowerment, learning and engagement. All emotional values that your brand can deliver

Driving in all lanes at once

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

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

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

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

Shove it into reverse

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

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

Wanted: Drivers with heart

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

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

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

There's sap all over the highway

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

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

These new world markets will belong to companies that integrate the intangible things that customers value with products and services to form value offerings that they strongly brand.

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

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

Bottom line

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

Well, things have changed, Bucky

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

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

Start changing lanes and your point-of-view

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

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

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

Connect with prospects

Interactivity can connect your customers with your prospects in powerful ways that teach prospects how and why they should use and buy your products and services.

Building awareness of your products and services is one thing. Problem is, it's an old thing.

In this new paradigm world filled to the brim with over-communications, over-choice and time famine, it will get you about as far as Kathy Lee Gifford singing "You Light Up My Life" at the midnight show at the Apollo Theater.

Talk to the hand

The same goes for those interruptive, one-way monologues that tell people what to believe. Even if they're in an e-mail.

They're the refuges of marketing and communications dinosaurs. Those traditional ad agencies who call themselves integrated communications companies these days to hide the fact that they're frantically trying to locate Mr. Peabody for a quick spin in the Way-Back Machine.

Getting attention is something else. It will get you farther.

And attracting attention to your unique value offerings will take you even farther in a world that doesn't deal in pure products or services anymore.

Attention counts

The hard fact is that in a speedy interconnected world, you have to get people involved in your information, messages and brand before you'll see direct financial returns on your marketing and communications.

In fact, in this environment, sending out more and more passive, interruptive messages is the informational equivalent of the guy at the office who has to look like he's

constantly doing something while accomplishing nothing. You know, like Vanna White in a power tie.

That's why interactivity is such a powerful tool. It does something. It's active. It involves. It transforms vague awareness to attention. It makes immediate dialogue with customers possible. It connects everyone with everyone else. Including your customers with your prospects

The power of interactivity can be used to powerfully connect your customers with each other, and with you. It can connect you with your prospects in ways that create brand experiences. Even more important, it can connect your customers with your prospects in powerful ways that teach prospects how and why they should use and buy your products and services. But it only does that to your advantage if you're willing to use it as a mechanism to listen and learn and respond.

I've been interactivated

Essentially, it does all of this by empowering both your customers and prospects. That is it makes it easy for them to talk to who they want to talk to when they want to. It makes it easy for them to quickly go wherever they want to go in your information whenever they want to go there, however they want to get there.

Of course, they're already in control of information and communications. Technology and connectivity have already empowered them. The issue is, will you use interactivity to empower your prospects and connect them to your customer brand advocates through your brand?

The issue is, will you use interactivity to empower your prospects and connect them to your customer brand advocates through your brand?

After all, we're all just trying to find the bathroom

In terms of its ability to help your brand advocate customers sell your prospects, the overarching power of interactivity is its ability to bind you and your customers and prospects together in a special kind of empowering relationship. One in which their experience with you, your offerings and your brand make them better at what they do. Make them better professionals. Make their jobs easier, more efficient and more productive. Make their businesses more successful.

It's built on the premise that we're all just human beings stumbling around in the dark, trying to find the bathroom and kicking the heck out of our shins on the way there. We appreciate a little help and insight along the way.

The WD-40 in the gears of relationships

Interactivity is a powerful metaphor for this special kind of teacher student or doctor patient relationship. You describe your symptoms and situation. The doctor diagnoses your problem, prescribes the appropriate treatment and gets you in touch with fellow sufferers as a support group.

In the interest of overstating the obvious and beating a dead horse at the same time, you are the doctor, your prospects are the patient and your customer brand advocates are the fellow sufferers. Take it from us, Sparky, if you've ever been the patient in real life you know how powerful the advice of a fellow sufferer can be.

The same holds true for the advice of your customers to your prospects. At key stages of the purchase process the interaction between customers and prospects can make the difference between an enquiry, a lead and a sale.

That's the kind of relationship buying that's going on today. Whether you're involved in it or not. Interactivity and community allows you to build the kind of thought leadership and guidance programs that will fundamentally change and deepen your relationship with your customers and influence your prospects to buy. And as such, its power and influences goes beyond the Web.

By creating this thought leader/helper relationship with your customers and prospects across the board, interactivity can transform the very nature of your brand, your brand experience and your brand relationships across all media and across all marketing channels.

If you're confused, it's understandable

The term "interactivity" has been passed around more than a goatskin flask at a Blue Oyster Cult concert. Over the years, it's undergone more mutations than Phyllis Diller during a long weekend on Dr. Moreau's island.

But some things don't change. Even if the technology behind them is more fluid than Peter O'Toole's lunch tray.

There are some overriding principles of interactivity that you can and must understand. Even if to you, "Ram" will always be McCartney's last good album. And a hard drive is a long trip in the Chevy to your in-laws.

There are some overriding principles of interactivity that you can and must understand. Even if to you, “Ram” will always be McCartney’s last good album. And a hard drive is a long trip in the Chevy to your in-laws.

Some principles

Interactivity is not about navigation per se, or the ability to select from a menu, or analogies, animation, rollovers or canned content. It’s about empowering your customers and prospects around and through your brand.

In fact, the secret to brand communication on the Internet is your ability to present your brand in such a way that customers and prospects can interact with your key messages and with each other.

That interaction creates brand experience. If done right, it can be used to empower your customers. In other words, it can help them do their jobs better, faster or more effectively. Then it can be used to make it easy to pass those tools and ideas and customer stories on to prospects.

That brings us to the basic principles of connecting advocates with prospects.

Principle one: Help people be better

Ask what enabling or empowering interactive tools you can provide to help users serve their own self-interest better. Of course, you have to listen to them to know what their self-interest is, from their point of view.

Then you might want to provide them with tools like interactive need analyzers, configurators and calculators. Or discussion forums to help them talk to other people who share their business issues and who can supply insights, advice, referrals and best practice examples.

You can create a variety of interactive forums that make it easy for first-time and occasional buyers to talk to your brand advocates who use your offerings to solve the same problems they’re concerned about.

And if you’ve got the guts, you can put your customers directly in touch not only with your immediate support staff, but also with experts deep within your organization. The people who engineered and conceived the offerings you market can provide deep insights and brand stories that build emotional and technical connections with customers.

In this new connected world, they probably already have contact with your people. You just don’t know about it.

Principle two: Give users control

Forget all the rules you were taught about controlling information and its delivery.

Those days are over. Customers and prospects control not only the information they want but the sales process itself. Technology has given them the power to look at whatever they want to look at whenever they want to look at it.

They are doing it everyday. So the issue for you is whether you want to participate in their process.

Marketing used to be about telling your story. Now it's about getting others to tell your story for you.

If you do, then you have to give them control of your interactions with them. They have to be able to get to where they want to go. Whenever they want to get there. At their own pace. In their own order.

Principle three: Get out of their way

If you want to play in this new paradigm, you have to help your customers do what they want to do. That means two things. First, you'll have to engineer extremely easy usability and user freedom into your interactive architecture and design. And second you'll need to create places within that architecture where your prospects will bump into your customer brand advocates.

On the Web, that means interactive navigation tools like search engines and direct search pallets. Clear signposts and menus. A logical hierarchy that scales easily to hold the information people need. Abundant links both within your site and outward to other communities and information sources. Direct human contact wouldn't hurt either.

Principle four: Deliver hands-on involvement

When you put it all together, true interactivity focuses on some pretty pragmatic factors. Deliver these things interactively in real time to your customers and prospects and you'll develop an empowering, interactive relationship with them that naturally leads to connections between your prospects and your brand advocates.

- Let users give you instructions and respond with the information they asked for in whatever form they requested it. Including customer case studies as examples.

- Give users additional information based on their original query. Including referrals to customer brand advocates.
- Give feedback through hands-on user tests, diagnostics and answers to "what if" scenarios.
- Encourage users to add their own information to the interaction in a way that builds community with other users and your customer brand advocates.
- Make complex pricing calculations and other data evaluations faster, simpler and more effective for users.
- Diagnose user situations, business issues or problems. Help them find remedies. And connect them with others who share their needs. These groups should be peppered with your customer advocates.

Principle five: Enter the market conversation

Right now, on discussion forums, rogue websites and industry special interest groups, your customers and prospects are talking about your company, your competitors, what makes them angry and what makes them buy.

They're gossiping, sharing advice, laughing, smearing reputations and offering raving recommendations.

The best thing is, they want you to participate. They want you to respond to their questions, to their opinions and to their advice. They want you to get involved directly and they want the third party views of your customers.

Before Wes the Webmaster from DigiWorld begins to construct that virtual refrigerator, virtual information cafe or other clever but virtually irrelevant interactive metaphor, ask yourself a few crucial questions.

They're waiting for you

They don't want your monologue about what they should believe about your product and services. They want a dialogue. They want you to learn about them as individuals and what's really important to them.

All you have to do is have the guts and insight to join the conversation. To respond. To converse in a real human voice. To discuss. To help. To contribute to the community. That's what interactivity really is.

Creating interactivity

No matter what structure you develop to connect your brand advocate customers with your prospects, you're going to have to engage their imaginations.

You don't think so? Then the next time you have several hundred press releases to share with business prospects, go ahead; just shovel them all onto the World Wide Web. And watch with anxious anticipation as the whole worldwide world yawns, world wide.

You'd do better to rewrite this stuff. Interactivate it instead of "repurposing" it. And then dish it up using a creative concept that actually encourages people to come on in and browse awhile. One that promises timely, fresh information. One that implies an audience benefit and gives a clue that this is not yet another example of corporate shovelware. One that talks about your customers' and prospects' business — not yours.

It's about relevant originality, not irrelevant metaphors

Whatever your approach, one thing is for sure. You'll need to employ a little artistry.

Between the techno-dorks, the IT departments and the Web developers with their irrelevant games and omnipresent analogies, the flow of truly inspired interactive creativity makes Strom Thurmond's urethra look like Splash Mountain.

So before Wes the Webmaster from DigiWorld begins to construct that virtual refrigerator, virtual information cafe or other clever but virtually irrelevant interactive metaphor, ask yourself a few crucial questions:

- Does this creative brainstorm hold intrinsic interest to your customers' and prospects' needs and business problems in and of itself? Or is it as self-serving as an Ikea store?
- Does it say anything about your business? And does it say it from your audience's point of view? Based on what's important to them—not you? Or is it just one big sloppy, wet kiss on the corporate butt?
- Can you own it? Is it firmly linked to you and your customers' and prospects' needs and what you're all about? Or could it just as well apply to Larry's Gasket City?

No matter what structure you develop to connect your brand advocate customers with prospects, you're going to have to engage their imaginations.

- Does it provide value to your audience? Does it imply that it will give them usable information that can help them make better decisions? Or is it just cyberhype? Another one of those rhinestones on the jumpsuit of mediocrity that catches everyone's eye and makes us think, "Hey, maybe the Spice Girls don't suck."

Or is it all just another insipid interactive convention to throw against the old cyberbarn? Splaaat.

The truth is that creating interactivity is different than designing ads or art-directing TV spots or writing a brochure or graphic design. Way different. But it doesn't necessarily require metaphors to drive interactivity.

Get your priorities straight

Relevant, compelling information that empowers your customers and prospects can do that. Without any virtual cafes or castles.

All you have to do is get your priorities straight.

1. Focus first on designing the place and the experience of the place, not the graphic design of the place.

2. First design the:

- Interactions
- Functionality tools
- Experience
- Integration

3. Then design the look of the place.

Creating interactivity is all about perspective and point of view. Concepts, design and structure emerge from seeing things through the eyes of your customers and prospects and the lens powerful lens of empowering interactivity.

Don't be content

Content is not engagement. It never has been. It never will be. Without creatively and emotionally involving your customers they will never get to your masterfully developed content.

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 customer communications 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 content dumping is that awareness and familiarity of all the competitors in this market is almost zero. 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.

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 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 Twittiverse 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 parents' 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 formulization, 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 marketing will be about as interesting and involving to your customers as Ben Stein's audio book narration of the tax code.

Get a human voice

In this new marketing world, if your brand has even the aromatic hint of a belching weasel, you've got a customer relationship problem.

Whether you like it or not, your brand is now part of a very human conversation. And thanks to the Web, the very sound of that conversation starkly contrasts with the monotonous, lifeless, self-centered drone sent out from most b-to-b companies to their customers around the world.

Old-world belching weasels

The problem is that marketers and their companies have become more comfy with this inane, self-possessed, corporate-speak than Ed Begley, Jr. in an electric car on his way to a recycling center with a trunk full of empties.

In fact, they're so comfortable with it themselves they actually think that people on the outside (like customers) relate to this indecipherable babble.

We've got news for you, Skeeter. People on the outside are more involved in their tans than they are in this stuff.

And in this new marketing paradigm, if your brand has even the aromatic hint of a belching weasel, you've got a customer relationship problem.

What belching weasels smell like

Corporate belches consist of a mixture of meaningless mission statement mumbo jumbo, indecipherable acronyms and jargon and the legalese and weasel words that companies hide behind. They are the inward mumbles of old world hierarchies that are more top heavy than Pamela Anderson in a centrifuge.

And don't forget the strategy-talk that somehow turns communications objectives into copy that tells your customers what they should believe about your brand.

In other words, belching weasels smell a lot like all the stuff that Web-empowered, networked customers can see through in an instant because technology has enabled them to know more than you do, faster than you do. Especially about their many brand choices.

Check the Net

Compared to the emerging voice of real, human market conversations, typical business copy sounds about as natural and spontaneous as a Jesse Helms bowel movement. Even before he died.

In contrast, this new market conversations offers people the pure sound of the human voice, not the elevated, empty speech of the corporate hierarchy.

What's more, these new voices are telling one another the truth based on their real experiences with the brand, unlike the packaged corporate messages aimed at presenting that edited, finely polished version of reality that can generously be called the best-case scenario. Or it can be called bullshit.

In order to survive in this new age, your brand must have a human voice. It must stand for something. It must want to stand out, meet people and show that it's trying to understand those people.

Survival of the humanist

Since the first markets, we, as human beings, seem to know intuitively when something spoken, written or recorded is sincere and honest. When it's trying to connect with our hopes and dreams. When it comes from one person's heart instead of a synthesis of corporate-speak filtered through a myriad of English class editing, trimming, targeting bullet pointing and legal machinations.

There is a self-indulgent pomposity in what passes for customer communications today. Missing is the voice, humor and simple sense of worth and honesty that characterizes person-to-person communications.

But that will change. It has to.

Because in order to survive in this new age, a company and a brand must have a human voice. It must stand for something. It must mean something. And it must want to stand out, meet people and show that it's trying to understand those people.

Have a heart

Consider this: Your company is not made up of pieces of equipment. Or an army of workers. Your company is made up of people. Individuals. Beings who are human.

And although your audience is made up of highly trained, analytical professionals, they, too, are human. They can be moved by emotion as well as by logic.

The breakthrough business-to-business marketing and branding programs of the future will make contact between these two very human elements.

Buyers have hearts

That's why good customer communications is written as people speak. As one person talks to a friend. In short, sometimes incomplete, sentences. Simple words. No jargon.

Not because we are less than literate. But rather because that's the way people talk. And as a result, that will always be the fastest way into someone's mind.

In the same way, customer communications should be illustrated in human terms, using human situations. Visuals should involve the human feelings of the viewer. In fact, as business marketing becomes more and more high-tech, your communications should become more and more high-touch.

The shortest
distance into
anyone's mind
goes through his
or her heart.

Even geeks have hearts

The shortest distance into anyone's mind goes through his or her heart. By that we mean you can get extra credit from your customers if your communications are engaging. That extra credit comes in the form of attention, interest, memorability and eventually loyalty.

You've heard the old saying about sales representatives. The one that goes: People buy from people they like. Well, your brand and marketing communications can create just as strong a personality as your sales force. A brand personality can predispose people to like you and your products and make them want to interact with you.

All God's children have hearts

So your communications should present your company's message in a direct and honest way that shows you take your customer's business and your products more seriously than you take yourself.

Your interaction with customers should have blood running through it. A twinkle in its eye. A grin on its face.

To create this kind of engaging, human personality, look for three intangible elements in every creative execution:

1. Relevance
2. Emotion
3. Surprise

Owning your customers

Elbows are flying between manufacturers and resellers over who owns the customer in this new customer-controlled world.

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

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

Over there in the blue satin shorts are the manufacturers, who historically controlled information flow about their products and services by sending one-way messages down a simple, clearly defined channel of retailers and media to their customers and potential customers. But often not to end users.

Let the games begin

In the first period, manufacturers dominate because they have unique or differentiated products and services that are in high demand. Thanks to their unique offerings, distribution systems or dominant brands, the manufacturers are able to control and dictate how the brand is sold, at what price and, to a certain extent, even control demand.

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

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

Whack, bam, boom

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

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

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

More powerful than a speeding power slam

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

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

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

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

“How can that be?” whines the manufacturers’ coach in blue as he hurls a folding chair across the track.

Able to leap customer expectations in a single bound

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

For example, many customers no longer look to manufacturers to stand behind their brands. Dealers, retailers and distributors with no-questions-asked return policies and warranties are taking over this role, making exchanges and then demanding credit from their suppliers. And this is just one of the situations that is transferring brand loyalty away from manufacturers and into the hands of the channel, thus increasing channel strength.

As a result, there’s now so much mistrust and paranoia between the two parties it makes the war room in “Dr. Strangelove” look like the Jacuzzi room at Hedonism III.

Winning by taking care of the customer’s business

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

And now, as technology pushes control of information toward the customer, a fourth period Battle Royale is

erupting between the two warring camps for contact and control of the sales process.

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

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

And there goes another one over the rail, fans

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

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

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

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

Round and around the brand they go

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

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

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

You can't own the customer anyway

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

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

The customer needs to own you

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

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

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

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

And it's not over yet

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

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

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

One more kick in the groin for old times' sake

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

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

How's that for another elbow to the head and a big fat skate to the midsection?

What's a Mobium?

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

We're mutants.

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

We change things

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

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

We transform things

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

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

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

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

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

We're change freaks

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

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

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

Organized chaos

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

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

Buddy, can you paradigm?

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

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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

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