



## **Community marketing – the future for marketing agencies?**

A recent report from Forrester entitled 'The Connected Agency' paints an interesting picture of the future of communications agencies. The Connected Agency is emerging with the specific aim of getting under the skin of its audiences to the point of membership, and only when it has attained the trust of a community can it introduce brands to them. Rules of engagement are changing, with social networking sites conquering the web, customer feedback sites squeezing out the corporate spin and TV on demand creating even more of a problem for above-the-line advertisers. At the same time, consumers are moving away from individualism and mass personalisation, instead seeking to create their own communities. These communities are created through shared values, passions, lifestyles, hobbies and interests. They transcend the boundaries of age, location and affluence, and, as such, are more meaningful and powerful to their members.

It is our duty to immerse ourselves in the communities that we ourselves feel part of. Only then can we understand their individual dynamics and the values that the community holds dear. Once we have established a genuine rapport, we can start to introduce our brands to them – only those brands which we are absolutely sure will be relevant and well received.

Now, at the very heart of what we do should be the needs of our community. We should all be armed with a checklist that ensures that these needs are effectively being met. What information do we need to give them to make sure that they make an educated decision on buying a product or service? How can we convey this information so that it is easy to digest? How can we support our community members in the purchasing process? How can we support them afterwards? And, how can we engage them in the process – before and after they become customers? It's a brave new world out there, and as marketers, this should be welcome news. Our tried and tested rigour in communicating in a timely, targeted and personal fashion should evolve nicely into a community marketing approach.

If we don't seize this new approach and embrace the proliferation of new channels to market, our brands are in danger of being controlled by the communities that buy them. Facebook and MySpace offer a platform for their communities to talk about and recommend their favourite brands. Great if you're popular, not so great if your product delivery is not up-to-scratch. Amazon reader reviews and ebay feedback ratings also place the balance of power right back into the hands of the consumer.

Mass marketing and traditional demographics simply will not have a place in modern advertising. The agencies that will out-perform their contemporaries over the next decade will be those who truly put the consumer at the heart of everything they do, seeing their role as identifying which brands to introduce to those communities and introducing them in a timely, appropriate and insightful fashion. Only then will we create an army of brand advocates and build powerful customer relationships that will sustain our brands now and for the future.

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