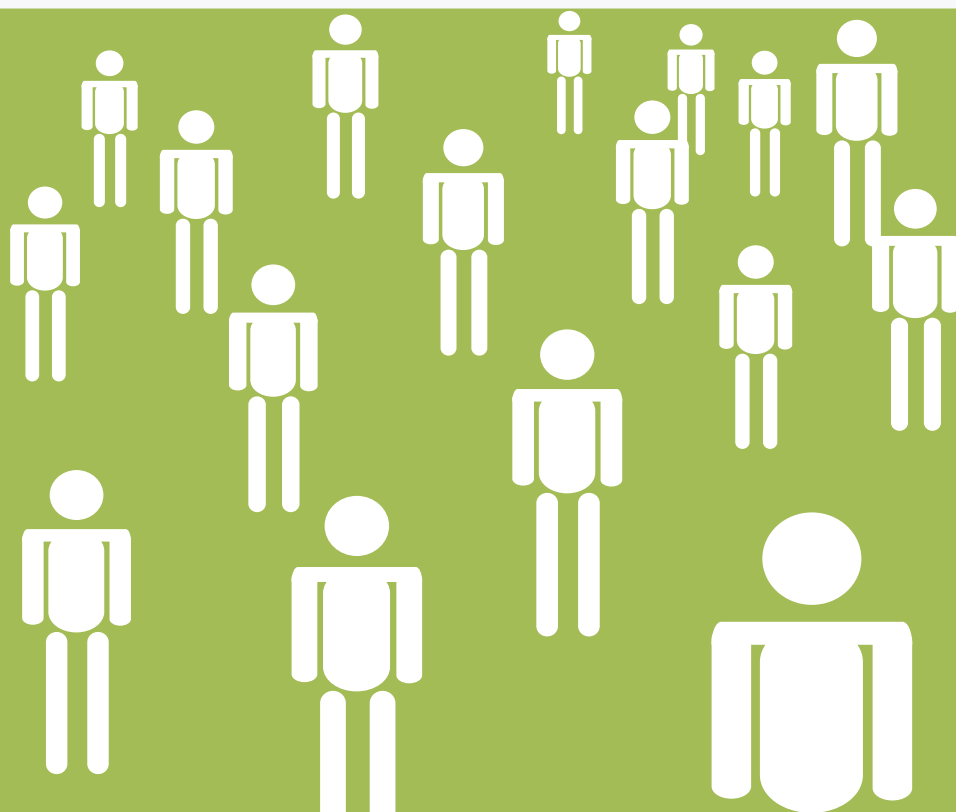
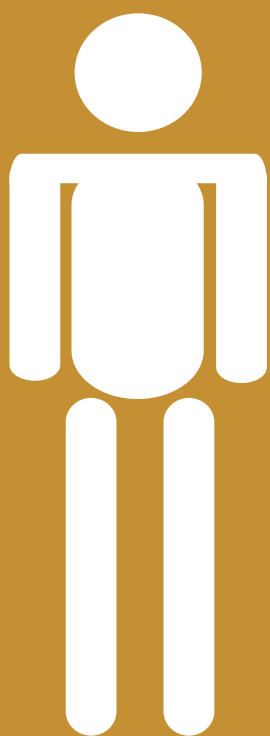


The Age of **Conversation**

100 voices. 1 conversation.

Edited by: Gavin Heaton & Drew McLellan
www.ageofconversation.com



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1 Conversation

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www.ageofconversation.com
2007



When we started calling for contributors to the book, we hoped that we would receive contributions from all over the world. As you can see from this Google Map, we have brought together geographically diverse viewpoints which have been matched by a diversity of opinion, thinking and approach.



The idea for this Google Map came from Matt Dickman who also contributed a chapter, “Technology is the Thread that Binds Conversation”. Matt also collated all the location data. View the live map at <http://www.google.com/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&hl=en&msa=0&msid=112007283041458612399.0000011309be086f1ded8&ll=14.264383,14.414063&spn=126.60206,291.796875&z=2&om=1>.

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The profits from the sale of this book go to Variety, the Children's Charity.

Dedication



The Age of Conversation is dedicated to the loving memory of Sandra Johnson Kerley (July 28, 1942 – April 1, 2007)

Sandra's life encapsulated principles that the marketing community values. So much of what makes this online conversation a rich experience stems from the practices we've learned offline: ideals ranging from sharing, listening and uniting to engaging others. When one of the marketing community's members — Christina Kerley ("CK") — lost her mother at the outset of this initiative, we decided to dedicate the book to the woman who serves as her role model. After all, these values reflect our own.

Be it her involvement in philanthropy, politics or education, Sandra was an active community-builder. While her gift was her ability to touch people through her personality, her passion was instilling values and inspiring people. The programs she spearheaded advanced and excited members to be a part of something they were equally responsible for creating and cultivating.

While Sandra's life was lost during the writing of this piece, her legacy lives on in the Age of Conversation.

Editors' Note

Ironically, it started as a casual conversation. In a blink it turned into *The Age of Conversation*!

We set ourselves a challenge — 100 authors. One topic. To our great relief (and joy) we received more submissions than we expected (103 in all) ... and then it hit us — there was serious work to be done to bring this project to fruition. In the first week we exchanged 50–100 emails a day — there were many questions to be discussed, agreed, confirmed and committed to. There were responses to contributors, some early submissions and some behind-the-scenes dramas. It all took time ... but we loved it ... and now we are pleased to present this collaborative work to you.

We believe that this is a world first. No matter whether you are holding this book in your hands or reading it on-screen, you can be certain of one thing — that your purchase of this book is going to help someone. Each and every contributor has waived their rights to royalties and all profits are to be donated to Variety, the Children's Charity ... so if you have somehow come across your copy of this book without purchase, we would encourage you to purchase a copy at our website at www.ageofconversation.com.

Our warmest thanks to everyone who contributed to this book. It literally would not be what it is without you all.

We would particularly like to thank the small group who helped kick start the process by volunteering to be involved (and for trusting us). This group included Christina (CK) Kerley, Valeria Maltoni, Emily Reed, Katie Chatfield, Greg Verdino, Mack Collier, Lewis Green, Sacrum, Ann Handley, Mike Sansone, Paul McEnany, Roger von Oech, Anna Farmery, David Armano, Bob Glaza, Mark Goren, Matt Dickman, Scott Monty and Richard Huntington. They encouraged and supported us with a flurry of emails, blog posts and discussions. David Armano went above and beyond by also doing the cover for us (and for keeping his word count in check).

We would also like to thank Roger Anderson from Modern Magellans Media who provided timely and invaluable advice on the intricacies of the self-publishing world; and David Reich who has kindly provided us with much needed PR support.

Finally, we would like to thank Christina Kerley (CK) who introduced the two of us and encouraged us to collaborate. Be forewarned. This certainly won't be our last!

Drew McLellan
Des Moines, Iowa, USA

Gavin Heaton
Sydney, Australia

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Keeping the Message Consistent

Roger Anderson

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Everyone has played the game of Telephone (AKA Chinese Whispers). The game starts with a line of people standing side-by-side or sitting next to each other. Someone whispers a phrase in the ear of the person at the end of the line. Then that person says what they heard to the next individual and so on down the line. At the end of the line, the last person reveals what they heard. The important point here is that each person says what they *heard*, not what was *said* to them. The final version of the message is often so different from the original that it usually generates laughter.

Getting people to *listen* and not just *hear* is an important step to improve communication. Hearing is passive. Listening is active. We cannot help hearing but we have to want to listen. Rewards can be offered and contests held, but people will never listen as intently as they do when they can feel the passion you have for your message. People who see what you see and feel what you feel become effective message owners. Having a clear and concise message improves retention and reach. Think of your reaction to the smell of smoke. You immediately recognize it, know what it means, and usually know the proper response. Smoke sends an unmistakable message — fire.

Dissemination is an active form of distribution; diffusion is passive. Dissemination means to sow seeds. In nature, all things tend to randomness and diffusion is a perfect example. The spread of ideas or concepts among disinterested people is a passive process that also tends towards randomness. A better way to retain message consistency throughout your company, group, or organization, is to disseminate the message by creating message owners at every level.

Seth Godin likes to say, “Ideas that spread win”. You may have a great concept, but if you want the idea to be a winner, others must be able to spread it around. Message owners may still misunderstand parts of it, but if they have the correct intent and enthusiasm for the message, they will be more effective at correctly communicating the meaning of the message. With the right delivery, there is also greater acceptance. Finally, the closer the message giver is to the receiver, the easier it is to be a passionate disseminator and not a passive broadcaster.

Scoring a Top Blog

Demonstrate Leadership, Build Readership and Earn High Ranks with Distinctive Content and Creative Features

Todd Andrlik

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Once you've joined the conversation and launched a blog, you'll soon start obsessing over statistics and rankings, such as those by Technorati, Alexa or the more segmented Power 150 ranking of top marketing blogs. Rankings are commonly based on incoming links, traffic, subscribers, personal opinion or some combination of these factors. While it will likely take several months before you start gaining momentum and earning top notches, there are two immediate areas — content and creativity — that deserve immediate attention to help you demonstrate leadership, build a devoted audience and eventually achieve high rankings.

Content — Within the content arena, three things seem to be most valued by readers — frequency, relevancy and quality. If you're not writing every day, a concerted effort to post content a few times per week will bring readers back for more. Personally, if I see a blogger hasn't written anything within the last two or three weeks, I'll assume they've given up on the blog or don't take it seriously enough for me to return. Bloggers can't be all things to all readers, so niche, segmented content typically translates to a bigger piece of the subscriber pie in your specific category. Just as companies attempt not to dilute brands with too many extensions, bloggers should not dilute their readership with too many distant topics. Finally, and most obviously, well-written content will go a long way in helping you attract and retain subscribers, but one additional content factor that weighs heavily on readers is length. Brief, pithy posts seem to be the bite-size reading preference for many subscribers.

Creative — There are oodles of ways to add creative elements to your blog, even if you're color blind or have no taste. A balanced color palette coupled with a clean, well-organized layout is essential; however, many readers will be pulling your content through RSS readers so content should take priority over creative design. Fortunately, there are many ways to be creative with your content, such as adding stock or custom graphics, or embedding video or audio clips in your posts. Be careful though as some RSS readers won't pick up embedded audio or video. Still, to me, there is nothing better than a short, topical video clip for breaking up the long, never-ending river of copy. Other in-post creative tactics include pull-out quotes, comic strips, graphs, scans of hand-written entries, links to an iTunes iMix, etc.

Bottom line, if you can sustain distinctive, quality content and incorporate creative building blocks, your blog will gain a loyal readership and hit the fast-track to top rankings.

From Aid to Opportunity

Afri-activism transitions into a new consumer market

G Kofi Annan

annansi.com/blog

Who can't remember the image of a sickly African child with flies buzzing around its nose while Sally Struthers pleads for viewers' help. That image, which defined the global community's perception of Africa(ns), was the result of interactions between governmental agencies and high-ranking businesses who rarely took into account the individual perspectives of the common African. But in this age where mobile technology and the Internet easily connect individuals from remote corners of the world, the voices of Africans have created a new image, exposed a new market, and changed the conversations about Africa and what can be referred to as Afri-activism — strategies where a person, group, or company engages Africa through aid and charity.

In today's Age of Conversation, popular sites like Global Voices Online, MySpace, and Hi5 have allowed Africans to broadcast their individual experiences worldwide and engage their foreign counterparts in conversations about solving Africa's societal issues. Tools such as blogs, Skype, and SMS are connecting consumers and accelerating the time it takes to exchange ideas and collaborate with Africans, changing the way developmental programs are organized. As more individuals communicate across cultural lines, their choices of products and services begin to reflect their new frame of mind. Conversations with Africans, and increased popularity of Africa in the media fueled by celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey's school for girls, and George Clooney's campaign against the continued genocide in Darfur, have added to social responsibility becoming a cultural norm.

A recent survey by GMI (Global Market Insite) of more than 15,000 online consumers in the US found that Americans place a high value on corporate community involvement. Businesses are now being forced to publicly re-define their social and environmental responsibility programs. Gone are the days when corporations could piece together a social responsibility program without direct engagement on all levels. With increased communication between individuals, consumers are more educated and critical of companies who develop programs that are uninspired. Today consumers require that businesses become active participants in community conversations both with the consumers themselves and recipients of aid; companies who exhibit a multi-layered Afri-activism program now enjoy a strengthened brand image. As programs become successful, businesses can begin to take advantage of new opportunities within a more accessible African market. As the ubiquity of technology continues, we are sure to see social enterprise, Afri-activism, and Africa as a whole reap the benefits of the Age of Conversation.

The Relationship Renaissance

David Armano

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If the original Renaissance invented the individual, then this one can reinvent the collective — Douglas Rushkoff, *Get Back in the Box*.

If you haven't noticed, the way we live is gradually changing. Some say this is a digitally fueled revolution. The power has shifted from the few to the many. Those who once had power and influence now have to share it with the masses. In some ways what we are witnessing is a form of revolution, though it's not the violent kind. It's slow and steady. Others have described the changes as a natural progression of the state of humanity/technology. Technology has enabled us to meet our very human wants, needs and desires in new ways. This viewpoint also carries credibility as you can make the case that our behavior is simply evolving over time thanks to recent advancements.

But are we also seeing another Renaissance unfold before our very eyes? A Renaissance built off of us discovering each other? A Renaissance composed of a human Web woven through shared knowledge, interests, creativity, and yes conversation? Is it simply a resurgence of connectedness and an answer to this question:

Am I alone?

The answer is no. *You are not alone*. There are millions of people out there, just like you. You play an integral role in the Relationship Renaissance. You matter. At the core this is it. This is why everyone is making such a big fuss over the "conversation economy". Even if you aren't an active participant, you hear the voices. They come out of nowhere. They talk to each other using text, voice and even three-dimensional representations of themselves. They listen. It's not a virtual world — it's virtual relationships. And these relationships are very real, often times starting digitally and continuing in the physical space.

What sparked the original Renaissance? Some historians speculate that the "Black Death" had something to do with it. The theory is that the plague caused individuals to focus on the quality of their lives on earth in addition to the afterlife. As a result, art and science exploded with the help of Greek and Arabic knowledge.

Maybe our own "Black Death" has been business as usual. In Advertising. In Business. In our everyday lives. To be called a "Renaissance Man" means that you possess multidisciplinary talents. Today's Renaissance men and women combine skills in personal publishing, podcasting, virtual worlds and other kinds of digital disciplines — which connect, converse, and ultimately allow us to relate.

The Relationship Renaissance is about one thing at the end of the day. Relating — to both each other, as well as brands. Can you relate?

How To Be Happy

Steve Bannister

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As much as the six and a half billion of us have different hopes, dreams and fears, we are all inevitably pursuing the same thing: **happiness**. This pursuit may involve satisfying our most basic need to survive or it may involve satisfying a more philosophical need to understand our existence. Whatever the case, once our basic needs are met, the following question remains: how do we attain this elusive state called happiness?

There has been a dramatic increase in the study of happiness in the past ten years with psychologists such as Martin Seligman leading the way. Seligman is well known as one of the main contributors to the field of Applied Positive Psychology, which is the major area for happiness studies. Seligman's book *Authentic Happiness* (2002) provides an insightful analysis of what it means to be happy. Other fascinating and more recent books on happiness include Daniel Gilbert's, *Stumbling on Happiness* (2006) and Jonathan Haidt's, *The Happiness Hypothesis* (2006).

The pursuit of happiness can be likened to the pursuit of the perfect diamond. Imagine the essence of each of us represented by a rough diamond. If the four Cs Diamond Guide (*cut, color, clarity* and *carat*) refers to the universal method of determining the value of a diamond, then the following four Cs Happiness Guide provides a template for happier living.

Cut: The perfect cut of a diamond will reveal its true brilliance. Cutting out toxic situations in your life (such as toxic foods and emotionally damaging relationships) will foster greater happiness.

Color: Diamonds come in an assortment of colors. Understanding your true color is like understanding your true strengths. Your happiness expands in proportion to how often you utilize your strengths.

Clarity: A diamond's brilliance is derived from the reflecting and refracting of light: the clearer the diamond, the greater the sparkle. Your happiness increases as your life's purpose becomes clearer.

Carat: Some diamonds are simply larger and therefore sparkle more brilliantly than others sparkle. Always remember to be grateful for what you have and give back whenever you can. This will help you become a happier person.

So there you have it, a happiness manifesto of sorts or maybe even a happiness reality check. May you always keep these guidelines in mind as you learn more about your own true happiness. Remember that happiness is available to all of us: we just need to know where to look.

Face-to-Avatar

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As a sixteen year old in 1999, the Internet served as the edgy make-believe world for me and my giggling cohort. Together, we occasionally indulged our curiosity by trying on sassy personalities, older ages — even the opposite sex.

Now, the general public plays virtual dress-up everyday, privately but zealously developing a virtual personality. But as online recreation becomes the norm, and a digital life that was once part-time fantasy spills into full-time reality, a pesky question nags at me — is face-to-face contact being neglected?

Imagine these perhaps eerily familiar scenarios:

1. Boyfriend and girlfriend sit side-by-side on couch. A TV show sparkles in the background asking viewers to text their vote for *America's Next Fairy Godmother*. Both parties sit with feet up, laptop on legs. Girlfriend decorates her screen with six IM windows as she feverously plays her keyboard, simultaneously scoffing at the screen and murmuring to herself. Ears adorned with white earbuds, boyfriend seems consumed with (in no particular order) the TV program, his podcast, and an old college friend's MySpace profile.
2. A coffee shop equipped with wireless Internet (not free). Computer screens obscure drone-like patrons, making their faces appear as furrowed eyebrows and silver nose-less rectangles with open apple-shaped mouths. Eyes materialize from time to time, but only to contemptuously scan the room when the soft purr of a human voice wafts across the air.
3. Ending a relationship circa 1997: Cut ex's head out of all photos, change speed-dial. Circa 2007: Change relationship status to "single" on Facebook (accompanied by a broadcasted broken heart icon), delete wall postings and comments from ex, untag common pictures on all social photo sites.

How much time do you spend preening your avatar when you might be cultivating flesh and blood bonds? Video killed the radio star. Email hijacked greeting cards. Now the social web is flogging face time.

There's no denying it, the wired world has enabled barrier-crossing conversation. The enthusiast compulsively crafts intoxicating content while his admirer, forever connected from either the other side of the Atlantic or the espresso machine, posts a comment. However, as passion and fascination lures more of us into the virtual world, we are losing the willpower to look up and unplug.

And just like that, eye contact joins MS-DOS and dial-up in the Land of the Obsolete.

Getting Past the Conversation Bottleneck

Cam Beck

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According to Technorati, there were 75 million blogs by early 2007, and there are 130,000 more created every day. About 33% of them are written in English. That's almost 25 million blogs. The number we've read is *statistically insignificant*. As if to rub it in, the mainstream Media gleefully points out that blogs have a median readership of one.* In the aggregate, the blogosphere is positively chaotic.

According to Malcolm Gladwell, humans are capable of maintaining about 150 meaningful relationships at once.**

Thoughtfully reading blogs takes a commitment similar to relationships, for they require we actually care about what the author writes to the point that we are capable of citing the content appropriately and in context. Just by reading someone's blog, we become a part of the conversation.

Attempts to conserve time by winnowing down our daily reading list to only the "Blogs that Matter" earn us a one-way ticket to Groupthink — that dreary old prison cell decorated with embellished resumes, outdated textbooks, and Tony Robbins motivational cassette tapes. Isn't there another way?

Some fine people have endeavored to help us find good blogs by creating and maintaining various lists of worthwhile sites: Mack Collier, Gavin Heaton, Todd And. But even those lists have their limits. We already have to read the influential blogs to understand what everyone else is talking about, and the other lists ... Well ... We have to choose from 25 million! Surely we're not so conceited to believe we have the unchanging list of only the best writers.

Ah! But we're talking about a specific type of blog, which narrows the list considerably. Not only that, but the people we seek are marketers, so it stands to reason that those we find are known to us specifically because they are good at their jobs, which gives our decision to read their articles an air of credibility. They must be good at what they do.

Still, I can't shake the feeling that we're missing something important. With our heads buried in the familiar, we forget to look up and notice everybody is saying the same thing. A vibrant community demands we force ourselves to stir the pot, even if it makes us uncomfortable.

Some measure of order is inevitable. Without it, the industry would never achieve focus. However, we must regularly force ourselves to peek beyond the curtain and challenge our way of thinking. A little chaos goes a long way.

* Daniel Cho, "10 Things Your Blogger Won't Tell You Smartmoney.com.

** Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, Back Bay Books, New York, p 179, referring to research performed by Robin Dunbar.

Using the Tools of the Web to Build Relationships Online

Jordan Behan

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In the online world, there are limitless options you can use for your company's marketing.

A good web presence starts with your website; your base of operations. The words you use to represent yourself are incredibly important; even visual learners need to know that there is some substance behind the pretty pictures. The copy on your website should tell a story about you, even though it's not actually about you. It's about your visitors, and you should speak to them accordingly.

When you conduct business in person, you listen intently to your customers and answer all of their questions. There's no reason why your website can't do the same in your absence. I firmly believe that sharing plenty of information about your business, your people and your process will attract even more customers. Skip the mission statements and the brochure-style hard sell. Focus on the same issues that people raise when they have a chance to ask you in person, and your website will become a tool that helps them make the decision to buy from you.

Your blogging strategy should work this way too. Mix in healthy doses of personality and a focus on value for your readers, and you will eventually develop a loyal following. Where possible, let all of the people in your company have a say. Your front-line staff and engineers have as much to offer as the marketers, and some of your site visitors are dying to hear from them.

Offsite, there are other ways you can connect with potential customers and friends, if you take the right approach. There are countless social networks and advertising options out there, but if you misuse them you can overstay your welcome very quickly. Simply belonging to the latest social network isn't a web strategy in and of itself. No matter what the channel is, you have to be aware that you are merely joining your friends at their party, on their terms. You must become an active community member, replying to any messages or questions that you receive, and contributing value. If you're not prepared to do this, then perhaps you should choose another avenue.

These days it's hip to join a social network and compile contacts faster than you ever thought possible, but if you want to keep them as friends, then you must be transparent in any marketing that you do, and most importantly, be yourself.

The Ageless Age

David Berkowitz

www.marketersstudio.com

The hallmark of the Age of Conversation is its agelessness — its defiance of ageing. As more conversations migrate to digital formats, they cease to occur at a fixed point in time and open themselves to perennial participation. These digital conversations also grow in complexity in three ways in particular:

1. **Format:** Most conversations documented online are text-based. Some include imagery — illustrations, photographs, charts. Concurrently, podcasts and digital audio have added actual voices to the conversations. Video has added yet another dimension, and this experience will continue to get richer over time.
2. **Participation:** As people find it easier to take part in conversations — including finding them, responding, and starting their own — then the conversations spiral in manifold directions. Content that's not part of a conversation becomes increasingly rare.
3. **Time:** As digital communication technology improves and becomes more pervasive, the volume of conversations recorded skyrockets with every year. Meanwhile, more conversations from the past are digitized and searchable, such as archived television programs, letters and historic documents.

Mitigating the complexity is the technology that makes the conversations more accessible, whether through search or discovery. With search, conversations are accessed when they're relevant to a given query. With discovery, one follows a web of responses or related conversations that connect to any content that's accessed.

Increasingly, the factor that's least important in these conversations is the immediacy of the exchange. The more that conversations are digitized and the more accessible they are through search and discovery, the longer their shelf life. Conversations can continue years after they begin, with participants incorporating disparate forms of content that were previously unconnected.

As conversations shed their ephemeral nature, their producers will come to alter how the conversations are constructed. There will be an expectation that conversations have no ending point, and that they may one day come to incorporate ideas from the past and the future. The present is thus when a conversation is accessed, not when it is created.

It's in this Age of Conversation that the Fountain of Youth has at last been realized, both for the conversations and for their contributors.

Here's to the Capital C Conversation

Susan Willett Bird

www.wf360.typepad.com/about-blog.htm

I'm impressed to the nines with the hip, urbane exchanges initiated by my fellow bloggers who dominate the "conversation space" in blog-land and muse there in rich variety. They talk — entertainingly, provocatively so — on how conversation is the essence of marketing in today's commercial universe. Their cleverness on a breathtakingly wide spectrum of topics impresses the bejeesus out of me.

My particular fascination with conversation is slightly distanced from the timeliness of their exchanges. Perhaps old-fashioned. But everything old is new again, right? Telling others about companies and products and brands that impress us — because we feel so compellingly in sympathy with what they stand for — is what people used to do before television, even radio. It reflects what my father called the "marketplace culture of the backyard fence".

I'm convinced that each of us is a reflection of all the conversations in our life, from the time we uttered our first words ... to right now. So if that series of conversations has made us what we are, we should pay attention to how we spend our conversational time. Because with whom and about what we choose to converse literally shapes our lives.

So what makes a conversation *great* as opposed to anything less? I believe it's that the participants come to such a conversation *with the intent to be changed by it*. They come prepared to listen in a way that will reveal a perspective, an insight, a fact that eluded them until now. This is conversation with a capital C.

How ironic that we call ours the Age of Conversation. Between Louis XIII's reign and the French Revolution a group of extraordinarily accomplished French noblewomen developed salons in which conversation was elevated to an art. It was in these salons where the novel was developed as a literary form. Skill at conversing — and listening — became a model for the ideal of sophisticated, pleasurable living. It was the first Age of Conversation.

Today's technology makes it possible to engage in provocative conversation that, absent the rigid code of 17th and 18th century salons, has nonetheless begun to shape a kind of exchange that reflects a new manner of speaking. Unlike the strictly gated salons of Madame Lafayette and her peers, everyone, regardless of pedigree, is invited into the Internet salons. But, similar to the circles developed by those awesome French arbiters of taste, today's conversational participants are welcome so long as they remain interesting.

Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose.

Speaking Through Action

Mark Blair

www.smoblog.com

By the time you're done reading this page, there will be about a hundred new blogs on the Internet. If each new post to the blogosphere over the past year were sugar cubes, you could line them up all the way from New York to San Francisco and still have near a hundred million of them in your pocket when you got there.

This formidable amount of intercommunication is intimidating. How do you introduce yourself, your ideas or your products into a conversation with so many distinct voices?

Target your attention. Learn to use Technorati and del.icio.us. Subscribe to RSS feeds for tags reflecting relevant topics. Use these to pinpoint the blogs that are having the conversations that you need to be a part of. This is your community.

Do more listening than talking. Engage in these blogs, but in doing so ask a lot of questions. Silence your inner monologue and put aside your expectations.

Think of yourself as an anthropologist. Your goal is to understand the dynamics at work in your community. Make it a habit to look beneath the conversations to try and deduce the feelings that underpin them. What motivates these people? What are they passionate about?

Invest extra time in studying the most influential bloggers in your realm. What are they doing that's making them so popular? Browse their archives from the beginning and follow their journey, post by post. What did they do that attracted people? How did they become social magnets?

Identify your community's needs. Using what you learned, brainstorm about what would benefit those that compose your community. There is almost certainly something that you can do for them that fulfills a need. Ignore your agenda completely. Think exclusively of what would make their lives easier, better, or more entertaining.

People used to use rocks instead of hammers. Can you improve upon anything that they already use?

Contribute selflessly. Slash your advertising budget and spend the money building something that matters to the people that matter to you. Invest in your community.

Invite feedback from the bloggers that you've been following. If it's something of true value, they'll be the first to tell you — and their readers. Speak through action and the conversation will come to you.

Technology Is Recreating Business Intimacies

Toby Bloomberg

www.divamarketingblog.com

Customers from India, Canada, New Zealand and Europe. Technology swings open the doors to a global marketplace. Our cyberspace offices and storefronts keep the lights on 24/7/365 allowing us to conduct business with a mere click and an Internet connection. Life is good. Or is it?

In their rush to enter this new environment companies often sacrificed personal connections with their customers and other stakeholders. Understanding the individual needs of a growing and often geographically dispersed customer based is not an easy or inexpensive undertaking.

Attempting to service and engage customers, some organizations turned to non-traditional solutions including: out sourced online service “chat reps” who often had limited understanding of the business’s culture; interactive websites that flashed messages that were pretty but of little value; and email tactics where questions were gobbled up by cyberspace gremlins who, of course, never responded back.

Misunderstanding and brand devaluation were frequently outcomes of *non-relationship service*. Customers wanted high touch along with convenience of immediate access to information. Even businesses with only a local focus were being challenged with how to stay connected to their clients.

About this time a strange dichotomy began to occur in the world of virtual business. The technology, that fostered impersonalization, was being used to create “corner grocery store relationships”. Through funny little websites called blogs companies began to engage with their customers in *people-to-people* conversations. Those conversations occurred not with the marketing, PR, tech support “departments” but with *people* within those departments who shared common interests and passions. The exchange was richer, deeper and more satisfying relationships for both customer and company.

When we get to know people more than product information is usually exchanged. That’s exactly what happened online. Stories about personal interest from wine to family vacation were “blogged”. Photos were shared. Relationships that were as intimate and important as those created by neighborhood green grocers were being formed.

Through social media marketing initiatives — blogs, podcasts, vlogs, mash-up communities, social book marking and photo sharing organizations were rediscovering that the corner grocery store relation was attainable in an online environment and more important than ever before to foster and maintain.

“It’s not personal, Sonny. It’s strictly business”, said Michael Corleone to his brother. However, the son of the Godfather was wrong. Dead wrong. Business is personal. Technology is fueling the emotional engagement that leads to long-term customer interactions.

Conversation and the Crumbling Wall Between Journalism and PR

David Brazeal

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Journalists don't do public relations, and public relations people don't do journalism. That's the line we've always drawn, but it's not the way things must be in an Age of Conversation. If you're doing PR without doing journalism, you're missing a wonderful opportunity to use creative, credible storytelling to earn the trust of the people you want to engage.

Admittedly, when one-way, mass communication ruled the media landscape, the strong division between journalism and PR made sense. None of us had time to weed out the trustworthy PR claims from the ridiculous ones, so we let journalists do that for us. It was easier to generalize — journalism is believable, and PR is suspect.

Over time, that generalization convinced many publicists that people would never believe them, no matter what. So they made things worse by throwing all pretence of objectivity out the window. Their press releases became tools for tricking journalists into lending even the silliest story credibility by covering it.

But in an Age of Conversation, PR professionals can win back the credibility they have ceded to journalists and they can do it by practicing journalism themselves. PR specialists don't have to piggyback on a "real" journalist's reputation, because the Internet allows them to directly reach the people they want to engage. And thanks to the social interaction and instant feedback of the Web, communicators can establish their own credibility in an online community by telling genuine, engaging stories that people want to hear.

Projects like Microsoft's Channel 9 or political candidate blogs are not so different from the advocacy journalism of National Review or Mother Jones. They are vehicles for telling stories, without trying to hide the agenda behind those stories. Even less influential companies and non-profit organizations are using principles of journalism to tell their own stories — from a small zoo reaching out to visitors, to a Lutheran seminary producing theological talk shows online.

It's all possible because the online conversation gives anyone — even PR specialists — the opportunity to interact with people, build rapport and establish trust. Being a journalist does not necessarily mean giving up your point of view. It means disclosing your point of view up front, and telling honest stories in engaging ways to interested people.

Conversations and the Customer Experience

Becky Carroll

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The customer experience can be viewed as a series of conversations, or “touch points”, that occur throughout the customer’s lifecycle. Each conversation contributes to the customer’s opinion of our organization. The conversations should differ to address customer needs at the time of the conversation. If we manage each customer conversation this way, we manage the customer experience.

In many instances, the customer doesn’t experience any conversation at all! The conversation either doesn’t change, or stops completely once a prospect becomes a customer. The majority of companies, especially those catering to consumers, assume marketing’s role is complete once a prospect becomes a customer; they hand over the “conversation” reins to customer service.

Customer self-service is then touted as a great way for customers to quickly accomplish their tasks, whether it is checking out at the supermarket or answering a question about their computer. However, not all customers want this convenience. Some customers just want to interact with a human being! Technology is inadvertently taking conversation out of the experience in the name of “efficiency” or “cutting costs”. This degrades the customer experience and negatively impacts the long-term customer relationship.

There are times when a conversation is expected. As I go through the check-out line at a store, at a minimum I expect the cashier to greet me and tell me what I owe. What is my customer experience when the cashier never makes eye contact or speaks to me? Another example is a customer spending a lot of money with an organization. They expect to have personal conversations at all touch points. Their customer experience will be positive when they are recognized as a valued customer and are spoken to using their own business language and terminology.

A key part of managing each conversation is to understand the customer lifecycle. We need to look at ourselves through the eyes of the customer. Do they need to buy something? Are they already a customer? Are they referring others to us? Are they considering leaving us? The conversation should change depending on the customer’s perspective and combined experiences.

We must recognize the needs of our customers first and foremost. We do this by understanding the key motivators behind their behaviors (not just demographics and psychographics). By putting on “customer lenses”, we see how customers want to be treated, how they want to be talked to, and how we can improve the conversation at each customer touch point to best meet their needs. So equipped, we can carry on successful customer conversations in marketing, customer service, sales, corporate blogs, and other key touch points using the customer’s language to create a fabulous customer experience.

Branded Communitainment

What's the brand role within a community of interest?

Katie Chatfield

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Who would have thought that in the new Millenium we would spend our time corresponding (IM, SMS, email), crafting socially nuanced calling cards (MySpace), keeping diaries, cataloguing memories like pressed flowers and contributing to the largest patchwork quilt of self expression the world has ever seen?

“The User Revolution”, released by Piper Jaffray in February 2007, calls this a new type of activity: communitainment.

While I'm not sure that sharing experiences, common interests and conversation is such a breakthrough way of spending time, the Internet is a platform for brands to create affinity by facilitating communication, providing and prompting entertainment and hosting a community.

How do you uncover the role for a brand in this environment? It's hosting that's the key.

The brand's role is to host a get-together. Swing open your doors, send out the invitations, arrange the entertainment and prompt the guests to provide the conversation. Invest in your most engaged consumers.

The Internet can allow a brand to host a salon, a sewing circle, a BBQ, a prom night — it's up to you. What do you stand for? What do your people care about? What does the space look like where these come together?

Create a branded experience of your promise.

A great host is known for providing quality to the taste of the attendees. Care about what your audience cares about. Be consistent.

A host doesn't stand on a podium and dominate the conversation. Greg Icenhower from P&G has said: “We've been voted the best marketer of the 20th Century. But that's because we were the biggest shouters. In the 21st Century, we want to be the best listeners”. Be interactive.

There's another quality of a great host. If there's another party across town, where the people that you want to spend time with are invited to, don't try to steal them away. Prove your relevance, turn up, be entertaining and provide a huge helping of brand values. Be useful.

Hopefully people will walk away from you with great stories to tell and maybe they'll want come back to hang out with you again, invite their friends back. Make sure you have party favors. Reward attention.

Communitainment is as much about the out-takes as the inputs. You'll learn a lot by paying attention and building actionable intelligence.

Learn the moves and lead the dance.

Brands: prepare your house for a party.

Brevity and Levity — Key Spices in the Conversation Soup

Tony D Clark
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Think back to some of the best conversations you've had — at a cocktail party, cook-out or your kids' soccer game. No trying to be "on", just a good talk.

Now think about someone you consider a great conversationalist. Someone you really enjoy talking to.

Chances are, if you're like most people, those conversations consisted of short exchanges with plenty of wit. Your great conversationalist probably talked very little — and when they did, it was short, poignant additions (a dash of brevity) with some humor (a pinch of levity) that kept the conversation enjoyable.

Those are the conversations most folks remember. Aside from deep or emotional talks, conversations with lightness and concise sharing of ideas tend to stick with us the most. We gain the key ideas and remember the person we talked to.

The way spices can add flavor and make or break a dish — adding brevity and levity to your conversation can make it more memorable. They dress up a conversation and make it more personal.

We already have a word for long boring talks — and it's not "conversation". That's what we call a lecture.

In the Age of Conversation, you have a choice — life of the party, or lecturer.

Who would you rather be?

Communicating Our Way to User-Centered Library Service

Emily Clasper

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The emphasis of Library and Information Science is rapidly shifting from providing access to information to a new focus on providing user-centered services. Library customers are quickly transforming from consumers of pre-determined content into empowered collaborators who want to be active participants in creating the services they enjoy. They have developed an expectation that retailers will provide individualized service and be responsive to their demands, and both expect and deserve to have their concerns addressed and expectations met by their libraries.

In the past ten years, information needs have changed dramatically. Librarians and other Information Professionals who have traditionally served their patrons by selecting, organizing, and providing access to materials and information now find that their customers need a different brand of professional assistance. Information is no longer scarce and difficult to access. These days, information is available in excess, and access has been made easy — perhaps too easy. The problem now lies in narrowing down too much easily accessible information as well as finding strategies for interpreting and using the information effectively. In addition, as the Social Web gains power, information needs also may increasingly include education in creating and dispersing information responsibly and effectively.

Librarians and other service-oriented professionals must stop viewing communication with our customers as a top-down, broadcast press-release model. We need to stop talking to patrons and begin talking with them. Reaching out to current and potential library users and engaging them in conversation is the only way we will be able to adapt libraries in the face of our customer's changing information needs. We cannot attempt to design and deliver services that are all about them without maintaining an open, honest dialog with our communities.

Four things we can do to open up communication:

1. Initiate sustainable conversations: Find ways to reach our customers on their own terms, within their comfort zone.
2. Listen to our customers: Really *listen*.
3. Implement change based on feedback: Let go of our fear of criticism and avoid getting defensive. If your customers think it's broken, it is. So fix it.
4. Respect our customers: Don't preach or talk down to them (or try to turn them into librarians!), and avoid library jargon. Speak their language! And most of all, be honest, open, and real.

Initiating a meaningful dialog with our customers may be the only way to advance library service, grow the profession, attract new customers, and retain current ones.

“Let’s See That Again!”

A Simple Formula to Create Remarkable Conversations from Your Remarkable Corporate Video

Tom Clifford

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Are people talking about your corporate video? Does it make them think differently? Feel a certain way? Move them to act? If not ...

Imagine these ten essential elements in your corporate video creating remarkable conversations for you, your team, product, services or even your entire company.

1. *Think STORY*

We are “hard-wired” to tell stories, so take your audience on a journey. We love a beginning, a middle and an end. Save your corporate numbers for the annual report.

2. *Think ONE*

There is only one person you need to think about when making your corporate video: the person in front of the tube. Period.

3. *Think TIMELESS*

A powerful story is timeless and magical; it does not get stale. It has “shelf-life”. Think: return on investment.

4. *Think REAL*

People know what is real and what is not. Authenticity works. Show it.

5. *Think QUALITY*

Hire the most qualified producer and director you can; one who understands exactly what you are trying to accomplish.

6. *Think “E”*

“E” = emotion, energy, enthusiasm, engaging. Video captures emotions and energy unlike any other medium. Use it wisely. Keep your charts, PDFs and spread sheets away from video. Please.

7. *Think CUSTOMER*

Your customers can tell your story, too. Invite them into your video to help tell your story.

8. *Think PLAY*

Does your video have “playful” moments? Even the most reserved companies have opportunities to capture some fun and playfulness. Capture “playful” moments and your video will outshine the others.

9. *Think THIRTY*

Change your pace, rhythm and content every 30 seconds. You can make your ten-minute film feel like five minutes with this little trick.

10. *Think HERO*

Recruit your employees as your storytellers. Call them “heroes”. Given the chance, many employees want to tell their story. They want to change the world by sharing their journey. What they need is the opportunity and the chance. Go ahead ... give it to them!

Breaking Marketing Barriers from the Top of a Harley

How companies can better understand their customers, by joining them

Mack Collier

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Willie Davidson, the Chief Styling Officer at Harley-Davidson, was once asked if the company makes any special efforts to better understand its customers. Davidson replied that the motorcycle maker was in constant contact with its customers, because they rode with them all the time.

What may at first seem like a flippant response, actually makes perfect business sense. What better way to understand your customers, than by using your product with them in their space? When Davidson rides his Harley with fellow Harley owners, he is able to not only experience the motorcycle as other owners do, but to also share that experience with them. The company/customer barrier is removed, and Willie instead becomes a member of the community of Harley riders.

Why is this so important? Because people don't trust advertising, they trust each other. And companies can't market their products effectively if they don't understand their customers' wants and needs. When a company begins to interact with its customers in their space, they begin to communicate with them. This communication leads to understanding. And when a company better understands the wants and needs of its customers, it can more effectively market its products to them. And more efficient marketing is cheaper marketing.

Willie knows that he could spend thousands of dollars on marketing research and surveys that would be designed to tell him more about Harley-Davidson's customers. Or he could simply hit the open highway with fellow Harley owners, and become a part of their community. He could hear first hand what fellow Harley owners liked and disliked about their motorcycle. He could better explain Harley Davidson's products and marketing. By communicating, both parties have a better understanding of each other.

The problem is that in many cases there are two communities; the company, and its customers. Each community has its own wants and needs, and its own way of talking to each other. As a result, neither group really understands or trusts the other.

But when a company makes an effort to join its customers in its space, that barrier begins to fall. The ideas and language of the company begins to seep into the customers' space. Likewise, the thoughts and opinions of the customers start to become understood by the company, and shape its marketing messages. Slowly, the line that divides a company from its customers begins to disappear.

Eventually, conducting market research can become as simple as riding a Harley with your friends. Wouldn't that be nice?

Using Social Media to Deepen Brand Engagement

Peter Corbett

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Social media is not new. It is one of the oldest concepts in human history — from our days using cave walls to express and share ideas to chatting about TV shows around a water cooler, we have always created and shared using various means. However, as applied to interactive communications, social media has garnered significant and increasing attention from brands, politicians, authors, artists and beyond. Social media in its digital form represents hitherto impossible economies of scale and efficiency for the dissemination of information.

For example, we can post an article, upload a commercial or engage in other forms of content creation, knowing our one act of publishing is enough to reach the entire Internet population — as long as our content is published in a way that promotes sharing. This is an important fact for us to consider at Blattner Brunner – we view the social media landscape as the space within which our client’s target audiences will find the deepest level of engagement with their brand. Producing a campaign with Social Media Optimization (SMO) included enables us to reach a much broader group of people — including reaching folks we never may have know would be interested in our client’s brand.

The following three principles are included as a guide to help you when you’re thinking about how to deepen brand engagement via social media:

1. *Encourage content creation:* Whether it’s asking users to mash-up your commercial or design a new look for your product, inviting your customers to collaborate with your brand is a powerful call to action that content creators and sharers alike cannot ignore.
2. *Allow for content to travel:* By simply integrating a social bookmarking widget like www.addthis.com, we enable content to post to del.icio.us, Technorati, Digg, MyYahoo and many other social media hubs. Publish once and let the reader spread the word from there.
3. *Engender authenticity:* By marking a campaign social media friendly, we’re inviting conversation. If our audience engages us in this conversation, we had better be as straight-forward and honest as possible. No one wants to engage with someone (or a brand especially) only to find out that they’ve been deceived.

Ultimately, our user forward-able, mash-able, comment-able, rate-able, embed-able branded content will navigate the social media pool, and eventually deliver better informed, better engaged customers who are open to ongoing dialog.

Art of Conversations

Chris Corrigan

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If talking openly means being willing to expose others to what is inside of us, then listening openly means being willing to expose ourselves to something new from others — Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems*, p 73.

It is almost impossible to describe what it is like to listen from the heart. We easily talk about “speaking from the heart” or making a “heartfelt” appeal, and we recognize this in someone who is deeply and honestly communicating their truth. One becomes solid in a way that is out of the ordinary. One feels anchored and firm in conviction and confident of the words one is using. It is sometimes accompanied with tears or other hints of emotion but at one’s core there is a steadiness that appears almost otherworldly. One develops a sense of mutuality with the other, and the boundaries begin to blur.

It is by no means a run of the mill state of being for most of us, but it is far more common than its attendant skill — heartfelt listening.

If it is possible to speak from the very centre of one’s being, what does it feel like to listen from that place, to listen, as the Dalai Lama says, “with the heart?”. How do we cultivate that in daily life?

To create new realities, we have to listen reflectively. It is not enough to be able to hear clearly the chorus of other voices; we must also hear the contribution of our own voice. It is not enough to be able to see others in the picture of what is going on; we must also see what we ourselves are doing. It is not enough to be observers of the problem situation; we must also recognize ourselves as actors who influence the outcome — Kahane, p 83.

Conversations — real conversations, between people sharing the same time and space — are humanity’s most profound invention. You would be hard pressed to find anything going in the world, past or present, that didn’t have its genesis in sincere and open conversation between two or more people.

The web invites us to notice the power of connection and it challenges us to do something with that connection, to extend it back into real world conversation using the age old tools of making a difference — speaking from the heart and listening for understanding to propel real change and deep transformation in our world.

Seven Ways to Start a Conversation with Advertising

Ed Cotton

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The masters of Madison Avenue spent the last century using one-way communication to push products at people. In a world with three television networks and no remote control, consumers were captives — and advertisers and their agency friends took full advantage.

Now, it's payback time.

Today, people are actively going out of their way to avoid advertising.

Advertising as we once knew it is fast becoming a relic.

The only way back is for the ad industry to grab some humility and learn the art of conversation.

Here are seven ways to start a conversation with advertising.

1. Think bigger than an ad

Find a purpose that's bigger than the brand. Does your brand have a movement it stands behind, something it believes in and it wants others to engage in and talk about? This isn't about PR spin, but finding a cause and a big idea to get behind.

2. Celebrate great products with creativity

You should be comparing your communication to the best in entertainment, not the best in advertising. Get your communication talked about.

3. Create mechanisms to let the consumer "in"

Provide forums, opportunities for conversation. This means more than users creating your ads. Let them have a say in how products are created, and please listen!

4. Add utility to your brand experiences.

What can they do above and beyond their product that adds value to their consumers' lives?

5. Surprise.

Surprise people; allow them to play and interact with your communication.

6. Take risks

You won't get talked about if you don't take risks.

7. The product matters

Advertising can no longer provide a smokescreen for a bad product. If your product is bad, it will generate conversation, but not the kind of conversation you are looking for.

The future of the ad business is about learning to talk to human beings, not consumers or targets, and understanding how to make them partners in a conversation.

The Dawn of Shared Consciousness

Luc Debaisieux

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Darwin initiated a brainstorm of thoughts about human evolution. Especially when it came to *the great leap forward* characterized by Jared Diamond (evolutionary biologist, Pulitzer Prize-winning author) and other anthropologists, when observing “human culture apparently moving at much greater speed”* ... leading to the so-called most advanced *Modern Humans* (Homo Sapiens). In fact, specialists are still debating today whether there was indeed a “revolution” leading to modern man (*The Big Bang of Human Consciousness*) or a more graduate “evolution”.** Either way, language seems to have been the sparkle of the development of human culture. Quite a while later — quantum leap, here! — mass media and telecommunication brought the next evolution, with limited access ... as we know.

Now what if one day ... the “anonymous mass” would become “inter-connected individuals” with the ability to share their ideas on a worldwide scale? What if people could have the tools to find, organize and regroup thoughts within a very short time notice, around a common opinion, feeling, mood or emotion? Distance would not matter. Time would relatively matter (if web seen as a memory). Well, this is ... NOW, and it is just the beginning. “WE”, as individuals, are feeding a fully networked global brain. Yes, it is a major human evolution. Drops of water with the power of gigantic waves. A giant leap for mankind that might move faster than its predecessors.



What about the “revolution”, then? According to this “human evolution”, businesses will obviously have to rethink their marketing and communication strategies. The consumer is now empowered, it’s a fact. Brands engaging in conversation with their consumers, seeking authenticity, will win. Above the best strategies, businesses will also have to adapt their core structures and processes to integrate feedback down to their roots. This adaptation might be the next revolution.

Welcome to the Age of Conversation ... a time to share experience, creativity and knowledge. A time for open minds and open hearts to meet upon shared frequencies. A time of hope for whoever “believes” in human values.

To the memory of Sandra J Kerley.

* Jared Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal*, Harper Perennial.

** Richard G Klein with Blake Edgar, *The Dawn of Human Culture: A Bold New Theory On What Sparked the “Big Bang” of Human Consciousness*, John Wiley & Sons.

Bring the Love Back

Geert Desager

brandopia.wordpress.com

“The conversation is already going on”, said Shel Israel, when asked about what brands should do within the blogosphere. We had invited Shel to Belgium to meet up with some of our customers to talk about his book: *Naked Conversations*. What he said was the inspiration for starting the project “bring the love back”.

Together with our ad agency we are currently making a commercial for Microsoft Digital Advertising Solutions. The film is called *The Couple* and makes some statements about the relationship between today’s advertiser and today’s consumer. A quite risky project if you know that the commercial explicitly challenges the advertisers — our clients — to question themselves and the way they communicate. Besides making the movie, and using this in all our trade events, we also wanted to open up the discussion with our trade audience: agencies and advertisers. The question was, how do we do that with a movie which is a monologue contrary to the dialog which we are preaching. That’s why we started the blog, bringtheloveback.com. Here we clearly say what we do, we don’t hide anything, we have the comments open to everybody and we try to get the conversation started. To demonstrate, this is how we finish the “about the blog” section:

In this blog I will keep you posted about the making of the campaign. I have also given the agency access to this blog, so that they can vent their ideas as well. As should be in this format, there is only one rule: “there are no rules!”

The movie has not been released yet, but reactions are already coming in. A nice comment, coming from someone from Saatchi & Saatchi gives an indication that we can now really talk about a conversation:

First and foremost: I think it’s great that commercials premiere on the web. That way, involved consumers/ brand fans/... will probably be the first to see them. However, my remark with them not airing on television is the fact that they don’t get to appear on television at all. Which means that the beauty of these stories will be lost for a lot of others (who are not that websavvy).

The conversation is going on and it’s not going to take long before more people will see it online than on TV!

Facilitate Better Learning By Breaking The Cycle

Rishi Desai

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Conversations are taking place all around us, and in this Age of Conversation, we are looking to learn a thing or two from them. My idea for this chapter came while reading an article in Harvard Business Review by Chris Argyris.

What is the quality of insight gained for the curator of the conversation? Moreover, ask yourself the question, are we addressing the more fundamental impulsions behind the responses from the newly formed community of conversationalists?

As the curator of the conversation, you are seeking to learn from the players involved. But also, you are seeking to further facilitate and massage the conversation forward with hopes to gain maximum insight. The problem arises with curatorial benevolence.

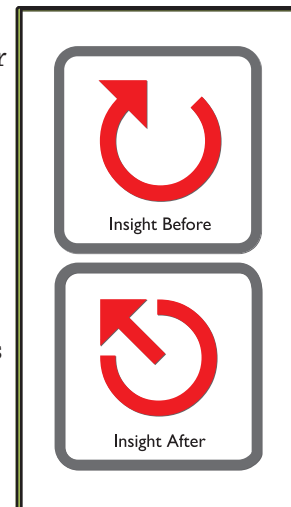
The curator strays from questioning the assumptions and fundamental biases in responses from the players of the conversation. These assumptions and fundamental biases are laid in the early formation of the group involved. A sense of communal identification is borne from active listening, conscious participation and purposeful speaking.

This initial process of respectful engagement will inherently lay a foundation that must be shaken for optimal insight. Most importantly, as this identity develops, the curator usually takes a passive role. Passivity is the result of the curator's fear that he or she will discourage the players from participation.

This passivity is a disservice to net learning. As a sense of community develops, fundamental assumptions are not addressed behind player responses. A cyclical process of learning develops as a result. The sense of communal assumptions (identification) with other conversationalists contributes to closing the circle, further continuing the cyclical process. This continues until the curator steps in to question the communal assumptions, thus breaking the circle, and allowing for deeper insight.

The curator must act as a catalyst at his or her recognition of this cyclical learning. The curator must seek to disturb the harmony when they detect cyclical or homogeneous responses, by questioning fundamental impulsions behind the responses. They are not destroying communal identification, but allowing for a more sustainable and beneficial learning process.

Argyris calls this the double loop and single loop phenomenon, I am adapting it here, calling it “a need for cyclical breakout”.



Revelation from a Digital Junkie's Digital Diary

Pete Deutschman

www.thebuddygroup.com

I spoke recently at The League of American Theaters and Producer's Marketing Conference about New Media and coordinated the "Teen Town Hall". The Town Hall was specifically designed for Broadway presenters and producers to learn more about the daily lifestyle of teens with the hopes of finding more effective ways of introducing the Arts and specifically Broadway shows to the "Next Generation".

To prepare for this panel I asked the teens to keep a daily digital diary that tracked their interactions with digital media. Prior to the panel I called the teens to review their diary and ask them what they had learned about themselves. Their journal surprised me and the teens too, as most spent every waking hour with a digital device.

If teens are bombarded and savvy enough to consume that much media how does a brand stay front of mind? How does *anything* break through and capture their attention?

I decided to keep a diary of my own. I took a typical business day and kept a small notebook next to me at every moment (yes, a paper notebook):

5:45am: Woke up via alarm clock. Reach to the nightstand and grab my cell phone to check my email.

5:50–6:15am: Showered and dressed all the while checking email or reading industry newsletters from previous night.

6:15–6:25am: Drove to the office listening to the news on my XM radio. At stop lights I checked the eight emails that came in between lights.

6:30–7:30am: Conducted conference call while responding to emails from previous day. Downloaded new episodes of my favorite TV

shows to my iPod in preparation for a cross-country flight later in the week.

The diary went on for almost two pages documenting my reliance on technology and commercial entertainment and bombardment of digital advertising (read the full diary at buddyblog.com).

At the end of the day, I asked myself, as I did the teens, "what do you remember?"

Not surprisingly...very little with the exception of what was most creative.

I recall a professor addressing a graduate class about stimulation by showing a 30 second clip of funny, sensual and scary scenes from various movies or commercials. After the giggles settled down he asked each of us to write up the scene which might follow one of the clips we saw. We each reported back to the professor as to which clip we utilized in our creative writing. Surprisingly, over 80% of the class selected either the first scene or the last scene presented with the remaining selecting scenes from movies that they recognized and were already familiar with.

Creativity flourished not based on what was the best scene but what was first or last and what "stuck" in our memory.

Through this exercise I learned that I need more time to be creative. My team needs more time to be creative. Creativity is what fuels innovation and leaves the lasting impression we all want to remain.

It also powers that something special that allows media to break through the clutter. Creativity is more important than an ever changing technology and a place where we need to all continue to invest.

Technology is the Thread That Binds Conversation

Matt Dickman

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Before the first century AD, communication was primarily person-to-person. The great orators and philosophers of the day created their ideas in a vacuum. They needed to live in Rome where they could pontificate to the masses who would then spread their ideas to the rest of the populous.

With the invention of book binding in the First Century, ideas were able to be put into portable collections and spread more quickly. Publishing, however, was limited to the speed at which a scribe could copy the works onto vellum. This remained the case until the mid-15th Century when the printing press allowed selected works to reach large-spread distribution. Printing technology got better over time, but there were still relatively few authors being published.

In the mid-90s something remarkable happened to communication even though it wasn't apparent at the outset. The Internet arrived and the technology behind it would eventually democratize publishing and decentralize authority. This manifested itself, in the early days, in bulletin boards and chat rooms. Regular people started to emerge as subject leaders and the speed at which they could publish was unmatched.

The influence design had on technology was the crucial step in the Internet's progression as a publishing platform. Anything can seem complicated when the design is poor. Good design, however, has allowed the technology to move behind the scenes where it belongs. Take blogging for example.

Blogging technology is complex, but the reason it has taken off as a publishing platform is because the user doesn't notice it. It's transparent. The system allows each blogger to create an ecosystem in which they publish their thoughts and interact with their visitors. These small ecosystems are inter-connected by technology. Keywords and tags, RSS feeds and comments all perpetuate the conversations that are happening and take them to new audiences.

The collective voice we form is re-defining publishing. This book, *The Age of Conversation*, is a prime example. Two bloggers had an idea. They connected with a few more bloggers who used the technology to engage even more voices to make the conversation as robust as possible.

You don't have to live in Rome to get your message to the people. Technology is allowing new voices in non-traditional locations to emerge and have influence. This is not publishing as usual. This is not business as usual. It's time to redefine usual.

“We” not “I” — the Human Truths Revealed by The Age of Conversation

Mark Earls

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When I was growing up, in the shadow of JFK’s great Lunar Adventure, we were convinced that by the end of the 20th Century lunar (and possibly martian) colonies would be commonplace, that we’d all fly around with jetpacks and so on. As I sit here, towards the end of the first decade of the 21st Century, it’s clear to me that we vastly overestimated the scale and pace of change.

That’s not to say that nothing has changed: my cellphone has more computing power in it than it took NASA to get Messrs Armstrong and Aldrin to the Moon and back and the lives we live are full of things that none of us could have foreseen (dating through computers, anyone?). And yet, human nature hasn’t fundamentally changed because of the new technology.

No, quite the opposite. What the new connectedness that technology has really done is reveal human nature more clearly, more fully, and more usefully. And in doing so, it challenges some of our most important assumptions about human nature and human behaviour, ideas that have dominated for two centuries at least.

First, we’re (re)learning the fact that we are a social species (not an “individualist” one): we are “programmed” to seek out others and to interact with them. We are “built” by, with and through our interaction and co-operation with others from the moment we are born to the day we die. This social compulsion is what lies behind the meteoric rise of SMS, social networking sites and the newer social media, such as Twitter.com. What we say is much less important than saying/hearing it.

Second, that our individual behavior is influenced more by other people than by outside forces directly (such as brands, marketing, government and the like). Hence, the decline of trust in the “mass media” and traditional sources of authority that Edelman and the like report.

Third, that our collective behaviour is complex and adaptive: that is it the result of our interaction with each other, in turn making it harder to predict. Our traditional frames — positivism, psychology, persuasion etc all fall short in here and in helping us describe behavior as we try to shape it.

All of which is very exciting and challenging to anyone involved in understanding or shaping mass behavior. As a Tom Stoppard character says, *“Oh, to be at the beginning again, knowing almost nothing”*.

About Conversation

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When time is squeezing you, the first impulse is to cut off all the activities that do not seem to contribute directly to your final result.

This is true in the business life as well as in the private one.

We talk but we do not listen, when someone talks to us we do think to something else, others' voices are just a noisy background to our thoughts.

Most of the times we follow the Winnie the Pooh approach:

It is more fun to talk with someone who doesn't use long, difficult words but rather short, easy words like "What about lunch?"

But a "... conversation is a dialogue, not a monologue. That's why there are so few good conversations: due to scarcity, two intelligent talkers seldom meet" (Truman Capote). And that's why the brave new world of Web 2.0 is a powerful driver for conversation, eliminating the physical distance between discerning talkers.

"Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools talk because they have to say something" (Benjamin Franklin); but "Silence is one of the great arts of conversation" (Marcus Tullius Cicero).

"When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen" (Ernest Hemingway), but do you really listen? Or do you just wait for your turn to talk?

Without a conversation there is no engagement, no sharing of information, no transfer of knowledge.

Without a conversation, we cannot learn to listen, to give words their own meaning and not the one we would like them to have.

Without conversation the essence of blogging would be lost as well as the newest trend in customer-centric marketing.

And by the way: "Don't appear so scholarly, pray. Humanize your talk, and speak to be understood" (Moliere).

How to Turn Employee Engagement into a Happy Marriage

Anna Farmery

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“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel” — E Roosevelt

To win in your market, you need to win the hearts and minds of the talent in your company — as it is the talent that differentiates you from your competitors. Here are six thoughts to help you turn that first date (the interview) into a strong, healthy, relationship that will turn into a marriage of minds rather than convenience:

1. **Honesty.** The foundation of any relationship and should be valued by both parties. Coach honestly and objectively to develop talent to their greatest potential. Nurture a culture in which people feel free from reprisal to give you honest feedback on your style and ideas. Never be afraid of honesty, be more afraid of not knowing and therefore not being able to do something about it.
2. **Respect.** A basic human need. Each person in the company has something to offer — otherwise why does the job exist? Respect the person, respect the role, and respect the diversity that will bring different ideas. Why? Because in the diversity lies personal growth and financial success.
3. **Fun.** Enjoyment brings productivity. People work harder if they are enjoying what they are doing. Remember, it is not knowledge that brings success; it is the sharing of that knowledge. When people have fun, they are more willing to share, to work together. Take time to celebrate progress, celebrate breakthroughs — reward success to encourage success.
4. **Variety.** Relationships can go stale without it. People go stale without it. Great leaders rekindle the career of colleagues by thinking of ways to bringing variety to their working lives: projects, secondments, technology for the repetitive tasks, and development of new skills. Re-recruit them continuously so that they never get bored with their role.
5. **Shared values and visions.** Values are not words on paper but lived each day by the team. Recruit to the values, manage to the values. Paint the vision not only at the team level but explain individually how they will deliver their part and why their role is valued within the company.
6. **Time for each other.** The greatest gift you can give is sharing that scarce resource with members of your team. It includes both informally — by being visible and accessible — and also formally with 1:1 coaching sessions as part of your calendar.

Visualizing the Threads

Julie Fleischer

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The flow of an online discussion is called a thread. These putative threads can be used to visualize conversational dynamics, creating a figurative tapestry of communication relationships.

Picture it: when an individual speaks in monologue, it's represented as a long thread, filling up empty space. It does not interact ... engage ... connect. It simply stretches on. Whether it reaches anyone or falls upon deaf ears, we may never know.

In contrast, two or more speakers engage in conversation — their threads interweave, they jut, they pause, they wrap around each other. If you pull one thread from the fabric, it all unravels. A good conversation is one in which neither thread dominates, neither thread tells the whole story; together, they create something entirely new. Each thread, each participant, is influenced by the other.

Conversations matter.

In the beginning, advertising was a conversation. In the early 1920's, manufacturers created characters to humanize their brands. Betty Crocker was a fictionalization, invented so that women could relate to and interact with the brand. Her radio show was the highest rated in the land. Betty spoke to consumers and they spoke to her. They asked questions, she answered them. Together, these threads invented the brand.

But as we became infatuated with new mass media channels and the idea of mass markets (efficiency! Hurrah!), we turned away from conversation and started a series of monologues ... the rise of push. Messages delivered via broadcast to massive demographic segments (M/F 18–54!) enabled companies to tell their stories in their own words — loudly, efficiently, and without interruption — whether or not anyone was listening.

Today, savvy consumers and new media forms have allowed us to return to the art of conversation. Respectful, multi-dimensional, personal conversations. Conversations that invite, no, *require* the listeners (that's you, big corporations) to actually LISTEN. Consumers are more than willing to be active participants — look today's blogs, opinion sites, and social media. Listen to what they are already saying ... about you.

Then look at the messages you are putting out. Scan the patterns. Are your threads monologues or conversations? Are you speaking or listening? Are your conversation threads woven loosely, in a freeform, fluid fashion? Are they organic? Are they true? Or are you just pretending to care about the conversation?

Conversation matters. Pay attention to your threads. They represent your customer, your brand's health and your very future. The threads matter.

The Internationalization of Word of Mouth

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Word of Mouth (WOM) is not new. Actually, we can consider that it had been created by first human talks; some people also say that it was the first marketing method that had been used. Johan Arndt gives a great definition of WOM: an “Oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as a non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service”.

Changes in the society make conversations between people much easier, whether it is online or offline communication. WOM is part of conversations; thus with “the Age of Conversation”, it will reach a new dimension.

If WOM is impacted by some factors of change quite similar to the one leading to an age of “conversations”, its internationalization is influenced itself by three other factors:

1. Foreign languages are more and more taught in our society. In Europe for example, English is nowadays learned by 95% of pupils and 78% of them do learn a second foreign language. Twenty years ago, it was only 58% of them!
2. International mobility has increased: vacations, study trip, short or long-term expatriations ... Reasons are numerous to go abroad, and as people better manage languages, they have more opportunities to interact with local people.
3. Thanks to new communication possibilities, people can stay or get in contact with others even if they are on the other side of the planet. These tools are various and powerful: VoIP, Blogs, Podcasts, Virtual Worlds ...

The biggest consequence of WOM’s internationalization is that companies will be constrained by these changing communication processes. For instance, can you imagine buying something from a company which destroys the environment in South America? Yes, you would buy it if you would not have had the information about this destruction. But as you actually have a Brazilian friend blogging about it ... the response will definitely be “no”. Moreover, you will tell all your friends not to buy from this company, and so on.

It has been proved that WOM is much stronger when it is local AND offline. International WOM conversations will have the opportunity to bring content and topics into local and offline ones, which could become very famous or popular.

International WOM will, in fact, improve conversations all around the world. As a consequence, almost everything will be known on earth and companies or governments will have to tell the truth and start real conversations with people!

Continuing the Conversation: The Importance of Follow-Up

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One of the most overlooked pieces of communication is also one of the simplest, and most impactful, ones to do. It's the timely follow-up after someone meets with you, be it for a formal interview, a question and answer session, a cup of coffee and polite conversation, or even an e-mail where you're asking for assistance. If someone has invested some time with you, show her or him how much you appreciate it with a timely follow-up.

No matter if you connect virtually or in person, after the conversation has ended, following-up can put you in a class by yourself. Now don't get scared; a follow-up doesn't have to be anything fancy, just a few words from the heart are enough to make a huge impact.

In today's high tech world, it's never been easier to follow-up with people. Sending a three or four line e-mail, with a thank you and offering something specific you learned during the meeting and your contact information is often enough to keep you in high esteem with the person you are meeting.

I encourage you to forget the high tech method of following up unless it's all you can do. Though it is easy, the very fact that anyone can do it means you'll put yourself in the top 20% of all people. To put yourself in the top 1%, aim for high touch! Send a handwritten thank you note the same day you meet a person, with the same information you would have sent in that e-mail, and include a business card just in case yours was lost in the wash.

Taking the time to continue the conversation by following up allows you to easily turn casual acquaintances into memorable friends that can last you a lifetime.

Give and Grow

Bob Glaza

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Communities are built on conversation. Discovering the power of conversation becomes evident when we choose to share on a blog. Whether your blog is business or personal, you will gather and share insight and information. The purpose of this chapter in *The Age of Conversation* is to encourage more giving than taking in our conversations and communities.

Enter the conversation landscape as a visitor. The edge of this landscape is where community growth occurs. Picturing the image of cell reproduction, think of how one cell connects to another at its perimeter. The question is how do we move toward these conversation edges? And what do we do when we get there? We begin developing communication skills at a young age. We are at somewhat of a disadvantage in the digital conversation landscape — at least for now — but there are two closely related concepts that are key tools.

The first concept is feedback. Feedback through the comment section of a blog gives the author reason to continue. Sharing your reaction to what is written and communicated will often expand a thought or idea. Keep in mind; this is a sharing age and a learning environment.

The second concept is encouragement. There are great and worthy conversationalists on your path in the landscape. Some have developed their skills over many years. Some are only just discovering their talents. None will continue to grow without support of the community. When you find one, help hone its voice.

Every community has an intrinsic need to grow. The worthy community will always seek and embrace a diversity of voices. Begin by using your unique voice at the edge of the community.

The blogging world is exploding. Technorati claims to track over 77 million conversation starters. We have become part of an expanding landscape by virtue of tools developed and used for communication. The degree to which these tools are utilized is a personal choice but you make a public statement when you decide to explore the landscape through a blog. The lay of the land is familiar in places and unfamiliar in others. Look at it through a learning lens. Expect to be surprised at most of what you see and read. Imagine every spot you land holding the potential to learn more about your self and your community.

Give to the conversation — you will be rewarded with a growing community!

Being a Give + Take Marketer

Or: How to meet, court and keep a new customer

Mark Goren

transmissionmarketing.ca

Act One: Joining In

Stop talking.

No one wants to listen to just you.

Start a conversation.

Throw out a topic. Move out of the way. And just see where it goes.

Or:

Let the subject come to you. Take it as it comes.

Roll with the good. Deal with the bad.

Listen to hear. Look to see.

First: pay attention. Then: act.

Don't overreact, though. Act.

Think them-and-us, not them-r-us.*

Think: Collaboration. Co-operation.

Connection.

Work with. And for.

Set out to learn. Take in everything.

Read. Study. Research.

Ask questions. Lots of questions. Then ask some more.

Challenge. Debate. Approve. Disapprove.

Look at all sides. Cover every position. Put yourself in the other person's shoes.

Now talk. You'll sound intelligent.

And don't hold back.

Say what's on your mind. It's okay. (Really, it is.)

Just be honest. With everyone. With yourself.

Act Two: Courtship + Commitment

So you've made a new friend.

You share views and values.

You hang out. Catch a movie.

Go on an *official* date.

You hold hands.

You let your hair down. Your guard down too. (C'mon, just a bit.)

Movie, dancing, bowling. More hand holding.

Repeat.

You move in for a kiss.

You ask to come up for coffee. (Not coffee. Coffee.)

And you stay the night.

Then you leave a toothbrush. A change of clothes.

You're sharing now. Believing in and trusting each other.

You ask for a commitment. Move in. (Or the other way around.)

You plan the Big Day.

Juggle. Arrange. Rearrange. Wait.

You walk down the aisle.

"I do."

And remember the keys to a lasting relationship:

Sacrifice + compromise.

Act Three: Show Lasting Appreciation

Always play, kibitz and have fun.

Laugh together. Laugh at each other. Laugh at yourself. Just laugh.

And keep the courtship going.

And keep the discussion going.

And just keep going when things get tough.

Know when to take things seriously.

Deal. Trade off. Find a balance.

Be flexible. Stay agile and open-minded.

Never lock yourself into one way of thinking. Think.

Then plan, test, try, adjust, try, adjust, try, adjust, and try again. (And always keep tweaking.)

Aim for 100% relevance. Not 2%.

Show your appreciation. Give encouragement.

Acknowledge the time. Recognize the effort.

Reward. Honour. Credit. Applaud.

And remember to always say thank you.

* Jon Steel, *Truth, Lies and Advertising: The Art of Account Planning* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), p 80.

W.R.I.T.E.

The Writing/Blogging/Conversation Phenomenon

Kristin Gorski

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Blogging will energize the writer in you. It will inspire you to look deeply at your passions. You will list topics to cover, read other sites for insight and inspiration, and find favorite bloggers in the process.

Yet for all of blogging's exhilaration, there are moments when you will be challenged, frustrated. Your river of flowing thoughts will freeze.

Then you'll feel an irresistible pull. Part gravitational, part magnetic, all motivational. A thaw happens, and you'll start writing again.

Your readers are there. They want to talk.

Regular blogging will spur you to produce more written words, more regularly, and with more focus than ever before. It is the interaction with your blog's community (your cyber-neighborhood writer's group, the "focus group" for your innermost thoughts and feelings — however you think of them) that improves writing skills and increases word flow.

Blogging and its immediate interactivity helps writers develop tools to blast through the dams that slow a flood of words to a trickle. When readers encourage, ignore, laugh, disagree, and link to us, blocks to expression cannot stand up to it. That's why when we keep ideas to ourselves, we often stagnate. When we invite others in, we flourish. Our brains thrive on the input and movement.

I've created this acronym to explain the writing/blogging/conversation phenomenon: W.R.I.T.E.

Web — Writing, through blogging, has created a "world wide web" of connected people. Writing a blog might link you to new "blog friends" and kindred spirits. As a group, you will share ideas, get feedback and push creativity to higher levels.

Real-time — Response to writing happens almost immediately, ensuring writing and ideas continue flowing. This immediacy creates blogging's benefits and challenges.

Interactivity — This creates the continually fresh online-classroom of learning.

Technology — This makes it all possible. Where will it take us next?

Expectations — Keep them high, for yourself and others. Commit to writing your blog, then follow through. Comment on others' blogs, regularly. Connect. You will find gold.

As a blogger, you will become a better writer. Share your precious thoughts. Listen and respond. Let conversations happen. Be generous, and your Blogville community will reward you in kind. Your life may shift for the better. Perhaps your readers' lives will, too.

This constant, constructive conversation, and the communities it creates, are blogging's miracles. To experience its full benefits, just keep writing and blogging.

The Restorative Qualities of Conversation

Janet Green

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Have you ever watched a movie where you knew that if two characters would just talk, all would be resolved? Didn't it drive you crazy that they chose to part in a huff rather than have a simple conversation? In reality, the more we engage in thoughtful conversation, the better we become at truly communicating.

Conversation also has the power to restore critical aspects of our humanity which over time have eroded from our daily lives: civility, credibility and integrity.

Conversation restores civility. Have you noticed that people in cars are becoming dangerously impatient and, at the same time, distracted? It's pretty easy to feel invincible when you're pushing through town in a two-ton SUV, without regard for the "little people" scrambling to get out of your way. But try this — go to lunch with a co-worker, and don't talk about work. Talk about your weekend plans, your kids, or anything that's personal, or funny, or important to you. And listen to them do the same. Connect with them, realize they're human. Suddenly that me-first attitude doesn't quite feel right anymore.

Conversation restores credibility. Consumers are sick of being shouted at, marketed at and sold to. When advertising folks talk about cutting through the clutter, they aren't just referring to the number of messages we see each day. They also recognize that people are tuning most of these messages out. So next time you find yourself about to slap a logo on some previously un-branded surface, stop. Instead, try a marketing tactic that forces you to have a conversation with the customer. You can learn a lot by asking them questions and listening to their answers. And when you start listening, you find that they are tuning in to what you have to say as well. That's when you become an advisor — a person offering a solution, not just a product.

Conversation restores personal accountability. How many times have you come close to doing something that went against your gut feeling, but after mentioning your intentions to someone else, realized how wrong your course of action sounded? Bringing issues and ideas out into the open through conversation sheds light on their true strengths and weaknesses. It allows you to "try on" different strategies, to decide which rings true for you. Conversation becomes the needle on your personal compass.

It's been said that conversation is an art. Indeed, it's the art of being human.

Conversation that Connects You to Me

Lewis Green

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For all of business history, one of our primary goals has been to talk with our customers in ways that grow our businesses and build strong bonds between us. Today, it is more important than ever, as new technology allows customers to easily compare our products and services to our competitors' products and services. And what do they discover — most of what we make or think is what our competitors make and think. So how do they differentiate between us?

Businesses will lag behind if we fail engage in conversation that connects us to others. The tools best used to carry on these conversations are interactive communications that encourage customers to talk back, such as online forums, email and blogs. We make the choices that determine whether we pursue conversations or merely the appearance of conversations.

When we invite people to talk to us, we choose whether to listen and then to respond to their wants, needs and desires in real ways. Doing so is hard work. It means giving our readers an equal voice, allowing blog comments to appear to other readers, encouraging forum participation and responding to e-mails within 24 hours. It means giving up some control of our marketing messages.

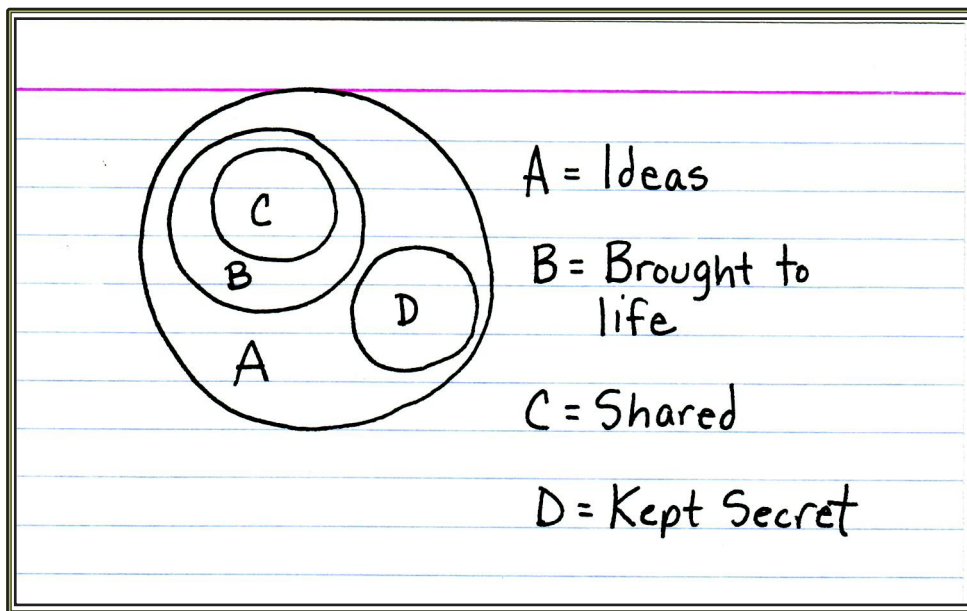
We can make it easy for customers to communicate their problems, their concerns and their needs. And then we can choose to respond quickly. Or we can choose to live in the other world, where our customers sit on hold for long periods of time, where they talk to customer service people who are powerless to provide solutions or live in foreign nations separated from the decision makers, and, in that other world, our customers' letters are met by form letters or maybe a coupon that does nothing to solve the original issue. That other world tears down relationships. The Age of Conversation builds them up.

Engaging in conversation represents the best starting point. Traditional marketing tools remain a part of our marketing mix, but they no longer achieve our end goals alone. Customers have a voice and they want us listen to their voices. If we want to gain their trust and win over their business, why wouldn't we give them what they want? Isn't that the basis of business — we understand what our customers want or need, and we give it to them. In exchange, they give us their business.

Sharing

Jessica Hagy

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So you've got this idea.
It's a marvellous idea.
It'll change the world.
It's the answer to every prayer ever said.
It's beautiful.
It's simple.
It's perfect.
But you're stranded on a desert island.
With no Wifi.
Nobody to talk to.
A soggy Blackberry.
No bottles, no paper, and no pens.
So much for that idea.

If you want to make noise, make money, make friends—
Then you have to make statements where they can be heard.
Get it off your chest.
Get it out of your head and into conversation.
Put your heart on the table.
Put your idea in the spotlight.
Tell her you love her before someone else does.

Say it. Spit it out.
That's how you make it real.

Ideas kept in the dark don't corner markets.
Ideas kept secret don't succeed.
Money in the mattress doesn't earn interest.
Neither do ideas you keep secret.

So share what you've got. What you know.
What you think.
Let it out where it can grow and spread and thrive.
Otherwise, it might as well not even exist.

The worst that can happen?
Somebody else takes some credit.
The best that can happen?
You get all the credit.
Either way, you change the world.

So much: just for that idea.

How Many People Are You Talking To?

Ann Handley

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I am a nervous flyer. Sealed into a jet 30,000 feet up, I become a fearful wreck.

I hate small planes the most. When recently I found myself buckled into a United Airlines prop plane, I couldn't fathom how other passengers could read or doze. I scanned the face of the flight attendant for signs that something was wrong. She saw me — a panicked soul in the front row — and she leaned in: "Need something?"

She was the kindest person I've ever confessed to. She spoke for 15–20 minutes about her measured view of air travel, including maintenance protocols and pilot training. She concluded emphatically, "And that's how I do what I do. I have complete trust and confidence in the people who work here".

I know how that sounds. But she really said it. Her name was Anne Newton, the sole attendant on Flight 6762, a Brasilia Turbo Prop flying to Santa Barbara on April 23.

Anne did me, and her employer, a great service that day. Her ability to articulately quell my fears made her the best brand ambassador United could have hoped for.

Put another way: One simple conversation achieved a laundry list of objectives. It established a personal connection between Anne—and, by extension, United — and me. Our exchange engaged me with the details of airline safety. I began to build trust — with Anne, United and the flying process. The conversation invested me more fully in the brand than a pamphlet or whitepaper ever could have.

But who was Anne really talking to?

The thing is ... in this Age of Conversation, one exchange has the potential to influence many. Anyone can be a maven. Or a connector. Social media like blogs and wikis help one person to reach and influence many.

But the coolest part: you never know who that person might be. Here, it was me — because I run a business blog and marketing website, I'm now talking about it to thousands. But it could (and may also) have been the person seated beside me. Who knows?

Which leads me to my final point: businesses, and their employees, should treat everyone like a "who" — a phrase I borrowed from Charlie O'Donnell, who tapped into the source of emerging media's power: everyone now has a voice, and can be heard, and can influence. Everyone IS a who.

So how many people are you talking to? You never know.

The Promiscuous Idea

Gavin Heaton

www.servantofchaos.com

We are living in a time of proliferation. Never before has the marketplace of ideas been so free, the barriers to entry so low and the willingness to collaborate so powerful. In moments, a concept can be explained, shared and tracked on a single blog — on the other side of the world, this idea can be modified, expanded upon and discussed. Seconds pass and more voices are heard — a version transmutes into new forms ... being picked up as a podcast, a video, an older-style presentation deck. From a single creative impulse, a legion of additions, modifications and transmutations can spread in minutes, hours, days and weeks.

Even months later an idea can come full circle. Someone, somewhere can stumble upon a “stale” idea, investing it with new energy, new context and a new perspective and the cycle of proliferation begins again. What this means is that our ideas are constantly in a process of reinvention.

What links an idea and draws us to it is the “story”. And the power and gravitational pull of the story brings us back to it time and again. In the Age of Conversation, whether we are marketers, activists, educators, politicians, academics or citizens of the world, we are all becoming the connected storytellers of this new era. This presents new challenges but also significant opportunities for brands, consumers and communities.

We are now dealing with a different type of story. Where once we had a beginning, middle and end, as readers and storytellers we can fall into a story at any point. We can link into the middle of a raging debate or witness the genesis of an idea that can change the world, and the narrative that we are dealing with is no longer linear but multi-textual, layered, overlapping and promiscuous. The ideas and stories care not for their creator but freely leap from one mind to the next — sometimes appearing simultaneously across the globe — with storytellers tapping into a powerful worldwide zeitgeist.

The new art of conversation relies not on a sense of ownership but on a willing openness on the part of storytellers of all kinds. In fact, the jealous storyteller may well find that “their” ideas, brands, concepts or other “intellectual property” will laughingly thumb its nose at its creator and walk off, hand-in-hand with the idea-next-door. Whether we like it or not, our brands, ideas and stories are no longer our own ... they are out there promiscuously reinventing themselves word by word.

Valuing Conversations

Graham Hill

www.customerthink.com/gurublog/graham_hill

The Chief Marketing Officer is under intense pressure. The CMO Council recently identified the greatest pressure as “quantifying and measuring the value of marketing programmes and investments”. But in a marketing world increasingly driven by the Internet and in the future, by mobile devices, what should CMOs be measuring and how will they quantify its value?

McKinsey and Double Click surveys show that over 90% of brand purchases are influenced by conversations with peers. And Pew Internet and Forrester surveys show that many of these conversations now take place on the Internet and increasingly, on the mobile Internet. Conversations clearly need to be on every CMO’s marketing dashboard. But how do we measure them and how do we quantify their value?

We now recognise three ages of customer management, each with different types of conversation. Until recently, we were in the Customer Relationship Management age. Conversations were mostly a one-way monologue by companies to customers. The value of these conversations was measured using Customer Value. But despite CRM’s well documented successes, its one-sided nature only resulted in weak relationships of low value.

Recognising that customers expect something more than just a series of transactions, companies have stitched them together into end-to-end customer experiences. We are now in the Customer Experience Management (CEM) age. The customer experience is built upon a long-term, two-way dialog between companies and customers. Similar to CRM, the value of these conversations is measured by Customer Lifetime Value. But although it is built upon a stronger dialog with customers, CEM still doesn’t enable them to manage their own relationships.

There are early indications that we are already entering the Customer Co-creation age. Co-creation is based upon involving customers inside the company: in customer-driven innovation, in social marketing and even in customer self-service. Co-creation not only enables deep conversations between customers and companies, it also gives customers the tools to converse with each other. While Tremors, LinkedIn and MySpace enable people to gather together in virtual communities, wikis, IM and Twitter keep the conversation going.

Customer Lifetime Value takes you so far, but it doesn’t capture the added value of peer-to-peer conversations. Social network analysis provides one way to value them, but it is difficult and there are still surprises in store. Recent research on two-sided markets like eBay, shows that the value of an additional customer, even if they never buy anything, may paradoxically be more than that of an additional seller!

Now that’s the real value of conversations.

You Get a Long Way with Common Sense

Kris Hoet

crossthebreeze.com

Almost every week someone asks me how people/companies can engage in social media, whether to set up a blog or not, how open you can be on a blog or just in the comments etc ... And every time again I notice that most of the answers have to do with common sense. There are a few hints that are interesting to know, but much of what you can or can't do applies to any conversation really.

So first, what guideline is out there that can help you to engage in social media? In February 2005, the Word of Mouth Marketing Association published a draft ethics code for the word of mouth marketing industry, which in essence comes down to: Honesty ROI:

- Honesty of *Relationship*: You say who your speaking for
- Honesty of *Opinion*: You say what you mean
- Honesty of *Identity*: You never obscure your identity

This is a good starting point for any participation in the conversation, whether that is blogging yourself, commenting, twittering ... you say who you are, who you work for and give your own honest opinions, that doesn't sound all too weird don't you think? Many of the (known) examples out there where companies entered the conversation and it went wrong are related to the Honesty ROI, they basically messed up with one of them. They tried to hide who they were, gave anonymous (which is ok) but dishonest opinions etc ...

There's really nothing different about the conversations we're having on the web using all this social media compared with conversations you have in a bar, in your office, at a conference or wherever. The speed in which technology changes might frighten a lot of people, but the conversation is the same. If you honestly try to start up a better conversation with your customers and as such really interested in the feedback (that you will take into account) most people will really appreciate that.

So whenever you think about blogging for your company, or whether you want to comment on people's blogs, pictures and videos think about the Honesty ROI and think about how you would be have in any other conversation. There's not much more to it, but the reward of it will be that you have a bigger and better conversation will help both yourself and your customers.

The New World of Invitational Marketing

Uwe Hook

uwehook.blogspot.com

You know the situation: You are at a party, chatting with a good friend. Out of nowhere, a stranger enters the picture, drink in his hand, booming voice: “How are you doing?”. You exchange glances with your friend, trying to establish a possible relationship between the three of you — just in time for the start of a five minute monologue about things you couldn’t care less about. Once he found a new victim, he moves on quickly because he knows his prey is only good for five minutes. Your focus for the rest of the evening is to avoid another encounter with him. At any cost.

If you’re in the advertising business, you’re the annoying stranger. People hustle to run away from you as fast as possible, trying to avoid you any eye contact. And all the Web 2.0 tools and new Age of Conversation won’t help you, unless you change your whole approach.

Don’t even bother approaching people, unless you’ve been invited to join them. Being invited is a beautiful thing and it’s an even more beautiful word with many meanings:

- a) “to request the presence or participation of in a kindly, courteous, or complimentary way”
- b) “to attract, allure, entice, or tempt.”

(According to dictionary.com)

Clearly, marketers have always tried to attract, allure, entice, or tempt people. But instead of being a polite supplement to everyday life, they tried the Neanderthal approach — hit them over the head, hold them hostage in exchange for entertainment and grunt at them louder if they react in unexpected ways.

Most of us left the Stone Age a few weeks ago and feel the desire to be respected, appreciated and left alone, if so needed.

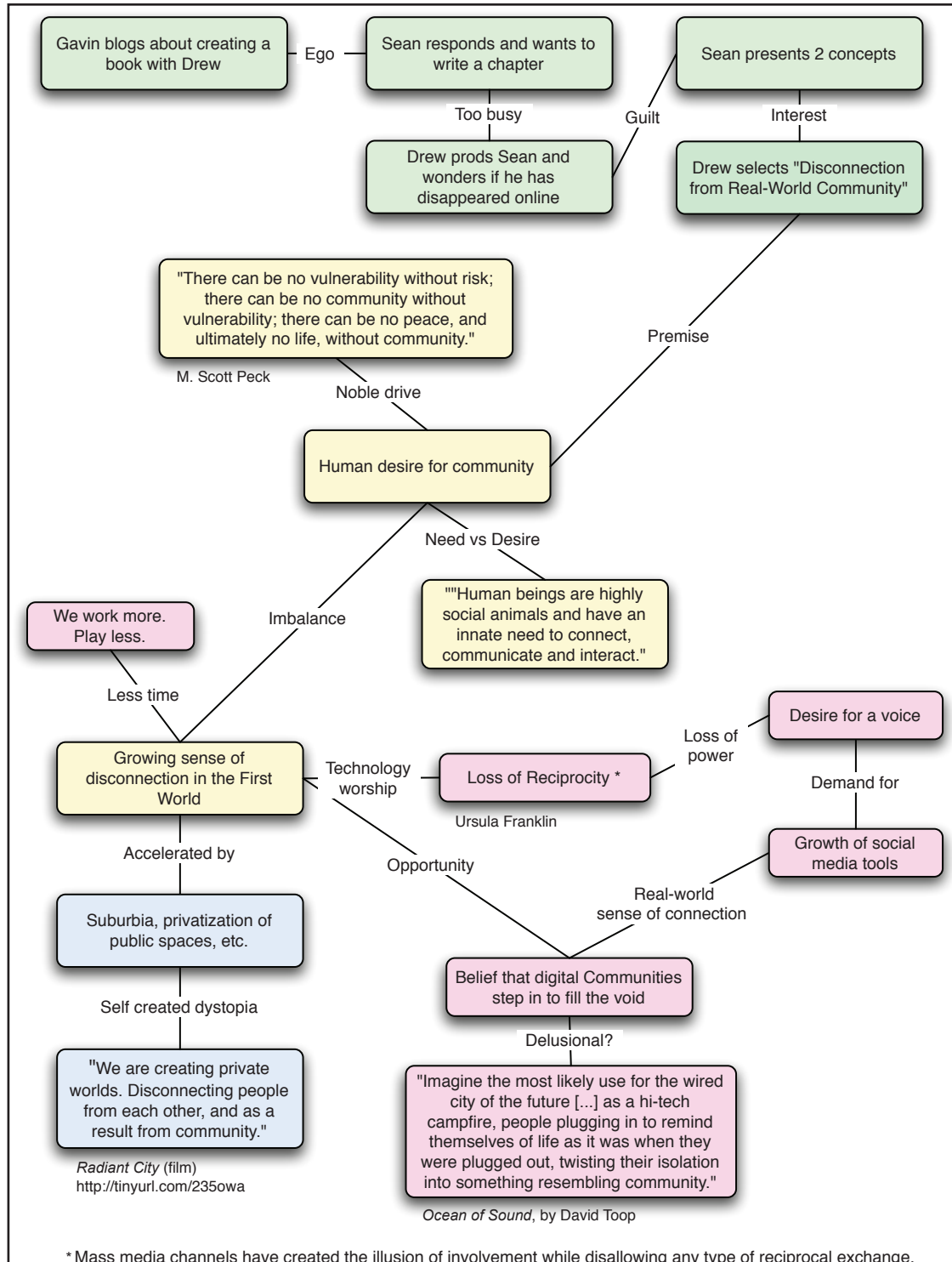
Real conversations begin with a clear invitation. It might be a paper invite, an email, a nod, a smile, a handshake. But it’s always an agreement between two mature parties to have a courteous and kind exchange. This is how it begins. Hopefully, it will get livelier the longer the conversation goes on. If you’re a good conversationist, it will end in an exchange of real, heart-felt ideas. Allowing for both parties to start a valuable relationship.

There will be parties you won’t be invited to. Don’t try to crash it, it’s not worth your time and their time. Hey, at least you won’t have to retreat to your cave anymore.

Disconnection from Community In Our Real World Lives

Sean Howard

www.craphammer.ca



The Age of Conversation Makes Me Think of ... Bridges

Robert Hruzek

middlezonemusings.com

Consider: We all know about bridges, right? You've seen and crossed hundreds, even thousands of them in your lifetime. Have you ever thought about what a bridge *does*? And while you're pondering that, just exactly *how* do bridges relate to conversations, anyway?

A **bridge**, in terms of its function, *connects or reduces the distance between two points*. In other words, it makes it easier for you to get from here to there. Sounds reasonable, don't you think? But what I find most interesting is the word applies equally to physical *and* non-physical worlds.



Now, before we go on, let's consider the term **conversation**. Think of it as *the use of speech for the informal exchange of views, ideas or information*. You'll note it's also defined in terms of function.

For example, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco links together two points of land, effectively and dramatically reducing the travel distance between them. A barrier (the water) has been bridged.

In the same way, two people, even with wildly differing views on a particular subject, can bridge those differences with a single conversation, resulting in common understanding. Again, a barrier (differing viewpoints) has been bridged.

In a sense, then, *the conversation is the bridge*.

It has been rightly said that the secret to good blogging can be found in the art of conversation. What's more, the proliferation of the World Wide Web has made it possible to conduct multiple conversations with folks anywhere there's an appropriate computer and internet connection. And that's exactly what makes it so powerful.

Conversation, when employed wisely, can easily become an effective tool for bridging geographical, political, and ideological barriers. I talk to you; you talk to me — but watch out! You're in a construction zone; a bridge is being built!

Distance? What's distance to an electron travelling at the speed of light? Geography? No problem; all physical boundaries are irrelevant. Well, then what about political boundaries? Countries, cultures and/or ideologies can often be formidable boundaries. But here's where the true power of conversation begins to shine forth for all to see.

Herein lies the danger — and also the exhilaration. With every post, a bridge magically springs forth that can span any conceivable barrier that could possibly be thrown in its way. Step across, if you dare.

The choice is yours.

Photo courtesy of Zoey Bluesky

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/zoeybluesky/122522662/>

Opinion is the Lifeblood of Conversation

Richard Huntington
www.adliterate.com

I'm not interested in debating whether we live in an Age of Conversation — we do.

And to be honest, I am not that interested in discussing the merits of brand or personal relationships built on genuine dialogue — it's a very good idea.

What interests me is what it takes to start and maintain conversations. And real conversations at that, not the fatuous exchange of pleasantries between brands and customers.

Sure it is important to adopt the right tone of voice, be courteous, and listen properly, to respect the audience, and be honest, transparent and responsive. But this is simply the etiquette of conversation, not its substance.

After all, what makes you want to join a conversation, whether online or face-to-face?

I'll bet it is because you couldn't agree more with what someone says. Or because you couldn't agree less with what someone says. Or simply that the point of view being put forward is in some way fresh and unfamiliar to you. That's why any of us comment on blogs.

And for this to happen, a person, blog or brand needs to deliver a point of view the conversation can coalesce around. In other words, to advance an opinion.

In the world of brands this is the distinction between a brand with a positioning and a brand with a position.

And why are opinions so potent? They are the substance of our meaningful interactions with other people. We are hungry for them, to adopt, share and trade with each other.

That's why we pore over sports analysis, devour the opinions of political commentators and Hoover up gossip.

It's not just that we are interested in the subject, it's that we need the content as conversational ammunition.

That's why opinions are the lifeblood of good conversation.

And so if you want to get the conversation started and if you want to keep it rich and rewarding, get opinionated.

Are You In The Conversation?

Tim Jackson

masiguy.blogspot.com

In this new age of digital/online dialogs, it has become increasingly important to engage in new types of conversations — conversations that didn't even exist in the not so distant past. With the ever increasing strength and popularity of online communities like MySpace and YouTube or the still-growing world of blogs, traditional forms of marketing have been thrown to the ground and kicked around like a schoolyard kickball.

Here's the core, the kernel, the meat of the matter; you can bet your company's entire marketing budget, that if you are *not* online in some form or another, where your customers (or potential ones) are spending more and more of their time, somebody else is and they are *taking them away from you*. Let's face it, our customers, the people who keep our companies afloat and money in our bank accounts, are spending more and more of their time online ... not reading magazines or newspapers looking for our slick, glossy ads. Heck, they aren't even watching as much TV anymore. If they are watching TV, that pesky TiVo and its cousins are allowing them to skip the commercials we spend so much money on — don't they know how much money we're wasting?

Whether your company has a blog of its own or not, you should be out in the blogosphere participating in the many conversations that are going on about your company. Consider this tidbit — if the conversation is going on (which it is) and you are not participating, you have no influence over the outcome. We have no real control of our brands anymore, which is scary, but we still have the potential to exert great influence. If we engage our customers, in their communities, then we have the chance to minimize negatives and further capitalize on positives. Going online also gives us the chance to seek the kind of feedback that can help us craft the best possible products for our markets and increase the impact of the user experience (and hopefully get us that corner office with the great view).

So what are you waiting for? Get out there ... before I get to your customers first!

Engaging Consumers in the Mobile Information Age

Dustin Jacobsen
shakegently.com

It's hard to dispute the fact that communication channels and media consumption is changing. How many emails do you receive a day? Text messages? Voicemails?

How do customers prefer to be contacted and how often?

How do you communicate with your family and peers?

These are all important questions with individual communication preferences in a constant state of change.

The sources vary, but there are roughly 2.7 billion mobile phones in active use as of January 1, 2007 (communities-dominate.blogs.com/brands). Some countries are reaching over 100% saturation with some people carrying multiple phones. There are three times more mobile phones than personal computers, with the line continually blurring between a mobile phone and mobile computer.

With the prevalence of access-anywhere technology from a wide variety of devices and the transition of media consumption from TV, radio, and newspaper to the Internet and mobile devices, what is the best way to engage the audience?

Are brands following the target audience trends and the way they consume media? Are consumers still watching TV, listening to the radio, and reading the newspaper? Of course, but it's likely there is a sub-segment of the target audience that is consuming other forms of media and may even have a preference to engage with brands differently.

Investing in emerging media projects carries a certain amount of risk. Remember discussions around whether the Internet was going to be just another trend that quickly faded away? Who doesn't have a website these days?

How is mobile different than TV and other forms of media consumption? Mobile is one of the most personal forms of communication we have today, with most people carrying their mobile phone around the clock and well within reach 24/7.

The mobile phone has the capability to combine many of the other mediums and channels, including mobile video and TV, music, email, instant messaging, games, photos, mobile Internet browsing, location-based services, voice and other items still in development.

The establishment and management of relationships using mobile devices, just like other forms of communication, requires continual testing, refinement and ongoing evaluation. Transparency and letting the audience initiate and drive the conversation are two ingredients of a healthy mobile device conversation.

Deep In Conversation – Don't Talk To The Hand, Everyone Knows
Of The Day, Hero Of The Week, Talking To Yourself, Slight For The Week
Weekend, Marsupial Madness, Analog-digital Foreign Exchange Program
Ideas (The Summary), Gotta Love Those 17th Century Monks, 50 Ideas
widgets, More On Tweaking, Visual Story Telling, Virtual Community News
Tail Inside, Back Seat Drivers And The Wikipedia Problem, When The W
Thinking Big, Thinking Small, Think Like A Man, LinkedIn And The A
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Was It As Good For You As It Was For Me – Sexpresso Sells, Dirt Really
Sitting In A Tree K.I.S.S.I.N.G., Marketers Voted Sexiest Professionals,

ARE THE CONVERSATIONS

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You're Never In The Mood, -Bloggers Gone Wild: Top Ten 'Boobies', H
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Toys To Entice Blogging, Blog Demographics, You've Run Over Your Dogma, Girlfriend Isn't
For All Of Us Bloggers, Help Wanted: Blogger Traffic Even Matter, Where's The Beef In Blogging, Blogging Has Not
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Hot Chicks, Age Of Too-Much-Conversation?

The Art Of Non-Conversation, 2007 - AJ

Don't Talk. Listen.

Stanley Johnson

branddna.blogspot.com

In the Age of Conversation the last thing a brand should be doing is talking.

Me me me is not a conversation, it's a monologue.

To engage your brand in conversation you need to be a good listener.

The more you listen, the richer your conversation will become.

In fact, you'll be amazed at how much better everything you do will be if you simply take the time to listen.

Listen to your customers and consumers.

If you're a client, listen to your agency. If you're an agency person, listen to your client.

The more you listen, the more you will learn.

Listen to suppliers. Listen to workers. Listen to people behind the counter.

Remember the more you listen, the richer your conversation becomes.

Listen to what the callers on talk back radio are saying.

Listen to what the blogs are saying.

Listen to the people around you when you're queuing for your morning coffee.

Listen to people. Real people. But not the sort of people who only tell you what you want to hear.

Of course you may not always like what you hear, but that's no reason not to listen.

In fact that's probably one of the best reasons to listen.

Listen to a different radio station every morning. It'll keep your thinking fresh.

Listen to kids. All sorts of kids. No matter what they say, it's always worth listening.

Listen to what people like. Listen to what they don't like. Listen out for opportunities.

Listen to advice. Listen to friends. Listen to competitors.

Listen.

Listen closely.

You'll be amazed how much your brand will benefit when engaging in conversation.

As long as you take the time to listen.

Shut Up

Spike Jones

www.brainsonfire.com/blog

Seriously. Shut your yap. You just might learn something if you do. In fact, I guarantee you will.

Okay, it's already been established that the days of the marketing monologue are coming to a close. Now, it's all about the dialogue. But sometimes — and I just may argue that most of the time — you need to be quiet and listen. Why? Because your customers want to tell you so much. Like what you're doing that they love. Or what they absolutely hate. Or what they just like (which is a dangerous word). Or how they would make your product better. Or even your company. In a lot of cases, they KNOW more than you about your own product. Scary, isn't it? You can feel the control slipping through your fingers. But it's such a beautiful thing. Embrace it.

Even if you have good intentions entering into the conversation, you aren't going to LEARN anything if you don't zip it every once in awhile and use your ears.

Look, if you've done your job up front and created an identity — a personality — for your company, product or service that fascinates, inspires, rewards and engages® your customers, then that in-and-of-itself will start a conversation. Now it's up to you to keep it going. To throw out new topics. To energize the conversation. And to pay attention and heed the words of your customers — good or bad.

Because they're out there. You know, those quirky, passionate, customers who just can't wait to meet you. To pour their hearts out. To connect on some level. Is it easy to enter into an existing conversation about you? Yes. Is it easy to keep it up? Not on your life. It's hard freakin' work. We're talking about roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty kind of work. But when you lay that groundwork, you not only show your customers that you will bend over backwards for them, but you're taking the next step from making your product or service a mere commodity, to something that is a part of people's lives.

You start to matter.

How do you listen? Try hosting an online chat with product developers. Answer blogs and show up on message boards. Or form a customer advisory board offline. All simple and cost-effective ways to engage.

And above all, be there for the conversation ... but don't forget to shut up sometimes. And listen.

Mommy, Why is that Lady Licking a Beer Bottle?

Ethics & Accountability in Advertising

Amy Jussel

www.shapingyouth.org/blog

The age of conversation ... Age 5? 10? Trust me, it takes on a whole new meaning when you have wee ones trying to make sense of the media and marketing messages flying in their little faces with increasing coarseness, commercialism and crass innuendo 24/7 at rapid-fire speed.

Not to be the morality police, but I'd like to open a conversation on media and marketing responsibility here. The digital age ensures we've got pop-ups online, offline and in the freakin' beach sand on vacation, as logos are stamped in the shore break with corporate precision and polished acumen of Madison Avenue's 'opportunity to engage.'

Brand marketing is everywhere — whether it's junk food advertisers embedded deep within fantasy worlds of online games, product placement in MMORPGs (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_MMORPGs) and virtual worlds, candy bar codes in text messages, or legs spread-eagle on either side of the freeway as an attention-getter, this stuff that cannot be 'turned off' as the marketers so smugly declare.

We've been filming the trickle down impact of media and marketing messages at the playground level, in Body Blitz: Media, Shaping Youth, and it will drop your jaw.

With \$51 billion in expendable income, marketers are targeting kids with reckless abandon, sending messages so mixed they could give kids whiplash, "Eat this junk, but look like this svelte hottie".

Body image links a child's emotional and physical health, and when kids are bombarded with 'age-compression' tactics to mine their

insecurities for profit, there are bound to be staggering implications.

In 2006 alone 178,000+ teens under 18 had a cosmetic procedure of some kind (including 16,477 nose jobs & 10,555 ear protrusion fixes and 3,087 breast augmentations): ASAPS American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (<http://www.surgery.org>).

Coincidence?

Our appearance-based culture is churning out a steady stream of steroid-abusing sports heroes and buffed, muscled videogame icons, and according to the AJDAA already 26% of male adolescents don't like their bodies or have dysmorphia issues: AJDAA American Journal of Drug & Alcohol Abuse (<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713597226>).

Point?

We MUST take responsibility for the marketing messages we're putting out there.

Body-snatching young kids and dragging them into adulthood at ever-earlier ages is sending an entire generation into an angst-ridden, appearance-based, vapidly insecure tailspin.

If we continue to "pour acid on their innocence", as Senator Harkin described, then the price we pay to mine their childhood will ultimately cost us all.

Dads andDaughters.org has a simple litmus test we should hold ourselves to: "Would you put your child's face in this ad?"

If not ... don't run it. Period.

The Strongest Conversations Start with a Point of View

Gareth Kay

Brand New — www.garethkay.com

If we accept that we are now living in the Age of Conversation, then the first challenge facing any brand is to understand how to spark and sustain a conversation around it. Yet all too often brands desperately cling on to old assumptions about communications and marketing and, as a result, see their attempts to start a dialog fail to catch fire. So how can a brand be more likely to be worthy of conversation?

First, a brand worthy of conversation needs to have an opinion; a clear and credible point of view on the world and the brand's place in it. A sharp opinion, strongly held is the fuel that ignites and sustains conversation. It has the ability to make your brand matter in the maelstrom of daily life because an opinion gives people something to talk, and think, about. It may polarize, but in so doing it helps the brand become a catalyst for conversation.

Second, if you want to get an increasingly marketing resistant culture enthusiastic about your brand, then your brand has to have an enthusiasm about the world bigger than itself or its category. This means having a social mission not just a commercial proposition. (The Dove 'Campaign For Real Beauty' or Patagonia's passion for the environment are good examples of this.)

Quite simply, what matters today is creating something of social meaning above and beyond the product or service. Your brand's point of view on real life, not Nielsen categories, allows it to connect with people on mutually beneficial terms and, more likely, has the contagious qualities necessary to start a conversation. You are more than your job. So is your brand.

Finally, nothing kills a conversation faster than saying the same thing over and over again. What makes people, and brands, worthy of conversation is their ability to possess a different combination of qualities that appeal to different people at different times. They are multi-faceted, full of depth and nuance. They embrace complexity. This means consistency of execution and expression is a false god of marketing.

A brand worthy of long-term conversation needs to constantly change the way it expresses itself and generate a coherent stream of actions that flow from its point of view on the world. This stream of coherent, sometimes surprising, actions is what keeps a brand interesting and part of conversation over time. It's this ability to "change clothes" while maintaining a clear, credible point of view on the world that has built the long-term success of brands from Starbucks to Virgin to Madonna.

The “Share” Economy

A new age begets new value

Christina Kerley (“CK”)

www.ck-blog.com/cks_blog

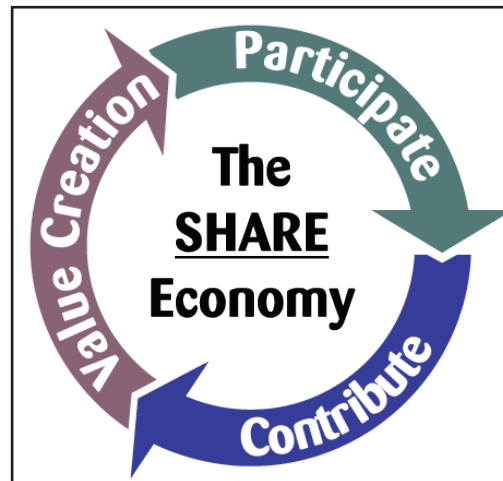
A new age bolstered by new technologies and new found freedoms is at once exhilarating to consumers, frightening to companies and altogether perplexing to those on the outside peering in. But this era is not about technologies and tools. This age is about people using technology to connect with others and share their interests, experiences, expertise and preferences.

Perhaps most revolutionary about this era is rather ironic: participants in the global conversation share common goals — such as personal expression and professional advancement — but many times, that’s all they have in common. No matter. In an economy of share, demographics like age, region, religion, income and ethnicity are irrelevant.

Becoming evident is how contribution has evolved into this era’s cost-of entry. Be it individuals using blogs to contribute best practices; cause-driven communities leveraging Wikis to contribute support; teens producing videos to contribute social commentary; or companies innovating software to contribute enhanced functionalities, contribution is key to this medium’s hearts and minds. Further, the more robust the contribution the greater the contributor’s value becomes to their communities (and audiences).

Due to the ease of entering the conversation, the potential for misuse or manipulative practices is high. Trust, therefore, is critical in developing relationships and brands. Where involvement lends credibility, closed communications — or the unwillingness to participate — appear disrespectful, even dubious. Add the self-policing nature of

communities and trust translates into a form of currency that isn’t freely given but must be earned.



While the act of marketing is a process spanning analysis, strategy and implementation, the purpose of marketing remains value creation. For marketers the question becomes what their audiences value. Clearly, the answer is participation, contribution, willingness to listen and credible communications.

Still, many companies view sharing as synonymous with losing control. Yet an objective assessment illuminates more opportunity for gain than risk of loss. With this new medium (and mindset) comes new methods to build awareness, new access to communities in which to build market share and new technologies to create offerings. All told, the sharing of ideas — how freely they’re exchanged, how dynamically they spread and the new ideas they fuel — drives not only the age of conversation, but an entirely new economy.

How Tennis Puts Conversation into Marketing

Kim Klaver

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Tennis can help put an end to the one-way monologues that have been “marketing” for the last 50 years. You know, where “they” talk to us through TV, radio, newspapers etc and where, until very recently, we’ve had little chance to opt out, much less talk back.

People in direct sales and network marketing, the field I work in, do what the big boys do, only one-on-one. They contact people they know, and insist on having a 1–3 minute non-stop monologue with each person, gushing about the product they are marketing, and how it’s a MUST HAVE for the other person.

This has not worked well in our field. Most people doing direct sales and network marketing (one-on-one) drop out. Ninety-five percent, actually.

That’s where tennis comes in.

Tennis players, when they move to a new neighborhood, will look for a game by asking around:

“Say, do you know anyone who plays tennis?”

They don’t, like most marketers, start the conversation by telling everyone they meet how great tennis is, how it’s really the only good way to exercise or compete, and that it’s heads and shoulders above other sports. Nor do they belittle people who don’t play tennis.

They ask for people like themselves, knowing it will be a small subset. People who are already part of their “community” — ie people in their niche. *They ask a question to trigger a response from the listener right off:*

“Do you know anyone who ...?”

Here’s how that works in direct sales:

“Say Lulu, I am marketing this new product, and I wonder if you know anyone who really cares about earth-friendly products like I do, and who might like to know about some new cleaning products that don’t harm the environment. Do you know anyone like that?”

We’re testing this with thousands of direct sellers and the response is most encouraging. No more hang-ups. And referrals are coming in because a conversation was just begun — question asked and answered.

Tennis, anyone?

The Voice of the CEO

David Koopmans

www.mokummarketing.com/blog

Enabled by the Internet, people are now starting to have conversations with anyone, anywhere; with politicians, with colleagues, with people who buy the same products and services.

Traditionally, communication between companies and their audiences of customers, employees and investors has been a carefully managed monologue. Our hierarchical business structures create a buffer of managers between CEOs and the rest of the world. So the conversation is often conducted on behalf of the CEO, rather than by the CEO. Now, some CEOs are joining the conversation and are starting to talk directly to the market. But is it worth it? Is it simply a fad? Will it last?

Some CEOs have embraced this changing environment and write blogs, like Jonathan Schwartz from Sun Microsystems, or they go on YouTube with major announcements, such as JetBlue CEO and founder David Neeleman. However, as this book goes to print, the list of CEO bloggers who run significant companies is no more than a few hundred globally (the new PR Wiki www.thenewpr.com/wiki/pmwiki.php?pagename=Resources.CEOBlogsList features a list of CEO bloggers) and with an estimated 50 million blogs online, it is probably a fair assessment that overall CEOs don't really participate.

And maybe there are good reasons why CEOs are reluctant to communicate directly. There are legal risks, it is time consuming, it could go horribly wrong. More importantly, it is such a new phenomenon that it is hard to tell whether it has a significant impact on business.

So will the Age of Conversation change the way our CEOs communicate?

This is not just about blogging; it is about a new mindset for people in positions of power that is more direct, less controlled and interactive. After all, companies and brands are collections of people, first and foremost.

However, the time and effort involved will have to be offset by tangible business benefits before the mainstream of business leaders will get involved. Then there is the fear. Maybe, just maybe, some CEOs find it more comfortable behind the wall. They might just stay there.

If CEOs do embrace this change we call the Age of Conversation, it is because the innovators demonstrate that they are getting ahead. The change will come if and when it becomes obvious that people prefer to work for those CEOs, that they start talking about how this brand makes them feel better than the competitor. When that happens, we may even see a change in the type of people that are chosen to lead companies in the future.

Can I Have Your Attention Please?

Jim Kukral

www.jimkukral.com

Two bloggers walk into a crowded room.

The first blogger says, “Hi, my name is Jake and I blog about sports. Here’s a bio sheet and an about pamphlet you can read about me. Plus you could grab my RSS feed if you want”.

He proceeds to hand out his information.

A few people look up and accept his handouts. The rest continue in their own conversations, ignoring him.

The second blogger has a better plan.

She jumps on a table, blows an air horn, and then says the following:

Look at me! I am unique and the information that I’m going to give you is fun and will solve your problems too. I have videos and podcasts that will entertain and inform you. You can watch me 24-hours a day on my streaming webcam to get to know me better. Let’s hook up on Facebook and LinkedIn as well. Oh, and by the way, my name is Alison and I also blog about sports.

The crowd rushes over to hear more.

Welcome to the new online conversation ... where attention wins.

Every day, millions of chunks of user created content are being rocketed online by accidental publishers who are using new (FREE) tools like YouTube, Twitter & Flickr, just to name a few.

This new type of user generated content goes beyond words on a page in a browser. Therefore, it’s fresh, it’s new, it’s ... engaging.

And most importantly ... It gets attention.

In the ever increasing flood of information we all face each day online, the brands that use these new free attention driving tools to create engaging content will be the clear winners.

Will you be one of them?

Stand up. Seize the day. Create a video. Record a podcast. Create something engaging.

Don’t worry about failing. There are no mistakes right now. Everything is brand new.

What have you got to lose? Except not being part of the new conversation?

The Emerging Microclesia

John La Grou

www.mil-media.com

I do not care how you structure your churches, as long as you do not impose those structures on your grandchildren — John Wimber

Global Christianity is experiencing a profound shift born of Internet convergence. I call this emerging phenomenon the microclesia — a shrinking of worldwide ecclesial / faith communities into a participatory “global town square” — a virtual conversation facilitated by the microprocessor.

Personal Participatory Media (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory_Media) is the heuristic framework of this conversation — a self-organizing dialog that’s rendering denominational boundaries blurry and indistinct. Microclesia represents a global voice in which ideas and imagination, not structural or positional power, moderate religious dialogue. Wisdom (see Proverbs) is the new gatekeeper as spiritual community is reborn in a network of conversations.

Microclesia is bridging superficial sectarian divides; exploring commonality as much as difference; maintaining creative relevancy to diverse global cultures; remaining sensitive to our shared humanity and common need for grace.

The *microclesia* is not intimidated or impressed by inherited dualism (lay vs clergy, sacred space vs secular space, religious affiliation vs unaffiliated outsider etc). We’re celebrating unmediated connectedness — freely integrating as a global church — less separated by physical or ideological barriers. *Microclesia* represents an epochal transformation from passive religious consumers to actively engaged creators.

In times past, the church had the luxury of slowly engaging new technologies over decades, even centuries. Today, the intersection of faith and technology is about rapid convergence that cannot be contained within inherited ecclesiastical architectures. Just as the printing press caused an epochal shift in religious priorities and organization, so the church is again being profoundly (re)created by instantaneous virtual interconnectivity.

According to pollster George Barna, the Internet currently provides an “interactive faith experience for more than one in every ten adults”, and that within roughly five years “up to 20% of the population will rely primarily on the Internet for its religious input”. Global-virtual dialogue is rapidly becoming a dominant factor in the (re)formation of local-physical faith communities.

In the *microclesial* era, “church” is being spontaneously (re)formed into scale-free personal relationships — aka emergence, collective intelligence, distributed cognition, small-world networks, smart mobs, self-organization, accelerated folksonomy etc ... Alas, *all* organizational models, including (especially) the church, are being swept into this grand relational paradigm.

No longer a club for theological elites and CEO mega-pastors, the church we’re dreaming about is more like poetry that we all write together.

Viral Games — Alternate Reality Games

Karl Long

experiencecurve.com

Alternate Reality Games or ARGs may sound extremely science fiction but are in fact happening now, and have been happening for some time. Did you know that one of the things that makes *Lost* so compelling is that it has an Alternate Reality Game that runs parallel to it? Books that are seen in the series, the fictitious airline, all had real world artefacts or evidence created in the real world, and on the Internet. Evidence for fans to discover and collaborate on as they try to solve the riddles that *Lost* poses ... wow, sounds much better than watching television.

ARGs are essentially are like “live fictions” brought to life and made real through creation of evidence, stories, and characters in the real world that people can discover, interact with and piece together. These stories have been used in many cases for the purpose of marketing, stories like *The Beast* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Beast_\(game\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Beast_(game))) to promote the Spielberg movie *A.I.* or *I Love Bees* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Love_Bees) which promoted *Halo 2*, or *Year Zero* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Year_Zero_\(alternate_reality_game\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Year_Zero_(alternate_reality_game))), a game *Nine Inch Nails Used* to promote their most recent album.

The previous ARGs I had mentioned all followed a pretty similar formula, with a well thought out story, characters and narrative arc, clues are then seeded with the community and the puppet masters dole out clues and puzzles to keep the story moving. ARGs are such a new discipline/activity that we have barely scratched the surface when it comes to formats, scale, how they work, how they are built etc. With that in mind I think we should be careful not to assume that the format is set.

The most recent creation of Jane McGonigal (<http://www.avantgame.com/>), one of the minds behind many of the high profile ARGs I’ve mentioned, does not follow that same format. The game is called *WorldWithoutOil.org* — an ARG about a “fictional” future where we run out of oil. *World Without Oil* is an interesting ARG because only the prelude has been scripted. The rest of the story of what a world without oil will look like will be developed by the participants in the game. Consider this a massive scenario planning exercise where users will develop their own blogs, videos, podcasts, from this fictional future.

The scope and possibility for ARGs to engage in new and different conversations is extremely exciting and I recommend you keep your eye out for them, and opportunities to use them.

“Speak to Me TJX”

Lori A. Magno

digitalhive.blogs.com/digiblog — modadimagno.blogspot.com

Speak to me! Why are you ignoring me? I thought we were friends, well, if not friends exactly, then shopping buddies. I don't know who you've become. I am saddened. For a long time I believed our relationship was solid and mutually beneficial, but now it's like you don't know me — you've forgotten who I am and how to speak to me.

That was addressed to the TJX Companies from me, a humble consumer.

Why did they dump me? Me, the person lining their pockets!

On January 17, 2007 when TJX announced (grudgingly) its customers were involved in a security breach that likely compromised their credit card and personal data the Wall Street Journal estimated that *40 million* cards may have been compromised. TJX's response:

Spokeswoman Sherry Lang said ... TJX has identified a “limited number” of credit and debit card holders whose information was stolen from its computer system, adding the number was “substantially less than millions”.*

It took TJX nearly a month to reveal to the public that customer data had been compromised** and the Massachusetts Bankers Association† wondered why TJX was holding onto credit data after transactions cleared.

By delaying a public announcement, with the help of top security experts, we were able to contain the problem and further strengthen our computer network to prevent further intrusion ... we believe we were working in the best interests of our customers.

Best interests? It was revealed on March 29 that some 45.7 million †† credit and debit card numbers were stolen. TJX took the immediate PR step of doing nothing.

TJX certainly has data on impacted customers, yet the only outreach was a video apology so lame that no one even bothered to post it on YouTube. There are 50 references to stolen data in TJX's SEC filing of March 28, 2007.‡ Ouch.

On April 24, the Massachusetts Banker's Association announced a class action lawsuit intended to collect tens of millions of dollars in damages. ††

So, based on our long term relationship, where are the flowers? Where's the apology wrapped around a gift certificate? Where's the acknowledgement that we broke up?

I miss your overstocked aisles and surly dressing room clerks and the shoes and handbags and ridiculous Father's Day gifts. And I totally miss trolling the racks for super designer bargains. But I can't come back until you make it up to me.

Someone has my numbers, call me.

* http://www.boston.com/business/articles/2007/01/18/tjx_credit_accounts_hacked

** http://www.boston.com/business/articles/2007/01/29/tjx_explains_reaction_to_data_breach

† <https://www.massbankers.org/pdfs/TJXNR1-22.pdf>

†† http://www.boston.com/business/articles/2007/03/29/breach_of_data_at_tjx_is_called_the_biggest_ever/

‡ <http://ir.10kwizard.com/files.php?source=487> (10-K, 03/28/2007)

‡‡ <https://www.massbankers.org/pdfs/DataBreachSuitNR5.pdf>

ConversationAgent.com: The Conversation Age @ Work

Valeria Maltoni

www.conversationagent.com

Conversation is the market where ideas start taking shape and form. This project was born from a conversation. The Internet and the tools built for this medium have lowered the price of entry. The marketplace is an infinite combination of opportunities in micro segments. Making it big is not necessary; we can make it anyway, as long as what we create has meaning for someone, and they are willing to pay for it.

Being extraordinary and authentic are still paramount. This renaissance in the free exchange of ideas and relationships is encouraging and deepening creative thought and innovation, and putting power back in the hearts and minds of individuals. We now have unprecedented potential to engage clients and form a network of allies.

We get things done through talk. We always have. The organizations that understand and allow these dynamics to develop and emerge with customers, partners and employees have a future. Over time, contracts, policies, scripts become less important — the free flow of ideas and projects is the backbone of this brave new world.

Things continue to change — economies, business models, technologies and the social components of your market. Connectivity and conversation allow us to learn about this change, invent and create novel ways of flowing with it and find the inspiration to try something new. But unless you join this conversation from a place of passion, unless you build trust and credibility in your brands, unless you find a way to risk everything in exchange for creation, you will not build something timeless.

Security and stability, even within organizations, have been debunked. Many companies are producing communications just for the sake of producing communications, not to have conversations. Conversations are different, they're joined, they imply some level of permission, and attention, that companies can earn only through remarkable products, services, and trust.

What makes a brand — product, service and person — stand out? While playing around with something new, someone found a way to put their entire selves into it. People respond to the humanity, not the form. Design is a way to beautify and let humanity shine through. That's the old and new "what's in it for me".

And humanity is about love. Love has scale, and application everywhere. We got so busy building profit and talking strategically and somehow forgot that what matters is staring at us in the face. Conversations are the places where we discover how what we make and do changes everything. And since everything changes anyway, wouldn't we want to be included?

Communication Isn't Lost

Carolyn Manning

thoughtsphilosophies.com

Around 1624, John Donne wrote the words, “no man is an island” in “The Island: Interconnectedness of Mankind”. Could he have known how long-lasting or how far-reaching they would be?

Witness the Lost Generation and our Blogging Community. The only thing that separates the groups is about 90 years. In reality, we are connected by the success promised by collaboration.

From the end of WWI until the beginning of the Great Depression, the city of Paris was the hot spot for expatriate American writers. Parisian cafes enjoyed the patronage of, and ambience provided by, people the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Elliot, and Ezra Pound, to name a few. They were the Lost Generation, writers who each had different reasons for leaving their homeland. Most of those reasons surrounded social issues in the States, chiefly prohibition. During their stay, however, the relationships they developed helped them produce some of the best literature of the twentieth century.

Since the early 1990s, through the Blogging Community, writers from around the world have had the honor of following in the footsteps of the Lost Generation. We do it through the Internet today, instead of gathering together in one city. Since 1994 we've been able to meet from CyberCafes, although many of us still travel from home. Either way, we're building relationships that'll help us produce some of the best literature of the twenty-first century.

The main parallel between the Lost Generation and the Blogging Community will become more obvious when the best literature of the twenty-first century rises to the top. Yet, there are marks of similarity, even now. Those marks are the small things, things hidden in the open.

The Lost Generation read from each other and talked together; they shared ideas freely. The Bloggers do the same.

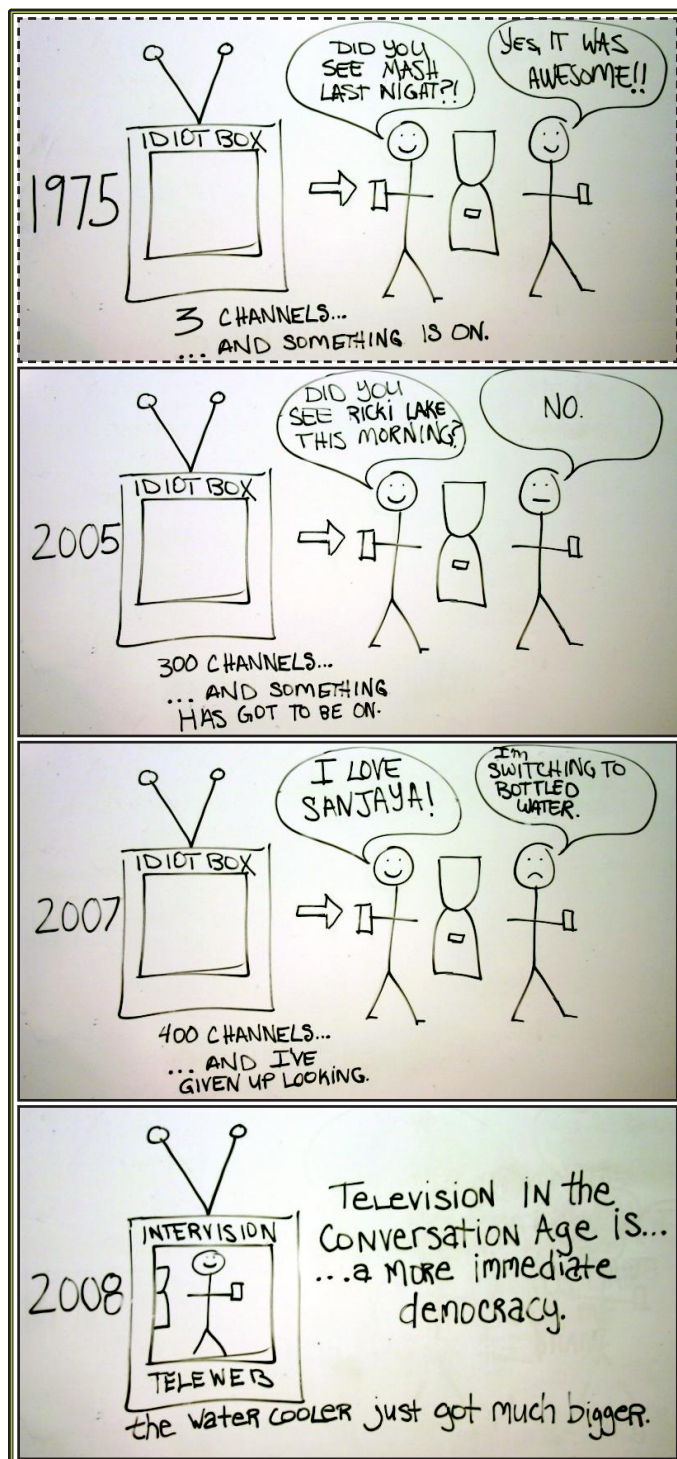
The Lost Generation found themselves and, by virtue of their camaraderie, showed themselves and let the world find them, as well. The Bloggers are following suit in that process. The world has found us.

The Lost Generation and the Blogging Community: kindred spirits.

Television in the Age of Conversation

Paul McEnany

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TV has always been about conversation. Just the conversation is getting worse, at least from a mass perspective. Luckily, the opposite is happening on a microscopic level.

Now, there's 20,000 channels and I'm on. Or my friends are. So are things my friends like, and things for me to discover and share. Before, TV was about high-paid executives, Hollywood mega-stars and prime-time budgets. Tomorrow, it's all about me and my friends.

Governments

Colin McKay

canuckflack.com

You know, the problem isn't engaging governments in conversation. It's getting them to participate in meaningful conversation.

Most organizations are capable of handling several conversations at once. With customers. Employees. Investors. Suppliers. Landlords. For most, it's a simple business transaction.

Some, like NGOs, are more adept at managing multiple conversations. Filtering one voice or many, they represent one issue or one group quite effectively.

In the case of government, the dynamic of maintaining a transparent and fruitful conversation is fraught with difficulties. It's not like a government usually speaks with one voice — there are too many subjects, too many stakeholders, too many stumbling points.

People — online or offline — have learnt from experience not to expect consistency when communicating with the government — except from the tax agency.

The problem is, most government efforts at conversation are limited, in scope or audience.

That's not to say governments don't make an honest effort to establish a conversation with their stakeholders. For them, conversations come in many forms — phone calls, academic conferences, town hall meetings, public hearings, legislative committees, inquests, consultations and public info desks.

Oh. And whatever they do with lobbyists. (Offer may vary by jurisdiction. Check with your local ethics officer before signing.)

Unfortunately, most executives, and most government officials — elected or appointed

— are instinctively wary of an unrestrained exchange of ideas.

To them, the world of online communications is a lot like the annual family reunion — for every bright nephew with a good idea, there are still two crazy aunts circling the bar holding a grudge. For the wary official, these unpredictable participants in the collective conversation pose a risk to the stable development of policy and programs.

And that's the key: stability. How can governments engage with the collective conversation and still ensure stability in their everyday work?

How does a traditional organization move towards innovative technologies and practices?

One simple rule — don't ask for permission. Ask for forgiveness.

In a government environment, that means low profile pilot projects. Limited run podcasts. Small community networks. Social networking tools on government sites. Projects that help establish a direct connection with the consumer and the citizen.

The best are government services that provide practical and exclusive information, like car recalls, road closures, municipal pool conditions and local weather information.

Governments are already behind the eight ball when it comes to public trust — their social media efforts need to demonstrate value and a true exchange of information.

To quote a much maligned Bill Murray movie: "baby steps, baby steps".

Full Circle

Drew McLellan

DrewsMarketingMinute.com

In early civilization, doing business was pretty simple. You had something I needed. I had something you needed. We lived in the same village.

There were no billboards or :30 TV spots. If anything, I might have heard about you from a mutual friend. We dealt with each other ethically and honestly because if we didn't — everyone would know. We lived in the same village.

Win-Win. Value. Trust. Doing business with someone you know. Transparency.

Somewhere along the evolution of commerce, we stepped away from that model. We had newspapers, and later, radio and TV. Layers grew between the buyer and the seller. We didn't talk direct much anymore. We shifted from doing business with the villager down the way or the grocer on Main Street to buying products from Mr. Whipple and Madge the manicurist. We didn't know these people. They weren't even real.

The buying felt different. Isolated. Impersonal. We weren't buying from a neighbor, we were buying from a multinational conglomerate with holdings overseas. Who?

Somehow the chasm grew deeper and wider. Rather than actually talking to each other, we developed consumer advocacy groups. Have you noticed that as soon as someone determines you need protection — you suddenly feel more like a victim or feel the need to fight back? And so the consumers did.

The marketplace was a more hostile place. We were not from the same village anymore.

No win-win. Always the sneaking suspicion that you were getting screwed. No trust. Transparency? Hardly.

And then some interesting things happened. The Internet. Blogs. Citizen marketers. Rather than hiding behind an advocacy group, the consumers began to realize that their voice could be heard. Suddenly size wasn't as crucial. A small businessperson could compete along side that conglomerate. People started to have conversations. To communicate. To connect.

Suddenly, whether it was a small business down the road or a conglomerate, they weren't faceless anymore. They were Joe. Or Raj. They were a blog reader. They were a 24/7 live customer service rep. They were a peer in the same industry but half a world away. They were a blog writer. They were accessible. And we discovered that they had something we needed. We had something they needed.

Win-Win. Value. Trust. Doing business with someone you know. Transparency. While it has gone global, we once again live in the same village.

Create Conversations, Not Clutter

Gaurav Mishra

gauravonomics.com

While all of us agree that we need to create conversations with our customers/readers and build a community around them, most of us end up creating clutter. In this article, I will share with you my thoughts on creating conversations, not clutter.

The Key to Creating Meaningful Conversations

Three elements are essential to create meaningful conversations:

1. People who are willing/eager to talk to each other (community)
2. A theme or a topic which is relevant to them (content)
3. Tools through which they can communicate (medium).

If that's all it takes, creating conversations should be easy as saying 1-2-3, shouldn't it? But it often isn't, because we try to "talk to" already established communities about already talked about topics using already saturated media. Whenever we do that, instead of creating meaningful conversations, we create clutter and add to the echo chamber effect. *The key, therefore, is to find a niche, not only in terms of the content, but also in terms of the community and the medium.*

But how do you find such a niche? Let me explain using examples: Edublogs and DesiBlogging. Edublogs is a network about education that is about to break into the top 50,000 sites on Alexa. DesiBlogging is a city-focused network for desi bloggers which will be up by the time this eBook is published (disclosure: I am a partner in DesiBlogging).

Own your community, content and medium niches

You should start by targeting a community that is large enough to be profitable, but is not

yet addressed adequately. Edublogs is focused on teachers and students. DesiBlogging is focused on bloggers in or from the Indian sub-continent. Both segments are large (and growing) and not yet addressed adequately. What's more, both segments can be further sub-divided into even more focused segments around which smaller, more close-knit, communities can be built. EduBlogs, for instance, can create separate close-knit communities for teachers and students, by geography and subject/ level of education. DesiBlogging will create city-focused communities for desi bloggers.

A community in itself is not enough; it needs content to get into the conversation mode. One way to enable conversations is to focus on niche channels. Edublogs, for instance, should have channels by subject areas which highlight the best posts throughout the blog network on that area. Within each city, DesiBlogging will have channels for activity/interest areas.

Finally, it is equally important to own the medium you are using to build conversations. There are many blogs and websites on education, but Edublogs is the first blogging network on education. Similarly, there are many blogs and websites focused on desis, but DesiBlogging will be the first city-focused blogging network for desis. Think about how you can similarly own the podcasting, video-blogging or micro-blogging platforms for your community and content niches.

In summary, the key to creating meaningful conversations is to own your community, content and medium niches. I think I have found mine. Have you found yours?

B2B Social Media: Don't Monkey Around

Scott Monty

www.scottmonty.com



As a former classical studies major, I'm fascinated with etymology, the study of linguistics. The word that is the focus of this book — conversation — has its origins in the Latin word *conversari*, which means **to dwell, to keep company with**. Entirely appropriate here, since having conversations requires spending time with people — namely, customers.

Too often in B2B marketing, we see the definition of the more personal “customer” devolve into the distant and cold “decision maker”. Decision makers are relegated to the sales cycle, engaged in research and in need of information and education. The prevalent attitude seems to be that marketers develop the message and decide which information to share with decision makers. This is command and control, with unidirectional messaging at its core.

Is it any wonder, then, why B2B companies are slow to adopt social media as a marketing channel?

It's not that B2B customers are steering clear of social media. On the contrary, they use blogs, message boards, podcasts and online communities in their research for business solutions as well as in their personal lives. But B2B marketers don't seem to be aware of — or worse — care about conversations that are taking place within the social media space about their brands.

Brands are being discussed, both positively and negatively; now marketers can follow the conversations and join in. Ignoring it won't make the problem dissipate; indeed, businesses that continue to put off the decision to join the conversations will find themselves at a disadvantage.

But — to return to our etymology lesson — marketers need to spend time with their prospects and begin to embrace bi-directional conversation. A simple way to start is to listen. Keep listening. And listen some more. Take the time to explore the sites. Look around. Follow the conversations with RSS feeds.

Above all, resist the temptation to jump in until you understand the context. Businesses that attempt to harness the power of social networks or new media sites without realizing the rules and etiquette will find themselves unwelcome. It is only by listening and learning will B2B marketers be able to start talking *with* their customers.

How to Build a Community on a Budget: Just Use An Online Newsletter!

Michael Morton

marketingmonster.wordpress.com

Establishing an online community allows you to gain valuable information from registrants by letting you create many segments — ultimately allowing you to develop more effective marketing strategies that reach your goals. But your company doesn't need to develop the next MySpace to build an online community. To start all you need is an online newsletter.

You need quality content

In order to build a community with your online newsletter you must provide content that is important to your customers. Don't make the company the primary focus — or even the secondary focus — of the newsletter. Think about what your readers want to hear, then give them that information.

In addition, your customers must view your company as something more than just a business. They need to be able to humanize your company. This can be accomplished in many ways. One way is through your writing, another is by showing your charitable side.

Your newsletter needs to sound like it is being written by an average Joe. This means you need to cut out the legalese and technical jargon. Talk to them like they were a friend and not as a customer. And for goodness sake, don't be afraid to show a sense of humor in your writing. Everyone loves a person that can make people laugh.

Write about your company's altruism, but don't talk about how much money your company donates. That's boring and completely transparent! Write about how a group of employees volunteered their time to physically help in a worthwhile cause. For example, a group of employees that planted trees on Earth Day or volunteered at the local children's hospital. When writing about your philanthropy, be sure not to sound holier-than-thou. Approach it from the angle of how fun it was to help the community and include pictures of employees volunteering and smiling. A picture of the company president getting his hands dirty and loving it will really resonate with your customers!

Make your newsletter interactive

Give your readers the ability to comment on newsletter articles. I'm not talking about providing just a "rate this article" functionality. Give them the ability to express themselves with words. Think of it kind of like blogging. Providing the ability to comment allows your customers to interact with you, which means they are building a relationship with you. Just ask the people at USA Today; their registrations rose 380% after adding the ability to comment to their web site.

Now get out there and build your community!

We Are All News Hounds Now

Chris Newlan

lighthousecommunications.typepad.com/talkingpoint

The role of the journalist in writing the first draft of history is under threat by what social media expert, Dan Gilmour, calls the “former audience”.

Citizen journalism — where ordinary people capture a newsworthy event that the mainstream media struggle to provide instant and first hand coverage — means that history’s first draft now often makes its debut appearance within minutes on social networking sites like Facebook, on personal weblogs and video sharing sites like YouTube.

Joe Citizen and friends might not have the formal qualifications for a media job, but the proliferation of cell phone cameras and video recorders, ubiquitous Internet access and a willingness to express their opinions to the world means they now play as vital a role in disseminating information about the major news stories as any big name media outlet.

The past 18 months has been a watershed period in the shifting relationship between the public and the media. The wobbly images and gunshot sounds student Jamal Albarghouti recorded on his cell phone in the middle of April’s Virginia Tech shootings were replayed to a global audience on CNN.

The new paradigm for news is anchored in technology driven participation by the masses. Consumers are either becoming part time members of editorial teams or bypassing the mainstream media altogether and publishing their own material. The one way, top down conversation the media have traditionally had with the public is becoming a two way channel of information.

Most significantly, the rise of citizen generated media truly marks a power shift in newsgathering, reporting and consumption.

The media ecosystem has expanded so that people are no longer forced to solely rely on mainstream media outlets that many of them don’t even trust to get the latest news and information. By the time a big time story airs on the 6pm news it’s probably been through several iterations in the blogosphere with first hand accounts of what happened.

The media is also no longer the exclusive club of super rich moguls supported by big corporate advertising dollars and university educated journalists. Anyone with a Nokia phone and an Internet connection can now participate in the media game locally and globally and they don’t need a corporate budget, editorial guidelines or broadcasting licenses to do it.

So where does all this leave the future of journalism? Reports of the death of journalism may be premature but we are witnessing the emergence of an environment where the traditions of mainstream media are preserved but complemented by more input and diversity.

How to Shout

Andy Nulman

www.andynulman.com

All our lives, we've been told to keep quiet.

As babies, we're told to "Hush," to stop crying.

As kids, we're told that we should be seen, and not heard.

Even as adults, the e-world's rules of etiquette frown on **EXCESSIVE USE OF CAPITALS** lest it disturb all the other poor ones-and-zeroes that make up our emails.

Well, this "minifesto" explodes the notion that silence is golden. In fact, to borrow the famous anti-aids slogan, to effectively converse in today's all-pervasive multi-media environment, **Silence = Death.**

Imagine how ineffective **Martin Luther King** would have been had he whispered "Shhhh ... I have a dream". Would art thieves continue to pursue **Edvard Munch's** "The Sigh"? And would **Billy Idol** have had as big a hit with the song "Rebel Murmur"?

For years, the art of shouting (yes, the ART) has endured a bad rap ... probably because those who used it most are crass, aggressive boors. It's time to break that stigma. Just like paint can be used to create a masterpiece or a mess, when in the right hands, shouting is a deft, expressive tool.

Consider conversation to be shades of **black**, **white** and **grey**; shouting is the **color**. If conversation is made up of periods, commas and the occasional semicolon, shouting is the exclamation mark.

Like singing, great **SHOUTS** come from the gut, not the throat. They are emotional, not rational; inspired, not contrived.



Shouting is not about making yourself heard. It's about making yourself interesting. And making yourself into someone people will want to converse with.

And shouting doesn't necessarily mean pissing people off. It doesn't necessarily mean *speaking*, either. Used properly, a raised eyebrow can be louder than a jackhammer. It's all about context, and the courage to stand out from the norm.

Yup, it could still backfire. Think of **Howard Dean's** guttural yelp during 2004's Presidential race. There's a fine line between raw emotion and madness. But who'd you rather have in the White House today—screamin' Dean, or quiet, condescending **Bush**?

So shout, shout, let it all out. Don't be afraid to live life loud. Puff up your chest when you walk into a room. Stand out, don't fit in. Do it with your clothes, your accessories. A wallet (brown, boring) can hold credit cards, or (Paul Smith-striped) make a statement. Let everything you have scream your name and establish your personal brand as one of animal magnetism.

ROARRRRRR!

How Peter Got His Customers Back

(Or How to Make Money in a World of Endless Choice and Cut-Price Competition)

Simon Payn

simonpayn.typepad.com

Peter owned a hardware store on Main Street. There he was in his brown, grease-stained apron, presiding over screws by the pound and 27 kinds of doorknob. There was sawdust on the floor and white paint on his cheek.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew Peter. He was the hardware guy. On sunny days, he would stand outside and wave to people as they walked by. Some would stop and talk. After all, Peter knew everyone — and he was always full of good conversation, from the latest gossip to the best grade of sandpaper for pine.

So when his neighbors needed a key cut or a four-inch nail, he was the guy they came to. He was the natural choice.

But then the world changed.

The suburbs grew. People drove miles to work, schools and stores. A big-box retailer popped up on the edge of town, with cheap, cheap prices and aisles of choice. People stopped passing by Peter's store. They stopped waving. They didn't call in for a chat. Peter's community shrank and his business choked.

So how is a business like Peter's to survive?

How does he keep in touch with his community? How does he continue to share his expertise? How does he build a presence that doesn't depend on his storefront? How does he keep those conversations going?

And how does he continue to sell product and make money?

Here's how.

Peter created a newsletter — and it worked like magic. Then he could stay in touch. He could nurture his community, even when that community was spread across town ... or the world. He wrote articles to share his expertise — or just talk about what's going on. He could rebuild his physical presence because his newsletter would drop in a customer's mailbox. And he could continue the chatting, the handshakes, and the claps on the backs by using his newsletter to build a conversation between himself and his community. Not just about wrenches and hammers, but about his clients, his community and his world.

That's how Peter got his customers back. And it's why every business should have a newsletter.

The Role of Conversation in the Brand Experience

David Polinchock

blog.brandexperiencelab.org

Marketing is a conversation. Today, it's all we hear. We have to be prepared to have a dialog with the audience. And that scares many brand marketers today, because they've spent the last couple of decades speaking at their target audiences, not with them. But what does it really mean to have a conversation and how does having or not having a conversation impact the brand experience?

Traditional advertising has been built on the interruption model. We're watching or reading something and that stops so we can have a commercial interruption. Once that interruption is over, we can go back to our story.

But in the brand experience, not only is the interruption model not appreciated, it's also the worst way to engage the audience. Think about it. You're having a great time skiing down a great slope and suddenly you come to a screeching halt — so you can hear some brand pitch. Not going to make you feel good about that brand.

So, how do you create a real conversation in a place that's not really set-up for conversation? Here are two simple keys to having a great brand conversation:

1. Authenticity. Seems simple, doesn't it? But how often have we been completely turned off by a clearly fake conversation? Now matter what you want to say, it's got to be real. Are your staff trained to be real, honest and authentic? Or are they trained to simply read from your script and ignore any input from the guest?

2. Rules for them or you? Are your rules for handling business set up for your convenience or your guests'? After checking into a Hilton Hotel after 11pm, I was told that they no longer had food service because "it wasn't convenient for them". You can't have a conversation with someone when the rules are set up to ignore their needs.

You see, the real challenge for brands today is that I've got lots of brands that I can talk to. So, if I'm not enjoying the conversation I'm having with you, it's really easy for me to find someone else to talk to. So, if I'm going to put the effort into talking to you, have the courtesy to engage me back. If it's an authentic, relevant and compelling conversation, who knows how long I'll stay with you!

No Limit Conversation

Joe Raasch

www.happyburroblog.com

What it is

A simple tool to develop, enhance and enliven the lost art of conversation — where great ideas and relationships begin!

Why you want to do this

When you need to get a work group to connect, free up minds to new idea generation, or to sharpen communication skills.

How it works

Get a small group (2–6 people) together for a conversation. A topic is posed, and the conversation flows with no agenda or set direction. The only rules are that no one can defend anything, no can promote a specific agenda, random connections are followed, and the final topic connects back to the original topic. There is no required minimum or maximum time. This IS more art than science, which is the whole point of the exercise.

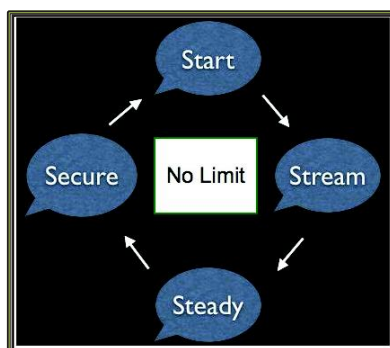
Example:

START — Choose topic: new food products. Start Stream.

STREAM — Conversation flows, possibly from types of food, to restaurants, to interesting packaging, to a favorite vacation destination, to food allergies, etc. Move to Steady.

STEADY — Everyone is contributing, no one is defensive or trying to push a particular point. As conversation wanes or time is short, move to Secure.

SECURE — to end the exercise, the final topic needs to relate back to the original topic (new food products).



Let me know your experiences with this tool! Email me!

The Rules of the Garage. For Digital Media Conversationalists.

Arun Rajagopal
arunrajagopal.com

In the late 1990s, “Rules of the Garage” constituted HP CEO Carly Fiorina’s efforts to capture “the spirit of the original HP” and inject an innovative and entrepreneurial culture into the digital giant.

Today, these 11 tenets are relevant to brands, professionals and organizations working together to create exciting and powerful interactive conversations through digital media.

Believe you can change the world

Your interactive channel should reach out, inform, entertain and make an impression on the world. Use this belief to empower you at work.

Work quickly. Keep the tools unlocked, work whenever

Always hunt for opportunities to create meaningful online conversations. Never stop your dialog with digital media consumers — there are no breaks or pauses in this business. And be a step ahead of competition, always.

Know when to work alone and when to work together

Work alone to build knowledge. Work together to share learnings. And work both ways to create magic at work.

Share tools, ideas. Trust your colleagues

That’s what knowledge enterprises are all about.

No politics. No bureaucracy (these are absolutely ridiculous in a garage)

They usually waste valuable energy and create embittered people. A happy garage is always a better performing garage.

The customer defines a job well done

Do the online metrics translate into desired brand objectives? Are clients happy? If yes, they will be your pro bono brand ambassadors and get you more business.

Radical ideas are not bad ideas

In this medium, the next big idea is a radical idea. Never stop churning out radical stuff. Come up with a big idea every day. If you implement the ten best ones in a year, you will be an industry thought leader.

Invent different ways of working

Innovate in the way you work and you will see innovations in the way you want things to work. To defy convention, you need to be unconventional first.

Make a contribution every day. If it doesn’t contribute, it doesn’t leave the garage

Someone who is ‘contributing’ and not just ‘working’ will not only set high standards, but will also deliver better.

Believe that together we can do anything

Two is better than one. Four is better than two. Together, people can achieve anything.

Invent

Invent. Innovate. Lead.

It Is Not Enough to Simply Listen

Ryan Rasmussen

Collaborative Ideation — rrasmussen.tumblr.com

Whether you are aware of it or not, there is a conversation right now about your client's goods or services. A new generation of customers are finding each other and forming communities based off of their shared interests. This consumer culture raised in weblogs and forums is using collaborative tools like del.icio.us, Flickr, YouTube, and Twitter to redefine your brand experience. However, something even more remarkable is happening. These communities are brewing some of the most innovative ideas for where your company should head, hacking existing products, brainstorming new goods and services, and may be the most valuable resource for responsive enterprise in the coming years.

The method for engaging this pool of creative talent will vary by industry, but the most important thing to remember is that it should be done soon. A social media strategy will only be as effective as the rate at which it can convert and build the loyalty and trust of the community. The best

"Honest, personal relationships are what is required to convert individuals into your most loyal and enthusiastic customers [...] creating a real connection with the company and its products. This is an extremely powerful thing." SHB

method for doing this is to dive into the conversation with a personal voice and vulnerability that invites notice. Transparency is paramount. As quick as a community will be to welcome a representative that is willing to

listen and learn, they are just as apt to sniff out traditional marketing maneuvers and react to the intrusion. The risk of requesting feedback in an uncontrolled public setting is often the leading inhibitor for companies to join in the discussion. However, the loyalties made now will become the backbone of your future brand image as participatory consumerism and social medias topple traditional models of business-centric customer relations. It is not enough to simply listen.

Tom Kelley, general manager of IDEO and authority on methods for encouraging innovation, spoke of a mindset not often considered in corporate culture – that of the anthropologist. An approach to understanding the customer's perspective by immersing oneself within said community, using the same tools for communication and collaboration, results in nothing less than a new form of business intelligence. Constantly questioning and learning from the community, a social media liaison can effectively create both focus group and think tank with open discussion. An interesting bi-product of this process is the generation of brand evangelists capable of mass consumer-generated marketing (not to be confused with the corporate-generated, company-controlled brand messages of diminishing affect.)

"I've been watching over the course of about a month, before I registered, how a suggestion here would become a Flickr set showing mods and then suddenly show up in the catalog [...] That impressed me [...] more than any claims or reviews." eris

The Two-step of Conversational Writing

Connie Reece

www.everydotconnects.com

Years ago, as a direct mail copywriter, I learned to write in a conversational style. Fingers flying over the keyboard of my IBM Selectric, I composed each fundraising letter as if I were writing to one middle-aged, Midwestern couple. For the response card, I created a mock-up of a mailing label:

Elroy and Maude Donor

1234 Main St.

Hometown, ST 56789

My “dear friend” letter might be destined for 100,000 mailboxes nationwide, but in my mind Maude and Elroy were the only recipients. Using that focus as a springboard for writing in a personal tone proved to be a successful strategy for increasing response rates.

What would that writing exercise be like today? Instead of bombarding Maude and Elroy — and 99,999 other people — with messages they don’t particularly want to receive, I now have the ability to start a dialog with them. I can cultivate an ongoing relationship with donors or customers. That’s a keystone of the Age of Conversation.

It follows that one of the skills in great demand is conversational writing. Even in B2B marketing the need is for plain, but powerful, language. A writer who tries to dazzle readers with buzzwords will not be effective.

If you want to be a successful blogger or online marketer, *Step #1* is to learn to write in an informal style appropriate to your readers. You do know who your readers are, don’t you? By informal style I do not mean you should rely on slang or jargon; I simply mean you should not be wearing your stuffed shirt when your fingers hit the keyboard.

Step #2 is to measure your readability. When people read for enjoyment — or conversation — they do not want to wade through scholarly treatises. Learn to write to your audience’s comfort level, without talking down to them.

I used to calculate the readability of each fundraising letter using Rudolf Flesch’s formula. (*The Art of Plain Talk* has been reissued every decade since its 1946 debut.) It was a laborious process, counting sentences, words and syllables and plugging them into the formula.

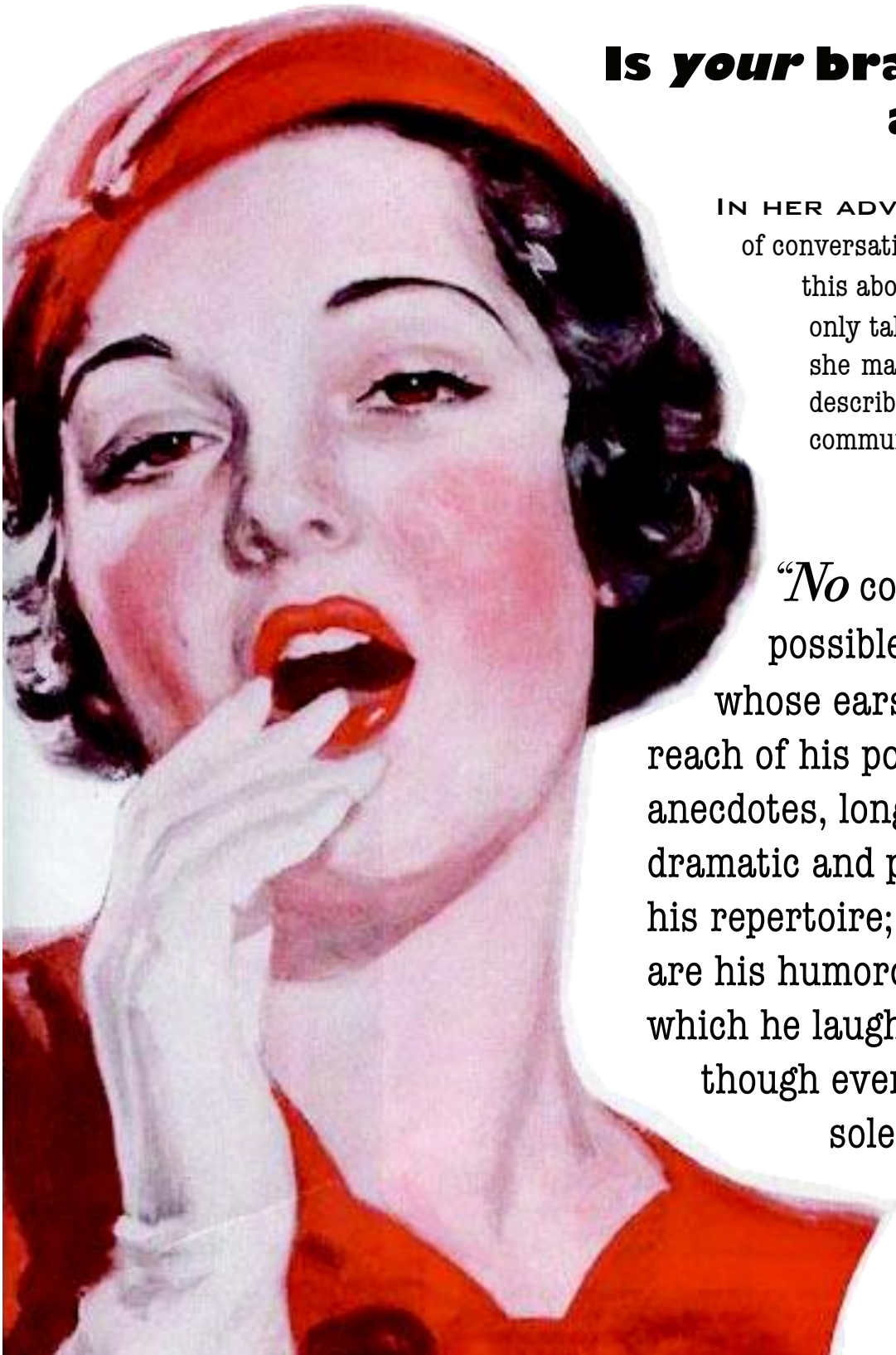
Today, readability formulas have been incorporated into Microsoft Word. Scores are not based solely on vocabulary. Reworking passive sentences and varying sentence length will also improve readability.

Adopting these two principles will help you connect with your readers. Go ahead, try it. Soon you’ll be two-stepping your way to conversational writing.

Is *your* brand a bore?

IN HER ADVICE on the etiquette of conversation, Emily Post wrote this about a person who can only talk about himself -but she may as well have been describing most marketing communications:

“No conversation is possible between others whose ears are within reach of his ponderous voice; anecdotes, long-winded stories, dramatic and pathetic, stock his repertoire; but worst of all are his humorous yarns at which he laughs uproariously though every one else grows solemn and more solemn.”



Conversation – The Ultimate Customer Service

David Reich

www.reichcomm.typepad.com

In simpler times, companies regularly had conversations with their customers, forging customer loyalty. The grocer called you by name, the butcher knew which cuts of meat your family liked and the owner of the hardware store would spend time to help you find that odd-size wing-nut you needed. Conversation and service were the norm. You knew the people you did business with — they knew you and what you wanted.

As businesses expanded and chain stores took charge, the focus went from service to price. Shoppers flocked to discount stores as local merchants and many long-established department stores suffered or closed. Customer service declined, and conversation with customers fell by the wayside.

Technology came along that made it possible to conduct business with virtually no human interaction, with ATMs, toll-free numbers and the Internet.

But with cost-cutting automation, conversation between customer and company too often became limited to “Press 1 for account information; Press 2 to make a payment”, with no option to speak with a real person. It was fantastic when it worked, but if you had a question or needed something a bit out of the norm, you might end up bouncing around in voicemail hell.

And here we are in the early stages of Web 2.0 with new opportunities for consumer input and feedback. With interactive websites, blogs, and the science-fictionesque world of virtual reality at Second Life, there is now unprecedented opportunity for marketers and customers to interact.

The new marketing buzzword is *engagement*, but it really stems from something that marketers had more than 50 years ago — conversation. Personal, up-close conversation with customers — a real two-way dialog. Knowing your customer — what they want, why, when and how. Knowing it because they’ve taken the time to tell you.

It’s hard to have that conversation when you have hundreds of thousands or millions of customers all over the nation, or spread around the world. But perhaps, thanks to the new technology, not so hard anymore.

What will be hard is changing the corporate mindset so marketers can truly talk with their customers every day and, most importantly, listen to what they are saying.

Companies who figure out how to converse with their customers in ways that are easy, inviting and effective stand to excel. They’ll know what customers want, and when it’s time to make changes in what, when or how they’re offering.

Conversation can be the ultimate version of customer service. Call it Customer Service 2.0.

Putting Media Back in the Middle

Brian Reich

www.thinkingaboutmedia.com

Charles Best launched DonorsChoose because he saw a need to provide students in need with resources that our public schools often lack. He created a non-profit organization that allowed teachers to submit project proposals for materials or experiences their students need to learn. These ideas become classroom reality when concerned individuals choose projects to fund. DonorsChoose is a marketplace mechanism for frontline public servants to create the micro-solutions for the very individuals that they serve. “Our users create the content and the wisdom that makes up our work. They are much wiser than anything someone at the top would come up with”, Best told me.

Technology is used to facilitate these, and countless other interactions, in our world today. And DonorsChoose, like so many other organizations, couldn’t exist without the Internet. But Charles Best knows that what truly drives the success of his organization is media.

Media — or to be more clear, what I call the “little m media” — is the information, the experiences and the stuff that we create, consume and share every day. Media is at the core of what organizations do and what inspires their work. Media is what we learn from, talk about, and define ourselves by. It is everything that we create and share — online or off, real or virtual, local or remote. Whether we make it or buy it, borrow it or purchase it, hold it or discard it, media is what helps us to learn, engage and participate.

Organizations must create good media. And when they do, the audience will know how to do the rest. Many organizations have forgotten that simple principle. They pin their hopes on profit or fame. They become satisfied with offering a mediocre service because people use it. We let them do it too. We settle for what is available instead of demanding what is good.

We want to have choice in what they do. We want to have an impact. We want feedback when we give, transparency when we invest, and accountability on everything. That isn’t unique to the non-profit space, it applies to all relationships — whether you purchase a product from a mega-corporation or start a conversation with your neighbor down the block. DonorsChoose provides that. All organizations can. Just make sure the media rules and the rest will follow.

We create media.

We consume media.

We share media.

Relationships are fueled by media.

Conversation is driven by media.

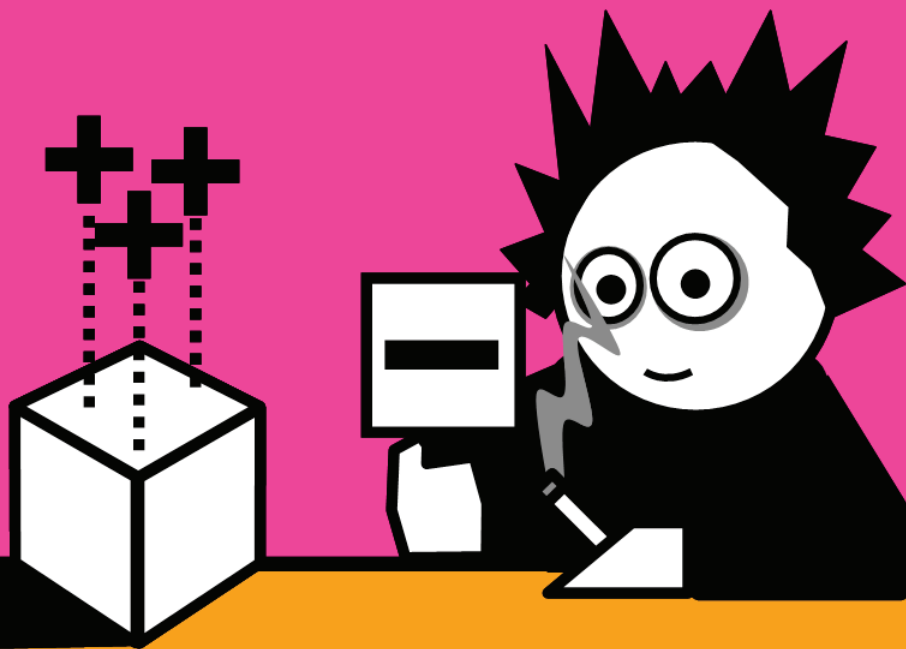
Media rules!

WARMNESS

from Sacrum B. Rown

<http://sacrum-b-rown.blogspot.com>

Brand Warmness is the completingness of what you is all calling conversation! Is this right? It is a way to the front of the queue you are lining! Has is goodness? There is friction of charges and sparkle of fire! Who is the match to be sparking such fire? Me, them, us and you; plus the brand charging that magically hit's us straight in the heart of our matter.



You is talking, I is talking and the brand sends out charges! The charge is a voice and sometimes we is listening.

Graphics and Conversations

Sandy Renshaw and the Team at Purple Wren

www.purplewren.com

In a world where we have three seconds to make a good impression, the adage, a picture is worth a thousand words, is truer than ever.

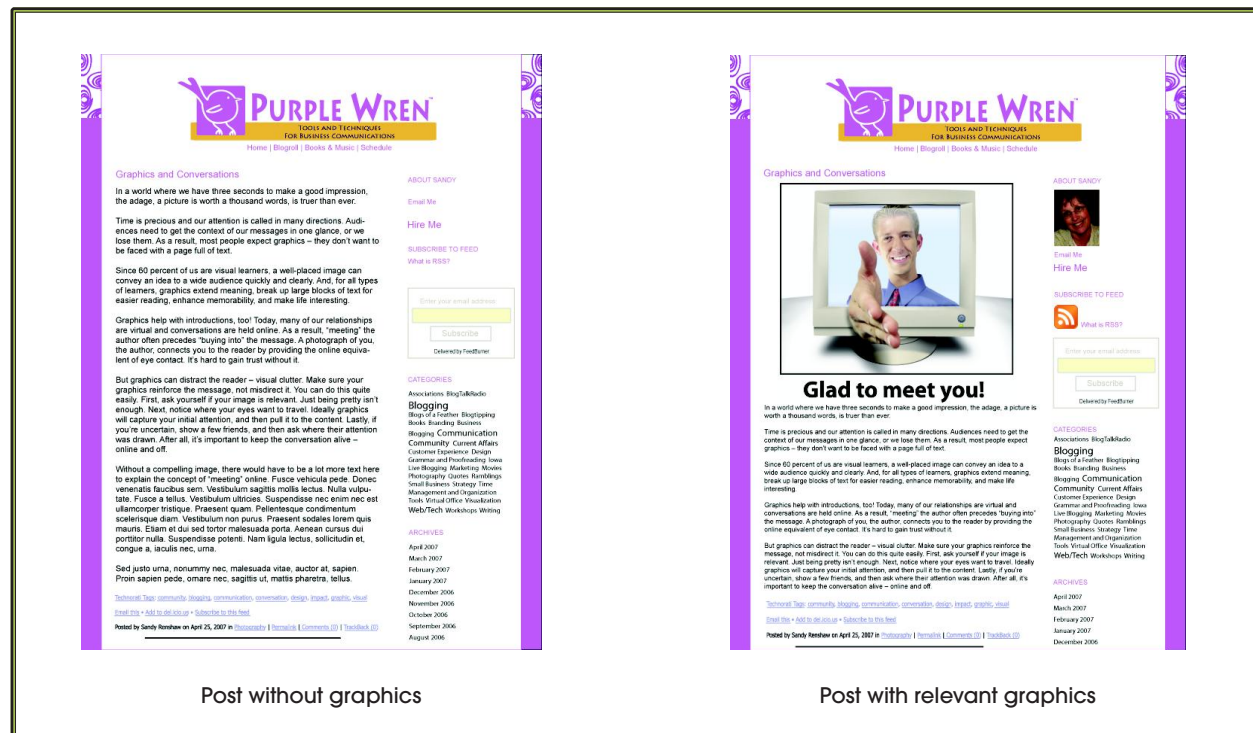
Time is precious and our attention is called in many directions. Audiences need to get the context of our messages in one glance, or we lose them. As a result, most people expect graphics — they don't want to be faced with a page full of text.

Since 60 percent of us are visual learners, a well-placed image can convey an idea to a wide audience quickly and clearly. And, for all types of learners, graphics extend meaning, break up large blocks of text for easier reading, enhance memorability, and make life interesting.

Graphics help with introductions, too! Today, many of our relationships are virtual and

conversations are held online. As a result, “meeting” the author often precedes “buying into” the message. A photograph of you, the author, connects you to the reader by providing the online equivalent of eye contact. It's hard to gain trust without it.

But graphics can distract the reader — visual clutter. Make sure your graphics reinforce the message, not misdirect it. You can do this quite easily. First, ask yourself if your image is relevant. Just being pretty isn't enough. Next, notice where your eyes want to travel. Ideally graphics will capture your initial attention, and then pull it to the content. Lastly, if you're uncertain, show a few friends, and then ask where their attention was drawn. After all, it's important to keep the conversation alive — online and off.



Authenticity-based Branding

Nick Rice

www.nick-rice.com

Right off the bat, I want to get one thing on the table. You do not own or control your brand. People like to talk about branding as an activity or a specific job role. There are countless books written on the subject of branding. Unfortunately, most of them are misguided. You cannot control your brand because your brand is defined by the internal feelings your employees, suppliers, customers and their associates have when they think of or experience you. Since you can't control another person's feelings, you cannot totally control your brand. But you can actively influence and shape their feelings. You can strive for alignment between your desired brand image and their feelings.

Authenticity-based branding starts by understanding those feelings when people think or talk about you. A strong brand is built through the consistently positive conversations of employees, suppliers and customers. Think about it, every call to customer service, every product mentioned in conversation, every order placed, every outbound sales call, every business card handed out, every invoice sent and every other element in which people are exposed to you. There are conversations happening around you right now and yet most companies turn a deaf ear.

Rarely does a Brand Manager focus on participating in those conversations when it comes to branding. They typically look at promotions, advertising, logos, packaging and taglines. So don't stop focusing on feature/benefits or logo color consistency or choosing the perfect words for your tagline. Those are important elements of your overall marketing activities. But to name that "branding" and call it a day is shortsighted. If you continue

to ignore or stifle conversation between employees, suppliers and customers, you're not authentically building your brand.

The best conversations are authentic. They're chats. They don't carry pretenses. They're not sales pitches. Think about how many times you talk about a new restaurant, a new business connection, a bad customer service experience, or any of the other dozens of interactions we all have on a daily basis. As humans, we love to chat. We love to talk about the good things and bad things – especially the bad things – that we encounter. And we love to talk honestly.

So, here are the hard questions you should ask yourself:

- How would you "brand" differently if you started thinking of your customers as friends and relatives instead of targets?
- What would you say differently?
- What new products or services would you offer if you only serviced friends and family?
- How would you price it?
- How would you reduce their risk of choosing you?
- How would you serve them differently?
- How much happier would they be with your new offerings versus your current offerings?

Those are the questions of authenticity-based branding. They create authentic interactions and conversations.

Want to Change the Organization? Change the Conversation

Steve Roesler

www.allthingsworkplace.com

Do you know that *what* you talk about and *how* you talk about it are the frameworks people use to decide *who* you are?

Think about your organization as a group of those people.

In organizations, what people talk about collectively — and how they talk about it — create and reflect what we like to call “culture”. Organizational culture becomes the product of the word pictures we paint as seen by us and the rest of the world.

The potential problem comes when each of us wants to mount words and their personal meaning in our own mental picture frames, set them on the credenza, and consider them a memorable experience to be re-visited and remembered as they were originally. When a new word picture comes along, we either have to buy another frame or dig in and say, “Hey, I really like what I’ve got. I don’t want to spend the time, energy and money changing what I already like”.

Whether it’s bringing in a new accounting system or starting an exercise program, success will come from:

*Critical Conversations Reaching Critical Mass
Create Meaningful Change*

Forty years ago we talked about tasks, got them done and went home. Thirty years ago

we added attention to “the process” and talked about “how” we approached the task — and we spent time learning more about who we were. And now, it’s about task + process+ meaning. “What is it about your organization — or the change you want to make — that enhances the meaning of my life’s work?”.

Shutter-click. Image. Frame

Successful “leaders” and change agents will know that the shutter-click now is about meaningful conversations. Task-oriented memos from on high followed by employee workshops and training are no longer the message. Only relational conversations whose viral aftermath says “Hey, we ought to do this!” will create critical mass that leads to change.

The successful New Leader will realize that organizations are now inhabited by people who are either part of the conversation or disengaged. Internal social media will become the friend of the New Leader or the enemy of change.

The “pictures” of the Renaissance were created by the likes of da Vinci, El Greco, and Raphael. But they were framed, given meaning, and accepted when the conversations in the courts of sponsoring nobles reached critical mass.

Critical Conversations + Critical Mass= Change.
Are you feeling Noble?

At My Grandmother's Table

The Art of Conversation from a Letter Writer's POV

Roberta Rosenberg

www.copywritingmaven.com/the_copywriting_maven

I became a professional letter writer at age six. I wasn't a child prodigy, but I could print my letters legibly. That was enough for Grandma Fanny.

"Sit, Roberta, darling. I'll go get the pad."

My grandmother spoke five languages, a necessity in her little corner of Eastern Europe where Hungary, Poland, Romania, Ukraine and the former Czechoslovakia swapped territory with abandon. (If you're counting, Yiddish was the fifth.)

English, however, wasn't one of them. She arrived in New York at age 40 with my father, age 13, in tow. Fiercely intelligent, but busy with running a household, she taught herself English by reading *The New York Daily News* and keeping a dictionary handy.

But she couldn't write it. The chaos of English spelling, grammar and syntax rules made no sense to her ordered and orderly mind. So I was pressed into letter writing service. Every Sunday afternoon after lunch, she would retrieve her writing tablet and pen and place them in front of me.

"I have three letters to write. Let's get started."

She didn't dictate her letters to me. *No, she expected me to actually write the letter*, even though I had no clue who I was writing to.

"This one is for my sister, Sadie. Write her a letter about what you learned in school this week and then tell her I'll call soon."

So I began. I wrote my grandmother's letters until I left for college. Grandma told me her stories, I shared some of mine, and poured them all into her weekly letters for nearly 13 years. She liked the letters she got back, too.

"Oy, that Roberta. She writes a nice letter, yes?"

I've been a copywriter for 25+ years. Print or web, I write and like it all. But I love writing letters most of all because they remain the most intimate and powerful form of persuasive conversation in print. We rip them in anger and bind them with ribbon. There's a physicality to letter writing that grounds the writer to the reader like no other medium.

We may blog into the void and wonder who's out there, but we write letters to *individuals*, to persons we know or want to know — and to have them know us. There's room for us to engage each other in all manner of conversation in this bravest of new worlds.

So, by all means, let's engage.

Do You Talk Write?

Mike Sansone

www.conversations.com

Don't be nervous. It's okay. You don't even have to imagine your audience in underwear. It's not so bad, ya'know. Just put both hands on the keyboard and start talking ...with your fingers. Write like you talk and more people will hear what you're writing.

If you're hung up on the advice of your English teacher, get over it. Either he didn't explain right ... or he was wrong. Top Journalism professors have been singing the "write like you talk" mantra for decades. A few reasons why:

People are more likely to remember what you've written.

Because they remember it, they are more likely to share your thoughts with others.

We live in the McNews generation. We scan. Lectures don't sustain our attention — neither do long sentences.

Writing like you talk can also be a freeing feeling to those who think they are poor writers. Of course, writing is a muscle that improves with consistent use. Here are a few exercises to build up those muscles.

Get to the Point: You can always elaborate as you get into the story, but unless you want to lose readers ... get to the point likkety-split.

Pause on Purpose: How do you punctuate a pause when you talking? With a sigh? Maybe a single word. Hmmm ... how can we put this in written form? Oh ... we just did, yes?

Read Out Loud: We've all seen this exercise, but do we practice it? If you do, one of two things will happen. Either you'll write like you talk — or talk like you write. For the love of Shakespeare, let's hope it's the former.

Keep 'em Moving: Your words. Your readers eyes. Like they're standing in line at Starbucks waiting for morning coffee. Keep them moving forward or lose 'em.

Listen, when your readers tell you they can hear your voice in the words — you've hit the target.

Still nervous? Don't be. Remember, you can always imagine your audience wearing a clown nose or something.

Starting the Conversation for the Small Business Marketer

Patrick Schaber

www.lonelymarketer.com

Marketing has changed. For the small business marketer the temptation for huge print and media marketing campaigns usually reserved for large corporate budgets has ended. Now more attainable and focused methods of approaching target audiences exist. Social marketing and the Age of Conversation has created new ways to start conversing with customers. Rather than dumping thousands of dollars into mediums that reach only portions of target audiences, businesses now can strategically spend their marketing budgets and reach a very high percentage of those open to listening to their message. Mediums such as search engine marketing, business blogs and RSS feeds have changed the landscape for marketers.

The rise of search engines has allowed for a “meeting place” of sorts between the interested consumer and seller. As the consumers search for their interests, the seller can now be there at the right time in front of the right prospect with an enticing offer. If accepted by the consumer, this offer begins the conversation that can lead to long-term relationships and purchases. The medium of Paid Search has given marketers the chance to place strategic ads on search engine results pages that are triggered by searcher keywords. Done well, sellers can be “at the right place at the right time” on purpose. Targeted, well-placed ads mean small businesses can reach their target audience at the time in the buying cycle when prospects are willing to listen.

More important than the “meeting place” is what happens after the prospect gets to your site. Will the conversation continue or end? This is largely defined by what opportunities you give your prospect. Obviously, an enticing landing page and call to action are important, but blogs or “media rooms” give prospects the chance to interact with businesses. They can share opinions and take away facts and information that are useful to them and their jobs. Accompanying blogs is the RSS feed which allows the prospect (possibly customer now) to leave with a way to receive your information when you update it. This allows the conversation to continue as long as the customer is interested and the business keeps providing enticing information.

All of these new mediums mean one thing — conversations are being started between buyer and seller and they’re happening when both sides are ready to talk and listen.

The New Entrepreneurial Paradigm

Gary Schoeniger
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A revolution is under way. Globalization and technology have converged to create an era of unprecedented opportunity for innovation and entrepreneurship. The barriers are gone. The possibilities are endless.

The problem is that most of us have been conditioned to be employed. Almost from the moment we're born, we begin to adopt social and cultural values that have prepared us to survive in hierarchical organizations where a few people at the top do all the thinking and the rest of us do what we're told. Beset by policies and procedures, we learn to ask permission, to follow the script, to avoid risk and leave our opinions at the door.

And while this may be the mindset that enabled us to survive and succeed in the land of cubicle slavery, it's also the mindset that blinds us to opportunity and our own untapped potential.

Welcome to the new entrepreneurial paradigm.

Amidst the wreckage and the ruins of the old economy, a new breed of entrepreneur is emerging, adapting to a new global economy where the old rules no longer apply, where no one is in charge and no one is coming to the rescue.

To this new breed of entrepreneur, problems are opportunities. Look for problems. (There are lots to choose from.) Use your imagination and creativity to find solutions. Focus on creating value (solving problems) for more people rather than trading time for money. Be creative. Think big.

Learn to think like an insurgent rather than an employee. Take advantage of the glacial nature of organizational change and the opportunities they overlook or leave behind. Be resourceful. Use technology to leverage your network and build trust. EQ is more important than IQ. Be honest. Make things happen in the margins. Do it now. (If not now, when?)

Don't quit your day job. Start small. You don't need money — money dulls your sense of awareness. Barter and bootstrap, connect and collaborate. Think win-win. Reduce your risk by testing your ideas on real customers. Get a grip on costs. Leverage your strengths. Outsource everything else. Stay focused. Run lean.

Entrepreneurs embrace change. Re-invent yourself. Challenge assumptions. Own your mistakes. Stay curious. Push the limits of what you think you are capable of. Do things that make you uncomfortable. Get face-to-face with your customers. Listen. Be reliable. Be remarkable. And when you're ready, quit your day job.

Behavioral Conversations

Ron Shevlin

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Social computing — which Forrester defines as a social structure in which technology puts power in communities, not firms — has grown rapidly, giving rise to this Age of Conversation.

But for marketers across many different industries, customer conversations aren't necessarily verbal conversations — they're often behavioral. Consumers "speak" via the sites they visit, through the transactions and interactions they choose to have, and through their clickstream patterns. Through their actions — not just words — consumers are communicating. Sending clues about their needs, wants, and intentions.

A customer that clicks on the same FAQ entry three days in a row could be sending a clue that she has a need that hasn't been resolved. A customer that accesses educational material on a bank's website isn't just signalling a need for help in that area — he may be indicating that he's open to taking his relationship with the bank beyond simply parking his money in a checking account with the bank. Registering for an email newsletter might not mean a customer wants to receive product offers, but that the product category that the newsletter relates to is an important part of his life.

These are just the one-to-one conversations a single customer has with a firm. But customers care what other customers are doing (and not just saying). Marketers must relate these one-to-one behavioral conversations to the larger community. Individuals within the customer community want behavioral conversations with other members, as well. Which FAQs are customers like me looking at? What educational materials are other customers accessing? Which product features do most customers opt for?

To succeed in the Age of Conversation, it's not sufficient for marketers to engage customers in verbal conversations on social networking sites. Instead, they must develop a new marketing competency — a sense-and-respond competency — to sense consumer needs and intentions based on their behavior, and to respond with appropriate advice, guidance and offers. And in a broader sense, this capability is about understanding trends and directions about the customer community based on their collective actions and behaviors.

The biggest challenges to achieving this ability don't involve technology — they're organizational, political and cultural. The behavioral conversations that customers have with firms cut across business units and functions. Political issues — about who owns the customer, who profits from the conversations and how sharing conversations with the community impacts the brand — will make it difficult for many firms to capitalize on the potential of behavioral conversations.

Building this competency will require database marketing, market research and web analytics functions to work together in ways that few firms have accomplished to date. But the firms that do won't just succeed at building strong customer relationships — they'll build competitive advantages their competitors will find hard to duplicate or overcome.

The Wallflower

Jamey Shiels

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Do you remember those high school dances in the school gym from when you were younger? Do you remember the two groups of people? The ones dancing and the ones lined up against the wall around the gym. Where did you fit in back then? Were you on the dance floor or were you a wallflower? Times seem to have changed but the situation is still the same. When you consider the conversation that is happening online; the growth of interaction, connectivity and communication; are you out there dancing or are you leaning on the wall and watching. Are you a wallflower?

The world today is connected, engaged and interacting. Social media and new marketing are allowing individuals, corporations and brands to interact like never before. The challenge is there for us to step away from the wall and join the dance. There has never been a time like this for individuals, consumers, corporations and brands to engage in conversation about every day life, needs and products.

The sad reality is, according to a recent report from Forrester, that almost 85% of Internet users are either inactive or spectators in the social media space. Only 15% serve as the early adopters, thought leaders and adventurers of this new medium. That presents an incredible opportunity for us to reach out to the 85% and build an audience, build awareness and brand loyalty. The value of that interaction is far more important than any marketing scheme we can craft.

Stepping out from the shadow of the wall requires us to risk exposure. It requires us to be brave and to find our voice. Joining the conversation gives us the opportunity to learn from others, further develop our skills and ultimately establish our expertise and leadership. The risk is there, but the exciting thing is that today, the tools needed to reach out are inexpensive, easy to develop and accessible almost anywhere. We need to challenge ourselves, our clients, and our audience by choosing to participate in the dialog. The fact is it could be more of a risk to you or your brand not to engage in the conversation.

The Age of Conversation is upon us. The time has come for us to choose to participate, to break out of the fear of uncertainty and engage others in the experience of direct interaction and feedback. Take a deep breath, step away from the wall and join the conversation. It's time to dance.

Voice to the Voiceless

Cord Silverstein

www.marketinghipster.com

As I watched the news coverage of the Virginia Tech tragedy and saw the videos of the students and faculty grieving and supporting each other, it reminded me of another tragedy that I witnessed first hand. I remember walking down a New York City street immediately following the collapse of the World Trade Center and being amazed at just how quiet the street was. There was, as always, a great many people on the street, but on that day everyone was so quiet and they all had the same look on their faces: bewilderment, shock and helplessness. I remember thinking to myself on that fateful day in Manhattan, how incredibly helpless I was to do or change what I had just witnessed. I saw those same looks on the faces of the VT students after their tragedy.

Helplessness is one of the worst feelings in the world because we feel powerless to change what is happening to us. We feel alone and isolated with nowhere to turn. Many people feel that the Internet and technology are causing people to be more isolated and that we are losing the art of conversation. I disagree.

Technology is enabling people to connect and converse on levels that we have never had the opportunity to do before. Immediately following the VT tragedy, we saw just how important and engrained technology has become in our lives. While cell phone lines were jammed, VT students went online to social networks like Facebook and MySpace to let their loved ones know they were ok. We, as outsiders, were able to read first hand accounts of what happened and we were given the opportunity to get to know personally the victims of this senseless tragedy through their online profiles and blogs.

We are living in a spectacular time where technology has enabled anyone who wants their voice to be heard an opportunity to do so. People who once felt helpless and voiceless are now empowered. Our communications and conversations do not have the borders or boundaries they once had. In this Age of Conversation, we can communicate, touch and affect others in ways that in years past we could of only dreamt of.

What will define the Age of Conversation? We will. Millions of empowered voices expressing their own opinions, thoughts and experiences for everyone to see, hear and read.

Are You Real?

Nathan Snell

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The sound bursts forth from my cell phone as someone on my contact list displays on screen. “Hey man, how’s it going? How are you holding out?” I answer. “Hey! Good morning! I’m doing all right. Just trying not to think about it”, he responds. We go out for lunch the next day.

Welcome to the new age. An age where the dynamics have changed dramatically.

I notice my number of unread messages has increased by one. A new email:

“RE: Another suggestion” is the email subject. I read the email and continue what has been an ongoing, passionate conversation.

The age of global conversations.

As I work a window pops up and flashes a few times. I have an instant message. “Hey, you have a minute? We need some help”, the person asks. “Sure. What’s up?”, I respond. We talk about their problem and how to solve it.

Not because we had to, because we wanted to. Because of what this new era is bringing in at a blazing pace.

The first person had someone close to them recently pass away and I’m able to be there for them. The second person contacted me involving work with some ideas she has. The third had the financial supporter for the hosting of some volunteer efforts leave and needs some help — so I used our resources to help.

Real conversations. Real relationships.

All these people are customers. Except they’re more than that. They are community members. They are fans. We engage them. We help them become involved in what we’re doing. More importantly, they let us become more involved in what they are doing. We open the lines for conversation. We establish relationships. It is here where the magic takes place. It’s here where your customers become fans that choose to support you. It’s here that you create the most loyal and evangelical fans possible.

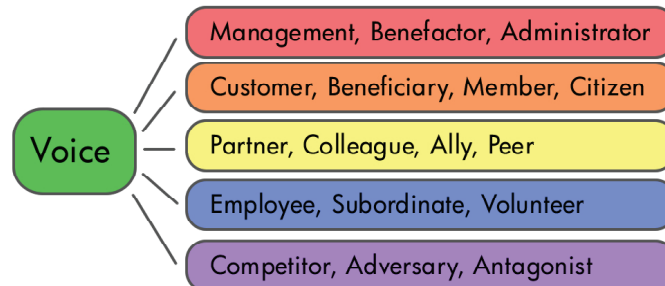
Business is a crowded market. Having authentic conversations, on the other hand, isn’t a crowded market. Not everyone is actually passionate about what they are doing. Jet Blue flies airplanes just as well as American Airlines, but while they’re both in the transport market, Jet Blue isn’t competing that way. They’re engaging in real conversations on their fans’ terms.

It’s now about authenticity, not with “customers”, but with what is the community that supports you. It’s about conversations that show humanity, transparency and build trust. It’s now about showing you.

Collective Intelligence

Mario Vellandi

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The practice of research and inquiry has been with us throughout the ages. We have built intelligence by analyzing synthesized information and data, then adding personal insight and experience to make it relevant. Mankind has applied this common process for scientific, socio-economic and political development in both positive and negative ways including the advancement of medicine, the harvesting and processing of food, and the art of war and provincial management.

Let's add a unique dimension of this process: conversation.

Soliciting feedback and conducting polls is an excellent form of information gathering. By doing so, analysts and decision makers mitigate the risk of making bad judgments based on inconclusive data. When conducted correctly, the process will have an additional benefit: the establishment of trust, loyalty, and appreciation among all participants to the organization or cause.

The illustration shown, classifies voices into five major categories. By starting a conversation with the attitude of a desire to collaboratively create a better product, service, relationship or experience NOW... we exhibit our commitment to unconditional quality and being a true team player. Being firm and sincere will always win attention and command respect. Regarding competitors and antagonists, human behavior would normally not lend itself to voluntary

cooperation and the sharing of feedback or intelligence. However, the improvement of common macro-level processes and goals has historically been a powerful incentive by nations, organizations, and individuals to collaborate so that the tide of excellence and well-being for all boats in the water will rise.

In order to obtain great data and information from your participants, we must follow some basic rules. First, each conversation should be customized to each audience category's profile. Second, give immediate transparency to all submitted information to promote candor and more honest feedback among participants. Third, some form of descriptive data is absolutely necessary; polling is helpful but optional.

After individuals and organizers have collected, analyzed and created intelligence, they must further process it in order to draw value. This is the stage of stripping out "nice-to-knows" and creating actionable intelligence, from which clear organizational and personal strategies can be made. The benefits can include competitive advantages, process improvements, better products/services, improved relationships with others, brand evangelists, and best of all: more goodwill to spread around for all to enjoy.

Now that you know the process, let's just make it simple: start a new conversation today. Be honest and open-minded ... see where it takes you.

Have You Hugged a Blogger Today?

Greg Verdino

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Have you hugged a blogger today?

I have.

OK, maybe not today exactly, but certainly on a few occasions over the past six months. I've also broken bread with bloggers, shaken hands with podcasters, grabbed a cup of coffee with a Detroit high school student who follows me on Twitter. I've spent more than a few hours speaking (*speaking!*) with social media creators, sharing thoughts about business, marketing and life in general.

By my count, I've met or spoken with more than two dozen people that I would never have had the chance to know if it weren't for our respective contributions to the social media community. And each time this happens, I'm floored by the way simple text — just one guy's thoughts about media, marketing, business and life — pecked out on my laptop keyboard in a few spare moments at the end of each day has led to new real world connections with actual flesh-and-blood people.

Having had the opportunity to meet so many social media mavens in the flesh, it's clear to me that our online relationships and digital dialogues might be the most revolutionary aspects of the Age of Conversation, but they are probably not the most important, or even the most interesting.

Sure, online social media is powerful for its ability to amplify the human voice and spur dialog among a widely distributed community of likeminded people. But the Internet didn't invent people talking to people, and connections don't always require Cat-5 cables.

In fact, if you place too much emphasis on the technologies of the social media revolution, you'll miss the point entirely. Online social networks, photo and video sharing sites, blogs, podcasts and virtual worlds may fuel the conversation, but it's the people that use these tools to connect with other people that really matter.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not urging you to step away from your computer and into the local coffee shop. I'm simply reminding you (and maybe even myself) that digital and analogue conversations are two parts of the same whole. Our newest forms of social media get especially interesting when they provide those of us who have gotten to know one another online with a good excuse to log off for a few moments and make use of our oldest forms of social media — the hug, the handshake, the art of the conversation between two people without the intervention of the latest technology.

Community and Conversation

S Neil Vineberg

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This week I've been playing guitar in a production of *Les Miserables* on Shelter Island, a quaint community of approximately 2500 people located on the east end of Long Island. It seems everyone on Shelter Island knows what's going on with everyone else because in a small town, information spreads fast at school, cafés, restaurants, post office, banks, beauty shops, barber shops, marinas and gyms.

Social networking technology enables a similar experience on the Internet. Small, online communities are forming with people from one corner of the globe to another who share similar interests in music, art, politics and culture.

And for those seeking a voice in their community of interest, technology is your amplifier. You can become a publisher and broadcaster. Spread your views and build a community of interest through a blog, podcast, videocast and webcast. If you've got something cool to say, the audience will be there for you.

There is now such a staggering amount of published content out there that information aggregation tools like NetVibes.com are essential so one can monitor and track the explosion in information.

At the edge of it all are microblogs and livestreaming tools like Jaiku.com that help individuals establish a single point of online presence and enable groups of people to maintain constant communication amongst each other 24/7.

So we are all empowered by online tools for community, broadcasting, commenting and sharing, and as the speed of information accelerates, we can stay connected constantly. Do I love it all? You bet. So what's really important to me?

What is important is how we communicate. And to what extent we nurture goodness, kindness and love within ourselves and share it with others through our communication.

Today, my PR business is thriving. We bring deep value to our Internet technology and telecommunications clients and the game is fun, indeed. My greatest joy, however, comes from the qualities of goodness, giving and kindness: finding those qualities in myself and spreading them through my actions, acknowledging them in others, and nurturing them in my communities of interest. And I'm drawn to like-minded people who do the same.

It is my hope is that each of us in his or her own way utilizes community, technology and conversation for the public good, both online and offline. Lets join together in raising personal and collective consciousness in our businesses and communities of interest.

How to Think Like A Fool

Roger von Oech

blog.creativethink.com

Let's suppose you're discussing an issue with some people. But the longer you go on, the more you notice that everyone is saying pretty much the same things. This can be a problem. How to solve it? Why not do what Renaissance kings did to stimulate their imaginations and improve their judgment:

Consult A Fool.

What did the fool do? Simply stated, it was the fool's job to "whack" the king's thinking out of habitual thought patterns. The king's advisers were often "yes-men" who told him exactly what he wanted to hear. The king realized that this wasn't a good way to make decisions. Therefore, he gave the fool a license to parody any proposal under discussion. His candid jokes and offbeat observations forced the king to re-examine his assumptions. By listening to the fool, the king improved his judgment and enhanced his creativity.

What if you don't have a fool handy? *Why not be the fool yourself!* All you have to do is apply a few of the following "fool strategies," and you're in business.

The fool will reverse our standard assumptions. He'll say, "If a man is sitting on a horse facing the rear, why do we assume that it is the man who is backwards, and not the horse?"

The fool can also be irreverent. He'll pose riddles such as, "What does a rich man put in his pocket that the poor man throws away?" When he answers, "Snot," he forces us to re-examine the sanctity of our everyday rituals.

The fool can be cryptic. He'll say the best way to see something is *with your ears*. Initially, this may seem weird, but after you've thought about it, you might agree that listening to a story conjures up more images than watching television.

The fool can be absurd. Having lost his donkey, a fool got down on his knees and began thanking God. A passerby saw him and asked, "Your donkey is missing; why are you thanking God?" The fool replied, "I'm thanking Him for seeing to it that I wasn't riding him at the time. Otherwise, I would be missing as well."

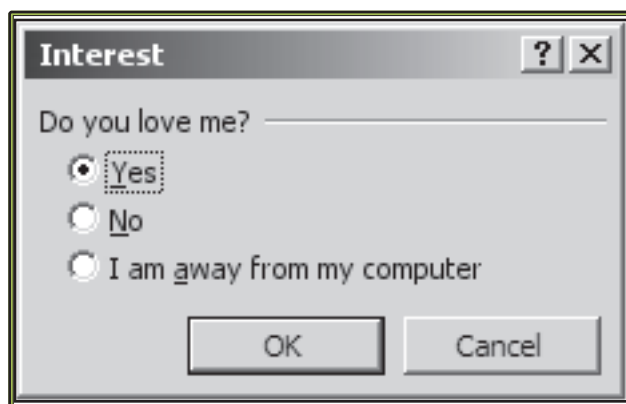
The fool will take the contrary position in most conversations. Whereas many people would agree that, "If a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing well," The fool might say, "You don't have to do things well! Indeed, it's okay to do them poorly; otherwise you'll never let yourself be a beginner at a new activity."

The great benefit of the fool's antics and observations is that they stimulate our thinking. Next time you're involved in a discussion in which everyone is thinking the same way, why not try thinking like a fool. People will thank you for jarring them out of their "group-think" mentality. They'll might even offer to buy you lunch!

Untitled

Kimberly Wells

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Not that long ago, dating was a contact sport. Couples got together when they wanted to talk. But, for singletons in the 21st Century, email make-ups and IM break-ups are quickly becoming a shocking standard.

Like it or not, typed technology has taken over communication in the field of dating. Gone are handwritten love letters, hours on the telephone and long walks on the beach. These have been replaced by email, IM, and text messaging, bringing with it a new level of cowardice and distain.

The truth is, most people would rather spare themselves the embarrassment of a face-to-face breakup and go with a written message. A sheltered approach for the sender perhaps, but the recipient usually has another opinion.

“Two out of my three boyfriends broke up with me over email. Only one was man enough to confront me.” — Heather¹

The trend shows no sign of stopping. While 11% of adults surveyed thought it was acceptable to break up via email, DIY IM divorces are still a thing of fantasy. For now, you’ll have to self-moderate your significant other’s electronic access and make your own decisions about how much face-to-face time you need.

Oh, and for those of you considering a breakup via text messaging ... don’t even think about it, loser.

¹ Name has been changed to protect her exes.

The Conversation Age Enabled

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Imagine being deaf, dumb, blind — like Helen Keller — caught in your own world with no way out, perhaps filled with brilliant discussion, conversation and brainstorm, but only with yourself. As enlightened and clever as you may be, you stagnate for lack of newness. Your world is a closed loop, a closed system.

Then, imagine an “enabler” entering your world. For Helen Keller, it was connecting water (a physical object) with language (an abstraction) — language consisting of words, sentences, context ... Language allowed her to take part in the world of senses, despite her handicaps. It compensated for them and became a path to new concepts and ideas, to communication and creating value. Language transformed Helen Keller and her life experience.

Similarly, an enabler has entered our world — Web 2.0 and social media.

Where we were once isolated in a mostly bland, slow-moving world, we now enter a richly alive environment where information flows like water out of a faucet — Google it, Mapquest it, YouTube it or check it out on Wikipedia. Answers are readily available. Books — once static entities — have become entry points for ongoing discussions with authors. Corporations — once cold, faceless entities — can now express personality and demonstrate commitment based on input from its community! Tremendous enthusiasm or passion for a topic no longer signifies eccentricity. Rather it signals engagement and enriches conversation, transforming the experience, adding dimension and relevance.

We no longer have to face the world alone. Advice, success stories, best practices are readily available through blogs, discussion groups, book clubs and online forums. We have but to ask and acknowledge interest.

Access to information, once the domain of a select few, has been democratized. Anyone with curiosity, with the desire to develop better ideas or solutions for solving philosophical quandaries, branding dilemmas, or business strategy fiascos can take part. Ideas — through online discussion — can be combined, perspectives from around the globe added, multiple disciplines taken into consideration and everyone’s opinion as it relates to the human experience intertwined!

As dizzying to the non-initiate, the choices available in the Age of Conversation enable a true conversation, with information flowing in both directions. Envision responsibility, authenticity, accountability and integrity as the current.

As with water flowing out of a faucet, just a sip refreshes and revitalizes. Immerse your whole being and realize for yourself how welcoming and conducive to brilliance it is. Realize, too, how quickly you adapt to it. It truly represents a conversation enabler for all.

Bringing It Back to Local

Craig Wilson

stickyads.com.au

The Internet is amazing. Websites, blogs, podcasts, streaming video and e-commerce open the doors to a world of business opportunities. It allows small businesses to speak to almost anyone.

However, this broad scope and randomness can also be a weakness for businesses who are not structured, or do not have the desire to sell to the world. How can regional businesses harness the immediate communication and broadcast possibilities of the internet and apply them to the market they actually want to serve? That's the challenge Sticky Advertising (Newcastle, Australia) is attempting to solve via a community focused website called Hunter's Best (<http://www.huntersbest.com.au>).

The goal of Hunter's Best is to combine the best aspects of the web at one location for one regional community. It will provide streaming video, mini-business pages, business directories, blogs, news, weather and entertainment for the Newcastle and Hunter Regions from one site. It's an online channel for the community in an era when local content is being reduced in old-world media due to "network rationalization".

Phase one of the site was informative and more traditional in content. Business profiles, editorial comment, movie news, gig guides, surf and weather reporting and a news ticker were the main elements.

Phase two involves the implementation of more interactive content; online videos and advertisements for businesses, movie trailers, video news, video and audio samples of local bands and competitions.

Phase three is about community-driven content. Video of local events and activities will be lodged by viewers. Blogs will provide the community with both an alternative point of view to the mainstream media, as well as an opportunity to respond and begin more meaningful dialogues on a diverse range of regional topics.

Email and mobile phone databases will allow businesses to communicate directly with audiences who have chosen to opt-in. Surfers could have daily local surf reports and messages sent directly to their email or phone. Live music fans could receive personal messages from artists encouraging them to be at the next gig.

It is during phase three that Conversation Age dynamics will really allow for the community to drive the site, its content and direction. Hunter's Best should then become a media for the community expressing the true voice and personality of the region.

Hunter's Best is taking the best of the web and bringing it back to a local level, so that regional viewers and businesses can see the forest from the trees.

The Lowered Fence of Collaboration

Steve Woodruff

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Back in the “old days”, the neighborhood consisted of a few blocks in a well-defined geographical area. Some folks never moved away, and their best (and perhaps only!) friends were those delivered to them by circumstances of habitat.

Neighbors interacted across the fence, or on the park bench. At various times, people would be out in their yards, and have the opportunity to exchange words and ideas in a common space.

We are much richer now!

While we still have nearby families and friends for support and fellowship, we now have a neighborhood far greater in scope. Collaboration and communication via the web means that I can now find others of shared interest — wherever they may be. I can create my own neighborhood, based on common professional interests, shared life experiences and mutual hobbies. The common space has no boundaries.

By operating several blogs, I have recently been in touch with a number of other people whom I now consider friends, without having (yet) met them face-to-face. They are neighbors, and we interact regularly via keyboard and broadband connections. They open up their thoughts and lives on their blogs and through their messages, as do I. And when one is in need or seeking help, these neighbors rush to give support. I would welcome any of them to a bench in my backyard for a chat, because they are now part of the neighborhood.

It is good for our character development (if for no other reason!) to be placed among neighbors and family members apart from any control or choice of our own. But it is equally good to actively create our own extended family and neighborhood. The fences are indeed low. And the fellowship is very sweet!

Graphic: Rebecca Jordan Indelicato

<http://www.rljdesign.com/home.htm>

Connect the Unconnected

Troy Worman

www.troyworman.com/wordpress

Hola! Thank you for tuning into The Age of Conversation. Now, plug-in and change the world.

Step 1: Plug in

Join a social network. Social networks abound! Wikipedia's list of social networking sites is perhaps the most inclusive (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites). Pick one that sounds interesting to you and sign-up. For commentary and opinion on social networks, read Danah Boyd (<http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/>). For specific How-Tos, read the Getting Started page of your chosen social network host. Do it!

Step 2: Build relationships

Typical networking skills and techniques apply. If you don't know where to start, link-in me or friendster me or invite me. I would love to help. Or contact one of the other writers herein. Or learn as you go. But strive for proficiency. Proficiency begets efficiency and efficiency is necessary in order for you to scale your network in the digital (and meat) world.

Step 3: Stretch!

Don't settle for participation. Extend the conversation. Ask yourself, "Who is obviously missing from this conversation?". Or, "What less obvious tangents might be relevant to this confabulation?". If it is a local conversation, consider the global implications. If it is a global conversation, what is the local impact? Broadening or narrowing the scope of a conversation can completely shift its focus. Conversely, a change in perspective can change the conversation's breath.

Whatever you do, breathe. And stretch! Reach out.

Step 4: Connect the unconnected!

Who are the unconnected? Look around. They are the people you don't see. Listen. Theirs are the voices you don't hear. They are the absent. Sometimes they are easy to forget as we go about our hectic days, rich with lattes and wireless networks. They are the homeless in New Orleans. They are the starving in Africa.

What can you do? How can you connect the unconnected and change their world?

And change our world.

Creating Video Conversation

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Marketing is becoming less about finding a way to sell and more about communicating with your consumers. It's about talking about the people who buy from you not about what you're selling. But adapting to this mindset, this uncontrolled mass of conversation, especially as it is occurring online, is proving increasingly difficult for marketers.

Broadcast media has been a great way to communicate to your consumers but lacks that crucial conversational element. Consumers now want to tell you what they think ... and it pays to listen.

The time is ripe to explore the conversational (rather than merely presentational) potential value of online video. Video can be a great invitation for people to chat, discuss and engage with you. You can gain instant feedback from encouraging participation and the more active your consumers are, the more free word-of-mouth marketing you get.

Video creation remains a niche consumer interest. According to Hitwise, only 0.16% of YouTube visits result in video uploads. What video creators often lack is a specific motivation or inspiration. Give a little of your creativity and effort and you might just inspire the nascent online video director in your viewers and remember, due to the nature of the internet, often only a minority have to be involved to create a major visible effect.

Some of the more famous online vloggers (video bloggers) on the Internet have already seen the benefits and possibilities that viewer participation opens up. ZeFrank, an online vlogger who completed a year-long series of daily vlogs this March, marvelled at how a random call for viewers to dress up their vacuum cleaners and take photos provoked 1000 submissions in 24 hours.

Blendtec, a blender manufacturer, regularly receives thousands of views and hundreds of comments for its "Will it Blend" video series, in which technicians blend anything from golf balls to garden rakes according to viewer suggestions. Blendtec is receiving constant consumer input as to how to make their marketing campaign more successful and sustainable. As a result, Blendtec is selling as many blenders in a single weekend as they used to in a record month.

Video is a language consumers can understand and displays an openness they will appreciate. The nature of constant consumer feedback keeps this conversation authentic. Motivate your consumers to use video to talk with you and you'll have your own media group working for you in no time. Now get creative if you want to create buzz!

“Don’t Give Me Songs. Give Me Something to Sing About” *

Faris Yakob, Naked Communications

Talent Imitates, Genius Steals — farisyakob.typepad.com

Human beings have an inbuilt desire to spread their own ideas. There are compelling anthropological reasons for this. We pass on our ideas in order to modify the minds of people we interact with, to make them more like ours, because this delivers an evolutionary advantage: there is safety in numbers.

So people are already primed to propagate ideas. However, the mechanisms that created this urge to pass things on are set up to favor our own ideas, not other people’s ideas and certainly not brand ideas, unless people have been given, in some way, ownership of them.

This leads to an inherent tension in the Age of Conversation. On the one hand, brands desperately want consumers to pass on their ideas — word of mouth has always been the most powerful communication channel because people believe other people. Word of mouse is more powerful — it’s faster, has exponentially greater reach and, unlike spoken messages, it’s archived. On the other hand, brands want to maintain tight controls on how their brand is represented in the world and any deviation from these guidelines brings down the wrath of the brand guardians. When programmer Jose Avila created FedExFurniture.com, to display artistic creations he constructed solely from FedEx boxes, he was issued with a desist order for infringement of copyright.

Brands have been giving people songs but that’s not enough anymore — they want something to sing about.

Today, brands can’t stick to a single song sheet. People have wrestled back control of brands because each of us has a voice now and we can make ourselves heard — online everyone is equal. If we choose to all sing a different song, the brand’s solo will be drowned out.

Propagation planning is a model for communications that takes this into account. People are our partners in communication. Not a target audience and not just nodes for further transmission, but partners in the production, modulation, development and distribution of brand ideas.

In order to give people ownership of brand ideas, and therefore give them a reason to propagate them, we need to provide tools and assets, give them permission to remix and re-imagine the ideas we create and realise that the more people play with our ideas, the further they spread, the more meaning they accrue, the stronger our brands become.

* Buffy the Vampire Slayer

