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CGM: the power at the margins

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We now live in a global village ... a simultaneous happening,' wrote Marshall McLuhan with no small degree of prescience in 1967. Forty years later, the notion of simultaneousness is absolutely key to the way we use media, learn and digest information, and build and shape brands. What is more, in this village no sooner is a piece of communication released than we are able to measure who has seen it, who has responded to it, how many ... and (provided you know where to look) ... what it is they are thinking, feeling and saying about it.

It is this last bit that is crucial: if Orwell was right, and advertising is indeed the 'rattling of a stick inside a swill pail', then consumers are now able to 'rattle back' – at the same volume and sometimes even louder.

While the ability to measure engagement is great from an advertiser's point of view, so many of the metrics we use have historically assumed a one-way, didactic stream of information: 'our brand tells our target market this message; a number of target markets are exposed to it ... which tracks through to β number of sales'.

However, if we concede that the rules have changed, allowing digital extremism to take place, then our present task as strategists is to try to understand how to deal with this new communication paradigm.

NEW RULES, NEW ENGAGEMENT

In the world of Web 2.0, we are facing the challenge of 'digital extremists': people who are not content with accepting these messages, and who instead are shouting back with their polarising opinion on brands and messaging – having the effect of turning conventional metrics and objectives on their head.

Extremism exists in all areas of society: politics, religion, sport ... anywhere where there is a passion. Very often these passions are born in the margins: people who can see beyond the anodyne norm, people who feel marginalised by society, people who feel left behind or are fiercely opposed to a set of beliefs and focus their energy on trying to influence others to share their perspective.

Until very recently, they lacked the tools, 'the oxygen of publicity', to communicate with the masses. Many extremists were confined to a specific geography or community. However, within a flattened digital world, these barriers have been dismantled: immediate, one-to-many communications are now accessible to everyone. Brands now have no option but to surrender an equal share of voice to their audience. Now, let us take the opportunity to explore examples of where brands have surrendered their share of voice and digital extremism has flourished.

THE RIGHT OF REPLY

- Kryptonite exposes a classic example of extremist influence. For a brand whose sole *raison d'être* is security, the emergence on the internet in 2004 of multiple home videos showing the lock being opened in seconds by a Bic biro was deeply disturbing. This led to a feature on BBC's *Watchdog*, and in the UK resulted in Kryptonite responding with a lock-exchange offer, costing the company thousands in replacement locks – not to mention damage to consumer trust in the brand. Worse still for Kryptonite Corp. in the US: lawyers launched a class-action suit against the company, eventually forcing an out-of-court settlement.
- Cillit Bang shows how consumers latched onto the fact that the product made false claims in its TV campaign – and produced a website claiming that its fictitious character, Barry Scott, was 'a liar'. Not the sort of publicity a launch brand needs, and in this case, it resulted in the campaign having to be changed.

But just as these examples show how digital extremists have used the increasing number of online 'word-of-mouth' tools to the detriment of brands, so there are cases where it becomes clear that all is not lost for advertisers in the face of such a powerful section of the community. The Diet Coke/Mentos phenomenon provides one such salutary lesson, and while the reason for its popularity was easy to see (place Mentos mints in a bottle of Diet Coke to trigger an impressive explosion, something that made for great viewing on YouTube), the two companies involved reacted very differently.

Coke initially responded by saying the experiment did not fit the brand personality of Diet Coke and that it wished people would drink the cola and not experiment with it. Mentos, on the other hand, relished the estimated \$10 million in positive brand exposure from the viral videos (which cost the company nothing).

But the story did not end there. Despite shunning the viral video, Coke tried to capitalise on the customer-generated media wave by revamping [Coke.com](#) into a groovy, viral-video-heavy focused promotion called 'The Coke Show'. The intention was to have Coke fans submit customer-created videos for all to see. But the results of Coke's resisting and then creating its own controlled take on the situation versus Mentos relishing it and creating a promotion that rode it were startling.

According to an *Adweek* article in September 2006: 'Mentos has attracted over 300 submissions, which have been viewed more than 400,000 times. The Coke Show, which wrapped up its first contest last week, got only 35 videos, with none getting more than 2,000 views.'

This suggests that the extremists tend to be rather passionate people with a dislike of corporate dictation. They have nothing to lose, as the digital world embraces anonymity, and everything to gain in terms of fun, creativity and brand vandalism. So, when it comes to learning how to react to extremist behaviour, lesson number one should be to think before you act and try to understand why it has happened and work out how you can turn it to your advantage.

LOOK AND LEARN

These examples focused on reactive behaviour by brands in the face of negative exposure; now we want to explore proactive strategies for building and harnessing their energy to positive effect. For this to happen brands should adopt the following rules.

1. Work with the Grain of Anti-culture and Embrace Rebellion

One of the best examples of this is the Dove 'Campaign for Real Beauty'. The mission was simple: to make women feel more beautiful every day by challenging today's stereotypical view of beauty and inspiring women to take great care of themselves.

This was not a standard or typical advertising monologue, however: Dove realised that there was genuine frustration among its product users at the way advertising had distorted perceptions of beauty over time, so they decided to join forces with their consumers and promote 'normal' as the new beautiful. Aside from the TV and posters depicting normal people as beautiful, they released onto the web a film that exploded the beauty myth by showing a 'normal' looking woman being airbrushed, retouched, photo-shopped and generally transformed into an unrecognisable figure. This was followed by other films that looked at themes such as self-esteem and ageing.

Because Dove had sided with women (not just its consumers) and given them a genuinely interesting insight into another world, the ads became hot currency on YouTube and the web, generating millions of views worldwide, and spawning a number of spoof ads – most of which worked in Dove's favour as they too served to explode the beauty myth.

Another example is the launch of Red Bull in Germany, which, because of the need to secure food-and-drug authority approval, was delayed by five years. While this was an initial source of frustration for Dietrich Mateschitz, the company's entrepreneurial founder, it turned out to provide exactly the marketing strategy he needed.

Red Bull contains the active ingredients caffeine and taurine – the main reasons why drug approval was needed. However, because Red Bull was essentially illegal until then, rumours started circulating that the drink 'contained ecstasy', was 'made with bulls' testicles' and was 'liquid amphetamine'. These rumours spread among the clubbing community, a key target audience for the energy drink sector – and an audience for whom the idea of an illegal drink was distinctly inviting.

Instead of attempting to quash the rumours, Red Bull added a 'rumours' section to its website to promulgate the myth. This worked so well that when the drink was finally licensed, a group of worried mothers campaigned to have it banned, asserting that it led to drug use. Again, this just served to increase the attractiveness of the drink among its core market and Red Bull capitalised on this by launching guerrilla campaigns in bars and clubs.

2. Look to the Edges of Society – not the Over-targeted Mainstream – to find your Extremist Advocates

Few could have predicted the explosive success of SMS as a communications channel. In hindsight, its popularity is clear: text messages gained in popularity among teenagers who wanted a code of their own, wanted to alienate their parents, and to gossip cheaply and frequently. The result was a massive set of advocates for an entirely new communication medium, one that mobile phone companies were very slow in working out how to harness.

At the other end of the age spectrum sit the silver surfers – not the primary market for internet-based products in the eyes of many companies. However, looking at the rise in the popularity of genealogy online, the obverse seems true. For people who are becoming less mobile, yet have a love of family and keeping in touch, the internet has become a prime tool, especially when researching family history. Whereas a trip to the National Records Office in Kew, West London, would have been out of reach for many elderly people, the publication of census details online, together with some early examples of genealogy software, was just what was needed to fire this audience's imagination.

This has since led to genealogy chat rooms, websites ([GenesReunited](#), [Ancestry.com](#), [Rootsweb](#), *et al*) and even the BBC TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?* The cleverness of all this lies in the early identification of trends and consumer-generated behaviour.

3. Listen to your Zealots, Understand their Passion and Fervour, and try to Facilitate Rather than Control it

This leads to the final rule required if you're to harness the power of digital extremists: apply the art of listening and facilitation. SMS and genealogy could arguably have grown exponentially in popularity much earlier if more attention had been paid to the activities in the margins.

The UK arm of international NGO Oxfam did exactly this when it wanted to reach out to younger audiences and provide them with what may have been their first experience in fundraising. In late 2006, they hit on the idea of a national music festival – the insight being that music is a passion for this audience and many garage bands would love to perform live if only they had the tools needed to market themselves.

The interesting point, however, was that Oxjam (as the festival was named) was initially advertised via traditional media – but this had almost no effect. Worried that the formula was wrong, the team at Oxfam tried another route – to place articles in music journals and drive people to the web. Once on the website, which was actually part of MySpace, they could explore the options available and spread the word throughout the MySpace network – which has rapidly become synonymous with the promotion of independent musicians. The result? As Oxfam's website expressed it: 'We're looking at reaching a staggering half a million pounds that has been raised by the festival. That's enough to provide water and sanitation for nearly 700 thousand people, or to build 294 classrooms, – equipping a new generation of children with the skills to overcome poverty themselves! You really have changed lives'.

By uncovering the passions of a target audience and observing how this audience passes on music and information about gigs, Oxfam was able – with minimal marketing spend – to engage new supporters, raise awareness of an innovative programme and, crucially, to raise funds.

THE SHOCK OF THE NEW

William Goldman said of the art of writing successful movies in Hollywood: 'Nobody knows anything' – even the most eagerly anticipated and well-researched films can flop. Futurology is an uncertain science and this sentiment is as pertinent to digital marketing as to the big screen. However, what it does suggest is that more effort needs to be spent up front in uncovering early trends and insights into how people are relating to brands in the digital space. In essence: more listening and less preaching.

Our examples show that brands can easily fall foul of a more empowered consumer if they insist on being didactic, corporate and manipulative – or even just overly protective of their brand. Whether consumer-generated material really will turn out to be the future of (digital) content is hard to predict, but we have seen that consumers are increasingly confident in populating their own digital spaces and creating – or at least co-creating – the words, sounds and images they wish to pass on. And the material that *is* passed on is not asinine corporate platitudes: it's shocking, new, funny and rewarding – both for sender and recipient.

We hope that this article will serve as an introduction to digital extremism and offer some insight into how best to proceed during these volatile times, highlighting the challenges for brands seeking to engage digital zealots. If you are going to say something in the digital space, make sure it's worth hearing. If you are going to ask people to champion your cause, make sure there's something in it for them – and give them space to add their own spin on things. Finally, look beyond conventional audiences to promote your message: the power of advocacy lies with digital extremists, and they are to be found in the margins of your brand and audience.

NOTES & EXHIBITS

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