

Branding in a New Dimension

How to build a brand and a relationship in a Web 2.0 world

A guy at a gym overhears a couple discussing Nike's Ballers Network. He's never heard of it, even though he's an avid basketball player. His curiosity is piqued so he pulls out his smartphone and looks it up on the Web. Discovering Ballers Network is a platform that allows basketball players to find courts, arrange games and connect with other players, he adds the Facebook application located on the mobile site. He puts the smartphone in his pocket and greets his friend, who has just walked through the door.

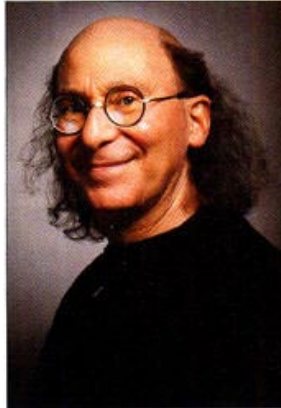
In those seemingly idle minutes, something remarkable happened: A relationship was formed.

Though consumers may be adept at tuning out traditional, top-down marketing messages, they're proactively using technology to conduct their own brand research to decide whether or not to pursue a relationship. Like flipping through profiles on Match.com, consumers are searching for brands that are right for them. In addition, whether spurred by a user review, a Google search, a brand site or a mobile application, technology has created multiple entry points to engage with a brand. And although it may be hard for marketers to predict that entry point, it's a safe bet the interaction will be digital. In fact, consumers' first interactions with brands are commonly through digital technology.

This shift in interaction has increased the necessity of smart digital branding, but there's still a misguided view of how to effectively brand for the space. In the past, branding was largely about creating corporate identities to help people understand what companies symbolized. Global or local. Bold or refined. Serious or whimsical. These elements of a company could be derived from the logo, typeface and colors used on everything from its letterhead to its advertising.

In the rise of corporate America, branding helped create some of the world's most iconic brands -- IBM, UPS and AT&T, to name a few. Many branding companies are still following the same set of rules used to make those brands famous, a system pioneered by luminaries like Paul Rand and Saul Bass. Those rules may have worked effectively for decades, but times have changed and branding today has evolved to mean so much more.

First, brands cannot be created and managed in a top-down approach. Gone are the days when branding companies could create a brand identity accompanied by a dense, rarely read instruction manual on how to apply it across media. Brands are no longer static. Today they're fluid, flexible and nonlinear.



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Second, branding can no longer work as effectively on its own as it once did. In our Web 2.0 world, branding has converged with design and advertising. Not too long ago, each of these disciplines had a specific role, a distinct purpose. In some ways, each still does. Today, however, the disciplines have become so intertwined that they work best when working together.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in digital. Take Apple, for instance. For the industry at large, Apple has become the default example of stellar branding, design and advertising. For good reason. The company has created a modern, sophisticated brand personality that's reflected in everything it creates, from its products to its packaging, messaging, Web site, retail stores and operating system. How the brand behaves in the digital space is quintessentially Apple. The novel way a user interacts with the devices is as much a component of branding as the logo is.

Nearly everything today lives behind an interface and that can be the most important contact a consumer has with a brand. The architecture behind creating applications, digital signage or Web sites, for instance, mirrors the architecture for creating a brand identity. The way an interface operates informs consumer perception. If it's confusing and poorly designed, consumers will dismiss it in a matter of seconds. However, if it's informative and engaging, they'll likely delve deeper into the brand experience.

Creating engaging interfaces requires a high level of urbane design. Unlike traditional practices where brand identities are conceived by branding companies and implemented by ad agencies or design firms, the best digital branding happens when the process is completed from conception to execution by one agency. That agency can ensure the brand system is dimensional -- working across more channels, executions and applications including animation, functionality and the little beeps you hear when you click on something.

The digital age has redefined what it means to be a brand. It's changed the way we approach the discipline and it's prompted many new questions we need to consider. For instance, what does the logo sound like? How does the text move? How can an experience draw an emotion? And perhaps most importantly, what are consumers saying about the brand? After all, listening is branding, too.