



FULFILLING THE POTENTIAL FOR A TRULY CONSUMER-CENTRIC MARKETING CULTURE

by Patricia Graham

Companies need to turn their best customers and prospects into collaborators in the product creation and marketing process—a goal that demands new resources ... and perhaps even a new language

These days, to speak of *push* or *pull marketing* is to date oneself hopelessly. Consumers are rapidly leaving behind the era when boundaries existed between demand, design, and dissemination of products. The notion of *marketing* itself may need revisiting, inasmuch as it is rooted in a world where “talking to” or “listening to” consumers is an activity with a beginning and an end, rather than a way of life.

Perhaps we should start at the very beginning—with the word *consumer*. To think of your customers and prospects as merely *consumers* is to vastly underestimate the nature of the connection you need to have with them. We are moving into an era when companies and customers will be nothing less than *collaborators*, with those who buy and those who sell engaged in a

mutually beneficial dialogue without seams or edges.

As the global Internet marketplace, enabled by search technologies, allows collaborators anywhere/anytime access to almost any product, the prize of sustained growth will go to those who can be sufficiently attuned and flexible to recognize changes in demand on an almost overnight basis and then translate them into an offering with nearly equal speed.

MORE IS STILL NOT BETTER

The trouble is that, in our still-evolving cycle of product and service creation, demand change has accelerated way beyond the capacity for product and service change. With our cell phones and Treos and iPods,

we seem to have more bandwidth than can be filled by all of the offerings that could ever possibly interest us. Think of television, where an ever-growing number of channels (500, 600, and counting...) has outpaced content creation; putting a different ghost-logo in the corner of the screen does not mask the fact that channels 87 and 287 are basically the same.

We have been seduced by the extraordinary volume that digital technology has enabled. By the standards of the old marketing model, we have reached nirvana—able to put the entire Sears catalog on the head of a neutrino-sized microchip. But as we were basking in the glow of Intel-powered expansiveness, someone moved our target.

The goal of any marketer today should not be to provide a consumer/collaborator with *so many* packages or TV channels or publications that he/she must certainly be

of him or her at the right time and in the right place. This is neither *push* nor *pull*; it represents a complete symbiosis between producer, product, delivery channel, and buyer. It is marketing with the marketing part removed; if we must call it something, *transparency* seems like the right word. This would be the hallmark of a true collaboration—or, in today's terminology, of successful “consumer-centrism.”

THE OBSTACLES TO TRANSPARENT MARKETING

Now that we have arrived at a clearer understanding of where we are, and where we must go, let's start identifying ways that we can use the technologies at our disposal to get from here to there—leveraging them more fully to develop better strategic and tactical plans.

On the way to transparency, we must accelerate communication; to remove boundaries, we must start by reaching over them more frequently and in more places. For decades, our model has been to seek out collaborators only when we had a question—“Do you like a square package better than a rectangular one?” “Would you buy this product for \$2.30 or \$3.50?”

“Which message is most believable for this service?”

Implicit in this approach is the assumption that our customers and prospects have nothing to tell us when we have nothing to ask. The Internet—via telephones, PDAs, and laptops—has given us the ability to transcend that model; but so far, these media have

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able to find one that fits just right. The problematic word here is *find*—who has time for it? What company can afford to put that kind of burden on its supposed collaborators?

Rather, companies today must strive to put *the* product and/or service package that any single consumer is looking for in front



primarily been used to push conventional advertising and promotions at large groups of people, even as we call them “targets.” Sound familiar? That is not how one treats a collaborator!

We also need to question the model that says that only dollars and gifts can motivate consumers to collaborate with us. Companies must recognize that the most precious growth commodity they could possibly own is the thoughts of their customers, and that there are more ways than we typically imagine to inspire cooperation. Simply offering a quality interaction, for example, represents an investment in goodwill;

consumer-centric companies take customer service and satisfaction seriously, give back to their key communities, and strive to bring to market products and services that people believe live up to expectations. This leads to obtaining consumer-centric information that can drive strategic and tactical actions.

USING CONTENT TO FIND COLLABORATORS

The notion of content as an engine of growth at every level is at the core of one venue for communication that we find particularly promising: the online community. Though the word *community* is used in many ways

by different people, one core of online communities is shared interest—a passionate engagement with a subject that is related simply to symbiosis (enthusiasm for beer, wine, or pets) or to a more urgent human need (coping

on the business side of the equation. As marketers, we must cultivate the mindset, systems, and technologies that bring our insights to every level of the company. The best ideas for products and promotion often come from unlikely sources—those who do not “know better”; so creating a partnership with all of our internal collaborators is also key. We must make their use of our information as natural and seamless as our interactions with consumers/collaborators.

AS CONSUMERS GAIN ACCESS TO MORE AND MORE INFORMATION, THEIR PATIENCE WITH “SPIN” DWINDLES

with a life-threatening illness). However, the visitor’s attention and trust must be gained by creating and refreshing content on a subject that deeply engages our collaborators and leads to a high-quality experience. By doing so, we can get and hold their attention, learn what truly interests them, and count on them to come back for more—thereby creating targeted relationships that are built rather than paid for.

In short, we must recognize the danger of relying on hype to persuade. As consumers gain access to more and more information—ratings, reviews, and the like—about all kinds of products, their patience with “spin” dwindles. The company that insults my intelligence is also my collaborator and trusted source of goods? That just doesn’t add up, somehow, if our goal is to build relationships based on security and confidence—connections that will ultimately yield information to inform our actions.

By the same token, we must also be sure that we are creating the same transparency

BUILDING COLLABORATION MEANS BREAKING DOWN WALLS

These are just a few key steps that any company can take to push closer to consumer-centrism. Breaking down barriers—between all of our clients, consumer and otherwise—is the fundamental building block of a forward-thinking approach to marketing. If we do not share the process now, it may well be taken away from us in bits and pieces until it barely belongs to us at all. To do this, we can start by:

- **Reaching out more often and in more places:** Taking or making opportunities to extend a hand is key to creating relationships—and optimizing your success rate with new or existing products and services.
- **See quality interactions as a reward:** Creating satisfying interactions with your consumer/collaborators establishes the trust that can later be leveraged in the

search for insights. (It's also good business, plain and simple.)

- **Don't underestimate the value of content:** Articles and other knowledge about a subject that interests your target audience is an ideal way to attract interest and win trust—at a time when both are in short supply.
- **Be wary of hype:** You can sell via hype to fewer and fewer of the people each day ... and trying makes you look really bad.
- **Create transparency on the business side, too:** The same values that you apply to consumer-collaborators should also hold true for your internal clients—trust them and keep them informed.

Though the vision of a future where terms like *marketing* and *consumers* will be obsolete remains somewhat distant, moving now to meet that day—even to make it happen sooner—makes you a more formidable competitor in an increasingly crowded marketplace. ▀

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