

The Art of Unlearning



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Published by Campaign magazine 17 July 2009
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For me, it was Stella. I had grown up with it as a marketing legend. My round, he whispered. Debt in Venice. Reassuringly expensive. Gongtastic. And then the wheels came off.

Suddenly people began to work out that it wasn't reassuring or expensive. In fact it was always on promotion. Nor was it lovingly brewed by medieval monks somewhere vaguely French. Nor, the truth be known, did it taste very nice when you compared it to a Beck's or an Urquell.

Worse still, it gained the dreadful "wife beater" soubriquet in a seemingly remorseless slide towards becoming the lager lout's bierre de choix.

So what went wrong?

The answer is it became an anachronism. Or, more precisely, the marketing principles that created it became an anachronism. And they did so with remarkable speed and severity. Events moved far faster than brands such as Stella could possibly legislate for. It was as if the tide went out on turbocharge leaving them high and dry in a new marketing world order.

I suppose it's in the nature of discontinuous change to be abrupt, but the speed of change, combined with a recession, is wrong footing even some of the most sure-footed brands. How do you respond to this kind of change?

I think the answer is not simply about doing new things, it's about unlearning old things. Old habits of thought, old structures, old assumptions. In this article I'm going to argue that we need to unlearn many of the marketing rules we've developed over the last three decades. We must unlearn them in terms of what we do, how we do it and, accordingly, how we organise ourselves as agencies and Clients.

What We Do

When I started out in the 80's, life in an agency was dandy. We were part social club and, on the odd occasion we applied ourselves to work, part conjuror where something called a creative brief would be magically transformed into a film (ideally directed by Ridley Scott). Ok, so I exaggerate, but the forty some things out there will see a grain of truth in this portrait.

Brands at this stage were largely the domain of the Marketing Director and his agency. They created them, they managed them, they dined out on them. And there are any number of success stories to show that this system worked.

As a rule, the task was to take a product and cloak it in personality or image. Brands, as a result, were in large part confections, often with only the most tenuous link to substance or credentials. Think Malibu, think Milk Tray, think Benson and Hedges, think Stella. They weren't counterfeits as such, they were media constructs, where the brand and the audience willingly colluded in suspending disbelief.

To use modern parlance, brands were downloads; desirable objects built by specialists that you bought into as and when they tickled your fancy. The problem is we no longer live in a download culture. Or certainly not exclusively so. Where we do download we are prone, I'm told, to do so illegally and anyway, it's just as much fun to upload. We're all broadcasters, journalists and critics now.

Of course, every brand is responding in their own way to the new realities of a bottom up world. We all preach the advocacy, word of mouth gospel. Customer forums are proliferating, CEO's write blogs, virals are the new 60 second. But, with a few exceptions, it's piecemeal. Clients ricochet around town as they try to co-ordinate a profusion of advice, from media, to atl, to btl, to experiential, to sponsorship, to CRM, to CSR, to PR, to digital, to promotional, to search, to design and back again. We should get our own bus lane.

Structurally, things will have to change (see below), but they will also have to do so intellectually. We must unlearn the old assumptions around branded products and services. The most successful brands have already moved two steps higher in the value exchange, beyond product and service into the world of customer experience. Agencies must follow them higher. In a few year's time the most successful agencies won't be confectors of image, they will be creators and co-ordinators of experience. They won't rely on interruptive models of communication, their approach will be participative. They will be judged on how they've helped create useful, entertaining or memorable experiences on behalf of the customers of the brands they work for.

This brings me to my first conclusion. We should stop thinking of ourselves as virtuosos, and start thinking of ourselves as orchestrators. Or, as Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody*, puts it "Media is less and less often about crafting a single message to be consumed by individuals, and more and more often a way of creating an environment for convening and supporting groups".

How We Do Things

This conclusion has huge implications for the way we operate. The industry has managed to salami slice itself into an almost comical amount of disciplines. (Have you noticed, by the way, how the newer the discipline the sillier the name of the company tends to be? But I can talk). This can't suit anyone but cab firms.

It would be easy to blame ourselves, but Clients have colluded as well. The separation of media and execution and then, in some cases, the separation of media planning and buying was in large part Client driven.

So we have the paradoxical situation of a world where everything needs to be more integrated and orchestrated, and an industry that, in my career, has never been more disintegrated. Now I know there are no easy answers. Some favour a one-stop shop, some favour a group solution. Some favour a set of disparate companies under one roof. Some say sod it, we're specialists. All of them are right. Up to a point.

The problem with any attempt to re-integrate is, funnily enough, not fundamentally to do with organisational structure. It is, instead, fundamentally to do with disposition and habit of mind. Some people like co-operating and sharing. Some people don't.

The problem for Clients is that cooperative people tend to be low on talent, whilst talented people tend to be low on cooperation. Thus the primadonna syndrome.

I don't think this has to be a Catch 22 situation, there are great cooperators who are also great talents. However, to achieve a climate in which both qualities co-exist requires a huge emphasis on agency culture, the nurturing of a collective ethos in what can often be a defensive trade (especially as you get closer to the creative product and the insecurities inherent in producing something by which you will be personally judged).

To get to the kind of collaborative culture required, there is in my experience no substitute for people simply knowing each other and liking each other. I realise this sounds lame, but the number of times I have heard a Client say they made their decision based on team chemistry makes me think it is not as lame as all that. But this chemistry point goes much further than agencies in terms of its relevance as an organising principle.

Bottom up culture means that everyone involved with the brand is now part of what makes the brand. Gone are the days of the locked off marketing department and agency. Thus the brand becomes the responsibility of every employee, whether or not they are customer facing. The greatest brands invariably have the most motivated, brand enthusiasts as staff.

Thus, from both a Client and Agency perspective, we have a new style of brand management which might be termed Total Branding. Every employee has a responsibility for the brand, everyone on the pay roll is a collaborator in its success or failure.

But this is only the tip of the newly democratised ice berg of brand management. Because underneath the water we have the most powerful new brand manager of all; the customer.

Now I know it has become a cliché to say that the customer runs or owns a brand. Not only is it a cliché, but as a rule it's also wrong. With a few exceptions, customers don't run brands, nor do they want to. We'd all prefer Rolls Royce to be building our aeroplane engines rather than Wikipedia.

That said, customers do welcome a chance to participate in the lives of the brands they buy and, on occasion, help shape them. And because they are both culturally and technologically so much more empowered, switched on brand owners are cultivating the role of the customer as co-creator and collaborator. Thus we need to stop thinking in the old language of "consumers" and "end users" and see the customer as an integral part of the branding process.

The end result is far more fluid, amorphous and experimental – some would say chaotic. But not only is participation the new definition of success, it is increasingly the new definition of creativity. Award winners these days (in Cannes, at DandAD, at NMA etc) are seldom set piece above the line campaigns. They nearly all depend on a social or participative element. Whether it's IdeaStorm from Dell, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, Do Us a Flavour or Aleksandr the Meerkat, they all embrace the new spirit of engagement.

How We Organise Ourselves

So how do we manage this more organic, bottom up era of brand deregulation? As I was saying, much of the answer is to do with unlearning how we used to do things. So much so that I sometimes wonder whether we need to tear up the focal point of the virtuoso model of the 80's, the "creative brief".

I suspect most of the brightest marketing ideas of recent years didn't start from a conventional creative brief (and anyway, why isn't the media brief a "creative" brief? Why isn't the web build brief creative?) The O2 didn't start with a formal creative brief, it started with the need to find a more experiential replacement for the Arsenal shirt sponsorship (given that mass awareness had by that stage been achieved). Dell IdeaStorm didn't come from a creative brief, it came from a meltdown in customer satisfaction and market share that required a radical approach to how the business was re-engineered.

This, in my view, is part of the new creativity. It doesn't need as many props or as much apparatus to guide it. It's more entrepreneurial than that. You can unleash it on a business problem raw rather than cooked.

That's one of the reasons we recently set up a division with the skills needed (PR, Digital and Brand) for what we decided to call the unbrief. This is when a Client recognises that a particular business problem might be addressed in any number of different ways through any number of different channels, media or disciplines. An unbrief avoids any pre-suppositions. It assumes all bets are off as to what the eventual outcome might be. It involves the creatives from the start not the end of the thought process. And it asks only three simple questions; Why will I talk about this idea? How do I get involved in it? What will keep the conversation going?

Whatever method you use to avoid falling into the old ways of thinking, these three questions help to highlight the biggest distinction between what we do now and what we did then, between getting consumers to buy a brand and encouraging customers to buy into a brand.

Learning to Unlearn

The first thing I'd do is stop anything resembling a relay. As soon as the baton has to be passed between five different departments in four different agencies you can forget it. Real time, bottom up marketing can no longer be linear or sequential, we all have to learn to improvise and be more spontaneous.

Get rid of offices. If they still exist at your agency rip down the partitions now. Or start preparing your cv.

Involve PR at the start. PR people know about momentum marketing, word of mouth and advocacy. It's what they do. Alex Bogusky says (have you seen his new, user generated website by the way? It's a wig worth seeing) that the way to judge an idea these days is to see if it reads well as a press release. "Brand X has just brought traffic to a stand still by mobilising tens of thousands of customers etc etc". Better to start with a press release than ...

... a creative brief. Don't get me wrong. Every so often we still need one of these pieces of paper. But much less often than we think. Too often it can become an excuse for the delegation of imagination. Instead, everything should be seen as the creative brief, everyone in the chain should be creative, and the creativity of a brand should be deregulated.

Be prolific. The strongest brands nowadays rely less on positioning and more on momentum. This doesn't necessarily suit the "but what's the big idea?" school of thought. Old school big ideas can look ponderous and industrial when compared to nimble, agile innovators who tend towards hyper-activity rather than hyper-discipline.

Three worthwhile questions for an unbrief are: Why will I talk about this idea@ How do I get Involved?
What will keep the conversation going?