
THE DIGITAL STRATEGY OF BRANDS TODAY

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Índice

INTRODUCTION	1
1 THE META-BRAND	1
2 BRANDROIDS	2
3 META-BRANDS	2
4 IN REVERSE IN THE NEW STAGE	3
5 DYNAMIC UNITY	3
6 THE BRANDING IMPERATIVE	4
7 THE TOTAL DEVICE	4
8 THE SEARCH INTERFACE	5
CONCLUSION	5
REFERENCES	6

INTRODUCTION

THESE days brands have a strategy. Period. It is no longer about having both an offline and an online strategy. There is just a strategy. And it encompasses everything, from touch-points to digital screens, cloud and mass media. It is just a massive establishment in which there is a manipulation of data. What brands are seeking is a better understanding of “audience” and “agency”, meaning what makes an audience enjoy a product, service or idea, and how people act upon it. Agency is key here. Of course brands do data-tracking with all the tools at their disposal, and they are also aware that the new economical currency is immaterial, since Ideas and Creativity are post-industrial society’s new engine. Nothing flees from the grid and its on-going revolution. Everything a brand reaches to has become strategic of sorts.

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1 THE META-BRAND

It has been said that "it is Society that teaches us how to fail, not Nature"(Darwinism). And what this means is that in each and everyone of us there is a winner. It is in our nature, to fight, to win. So only society would teach us different in behalf of moral and ethics and law. Only people repress people. Considering this, a brand today is something more than just icons, branding and a discourse, it is a resource of tools. And within the brands’ digital strategy they are either interested in making ourselves winners or they just target those people they already know that are winners. As we look into the digital domain turned into a new environment, media is just media, and a strategy is just a strategy. Times changed but despite the change in the architecture of media, the main elements are still the same: discourse, tactics, branding, media, and how to better reach people.

Take for instance social media like Facebook: this is a case of a meta-network or a meta-brand. It exchanges data with other brands, and in itself it is a brand of the new age. It is a strategic architecture for third party brands to better comprehend the final user. Yes, user, because in this day and age, beside being consumers, we are altogether users of some service or media tool. An in this new environment the digital strategy of brands changes. Brands are talking to each other and they are selling us, our data. Corcoran says: "new opportunities"favor "the Web-conscious brand" (2007, 371). And Facebook is a clear example of how the opportunities match a brand that is aware of its digital status. As we do pretty much everything online we are sitting targets for brands that extend their architecture, seeking moments and time frames to better

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reach us. However there is one key principle that still works out for brands. Morgan has the answer: "The Future of Branding is Marketing 'with people' and not at 'them'"(2012, 2). It makes sense. We need people, we are in the age of people and opinions, and brands, as strategic as they are, they establish a discourse towards us. In the overall the technology has changed but the contact cycles are not the same, they have increased amidst the revolution of new media platforms that we see, mostly being mobile media.

We are told by Fred Polak in his discourse on "The Image of The Future" that the "imagined tomorrow is today's idea" (1973, 179). And it is getting harder and harder to speak about the future since everything we do in digital media tends to become the past, a sort of fast past. So the question at hand is not the imagined tomorrow, but rather "today's idea". Brands and their digital strategy target today's ideas. Ideas, following authors such as Daniel Pink are the engine of the new economy. We acquire, we sympathize, we connect, we join something thanks to the power of the new ideas. We are getting too much used to the power of ideas. Gallardo also insists on the idea of the surprise: "There are two things we can say for certain about the Future: it will be different and it will surprise, (...) [being] dynamic"(2012, 6). The problem like William Gibson once said is that "the future already exists. It just is not equally distributed". And around us everything is getting too much technical, mediatized. Gibson is aware that Technology is unstoppable and it "redefines the usage of things" as soon as it arrives at the "Street". So, besides corporations, the only thing that can change a technology are people, once some type of gear reaches the street. All the people can change all the media. Just like corporations. Two sides of the very same coin.

2 BRANDROIDS

In his book about emotional branding and love-marks, Kevin Roberts (2004) calls this type of consumers in our discussion as the "Brandroids". The reason why he does it is because we are fast responders to brands machinations and also because we cannot disregard that we are like androids automatically responding to the stimuli from brands machine-like discourse. Brands know how and what we think. We just happen to respond automatically. As in nature, we see automatism taking place. One of the issues most in vogue today is Big Data. The whole packs of data that flow into our

accounts and from our accounts to the brands allow the latter to build rock-solid strategies. Some may call this data-centricity. More and more we see that brands rely on data, rather than on subjective inputs.

Brands are now interface brands, like Amazon, with all products and services we need, available to search and find, "from A to Z". Hence all the marketing around this slogan. If brands become interface brands, then we need to be careful when and how we interact with these interfaces, because these interfaces only guide us toward purchases. They are not neutral. If the whole Web becomes an architecture of interface brands, then it will become a Flow Point, a place where we go from A to B, while shopping happens in the meantime, somewhere. And it seems true that the Digital is here to stay. Secondly, the Digital is Mobile. And thirdly, the Desktop is dead.

Then there is the question of the generation. These days a generation is no longer a 30 years period, it is way shorter, because of fashion trends, media usage and media exposure. What Kerckhove says makes sense: there is an "Always-On Generation", that is to say a Generation that already grew up handling the Mobile Phone and is Always Connected (2010, LOC 28-397). Since we are always connected we are always at the reach of brands and their strategies. And the computer, the desktop computer, is no longer the core of the interactions between people and the brands. Author Wessling dedicates a full book to the Post-PC Era. In agreement with him, "Post-PC is the step into a world where the Computers get eliminated. What remains is the User. It's about the people and not the machine"(2011, Principle 6, 115-116, para.25). Now, more than ever, this is the ultimate truth. The user is the key, his agency within the worldwide audience is where the brands are depositing their focus on.

3 META-BRANDS

If everything in the future becomes scrolling media, and streaming screens, we may need in the future a New Operating System For Brands because brands are becoming so much more than isolated agents, they are becoming an environment of their own, fomenting their own product ecosystems, like Apple, Google, Amazon, Huawei, Samsung and others like Microsoft. The new concepts in town are "Continuity. Continuum. Synch". We start something in some medium, then we continue on another, and everything we do is synchronized.

Nothing is lost. There is no save button to click on. Things just are, there, wherever that may be. For authors like Bauman the problem starts in the way social media treat people: this society is a “confessional society”. People publish everything online. All their lives are online, at the mercy of third parties, be them good or evil.

There is a thing that Gallardo calls the 6 Rs, which are “Reason, Return, Rouser, Reputation, Relationships and Resistance” (2012, 16). Let’s break this into parts. Today’s users are people using a rational space, the cyberspace. Brands expect return from ourselves. Brands attempt to awake us, to call for our attention. Every brand, product or person has a reputation. And relationships are what brands want to establish with us to know us better. The resistance is either us against the brands or we with the brands against an adversary brand. This background establishes a dynamic that is like a competition environment where everybody wants to be a winner and all brands use their strategies to become something more and more powerful.

Forrester sees the question this way: “To succeed in the Connected World, Marketers must create Connected Brands: Brands that continuously engage with people when they want, where they want, and how they want – particularly through Social Media”(2012, 2). This is absolutely true, but because we are in the age of ideas, brands must find and help spread the gorgeous and enticing new ideas to get the attention of the audiences who are supposed to trigger agency events. We need to go past discourse right into action. We could also say that the brands want to become a “meta-brand”, and it means it should start with a “meta-idea”.

4 IN REVERSE IN THE NEW STAGE

“It seems to me this perspective has the Medium and the Message reversed. We humans are not the medium for Information; Information is a Medium for humans. We Are the Content – the Message” (in Rushkoff, 2013, Chapter 5, 493-494–564, para.51-52). This means that change occurred. We, humans, now users of everything since owning something is getting rare, we rent, lease and subscribe, are now the content for social media. We are not in control of the media, we are its content. A good example is Twitter. We are in Twitter, and it gets out of control. The other aspect of this reverse is that brands that perform as “platforms” for activities’ patternization or a tool for organizing activities are focusing more on us as

their by-product. The brand turns the products, as long as it remains strong, inevitably into an “Augmented Product” (Kapferer, 1991, 213), and in the end we are the ones who turn into an augmented product as well, by displaying products and their logos as if we are in a tribe, showcasing the cult we follow.

The reverse also has to do with the empowerment, while it was supposed to empower people it just so happens that the digital strategy of brands is rendering brands into almighty entities. Brands now are the empowered. Gardner & Davids indicate the 4Cs as something important in terms of 21st century faculties, being them “Critical Thought, Creative Thought, Collaboration and Community” (2013, 252). At first glance these 4 Cs seem to be what social media helped us to foment and expand, but on closer inspection we find out that these things are in reverse; they are becoming scarce. The endless scrolling we find on social media is reducing our critical thought, creativity is more like a pro thing these days, and only collaboration tools thrive and not always for the best reasons. As for communities they appear, develop and get empowered, but it depends on who is driving their agency. The kind of audience they truly are.

To put it simple, the architecture of brands today is something very well connected, it matches a grid of experiences and it requires on our side, our critical thought to notice and engage a sort of system-thinking. We are just dealing with systems here. Everything around us is getting systematic and technical. It is a rational environment designed to understand us and connect to us on an emotional level. “Post-Digital Age” is the expression Framp-ton (2012, 1) uses to depict our era. However we must say it is not post- in the sense that the digital is over, but rather in the sense that the digital was just triggered and there is no way to go back. “The old days of pushing products and services to Mass Audiences are over. The Internet has become the User’s stage for Experience” (2001, 231).

5 DYNAMIC UNITY

Celia Lucy compares (2004) the architecture of a brand to a set of parts. Much as the automobile is an idea, in the end there is no single object, but rather a set of parts. For Lury the brand has this dynamic unity (2004, 3) that makes it distinguishable, easily recognizable and remain in our mind. In this sense a brand is a set of icons, discourse, branding, logos, ethics, behavior and systems. What

changed is that the “touch points of brands will be digital or digitally augmented” (Frampton, 2012, 1). And we are just getting used to that. Brands becoming digital but at the same time they are vast ecosystems. Brands have a unified orientation, one identity, one system and we are all consumers in these United States of Brands. Other authors such as Breakenridge (2001, 27) speak of “cyberbranding”. But as for now the brands are not cyber. I mean they are digital, so they are cyber, but every brand is cyber, so it gets redundant. Let’s just call them brands. The strategy is where the digital really is focusing on us.

Enterprises need to function as “connectors” says Boyd (2013, 2). And not just companies and enterprises but people who connect to brands are becoming connectors. Take for instance the YouTubers. They help us connect with the brands. And there is nothing wrong about it. The thing is that what is growing is what Gustavo Cardoso labels as the “Society of Screens” (2013). Screens proliferated so much that they turn the touchpoints and mobile media in perfect spots for an engaging experience with the brands digital positioning.

Dynamic unity is what turns the brands into something coherent. Of course brands are into control, agencement and optimization. The purpose of the brand is to unify everything and everyone into its ecosystem. The objective is to render the user-consumer into a user-empowered. We tend to join brands that empower us, that help us grow, grow better and evolve. We are all working it out together as a team. The key for this success is relationships’ technologies, the way brands establish their architecture around us to promote ideas, trends, products and services.

Vasilache believes that:

“Semiotics, essentially the study of Signs and Symbols as elements of Communication, explains how people extract meaning from Words, Sounds and Images. When Semiotic principles are applied to Visual Identity and messaging, a product, event, company or service can be reduced to a Simple, Easily Recognizable Symbol that conveys multiple layers of Information” (2012, 3).

In the game-changing environment of today’s brands, semiotics is crucial. A symbol is supposed to convey layers of data that people extract. So there is an input from the brands, and then a second moment of extraction from our side. We are decoders of what the brands encoded.

6 THE BRANDING IMPERATIVE

Cooke points out the present “Branding Imperative” (2012, 207) since brands are forcing their branding exposure to make us acknowledge them easily. The environment for brands to use semiotics and graphic design to engage us is renewed. As Antony Young is aware of “the rules of Engagement have changed. Digital and data have formed powerful bedfellows. And this has been transformational for marketers” (2010, 3). This means that data and branding are becoming one discourse in which brand identity and user information allow a dynamic unity to exist in which corporate speech and user agenda merge.

Barthes used to speak about the “System of Images” (1975, 33). We are all targeted by this system. But also, inputs from Cooke underline that “Brands are Belief Systems” (2012, 65). We connect to their identities, we communicate with their communities. We are all on the same boat here. For authors, such as Schmidt & Cohen these Media-Immersed Societies of nowadays are clearly “Advanced Societies” (2013, Chapter 1, 30-684, para.2). This is not a problem. In fact, the more advanced we are the better, the issue to be resolved is whether or not too much media is a healthy thing or not.

The branding imperative also means that Massive Digitization Demands Orientation. The Public is carrying Media with himself. This new “Audience Agency” (Evans, 2011, 95), or “Audience Agencement” is implying modifications. People are empowered, yes, but they are slaves to media devices, the latter are rendered personal media. Breakenridge claims: “Embrace the ‘Empowered Customer’ Concept” (2001, 124). And that is what we have done. Breakenridge referred we are living an “Age of Empowerment” (2001, 123). And this is also true. But at the same time the imperative brands connect to us, we also connect to them. It is a two-way street. We are becoming the brands and the brands are becoming us. Gibson says that there are “creatures of the Screens” (2010, 155). And it all began with social media and the motto of Friends, Fans & Followers on social networks like Facebook and Instagram.

7 THE TOTAL DEVICE

Most people have a smartphone or tablet. Desktop PCs adoption is decreasing. And with the new personal media outlets in our hands we are more social than before. In agreement with Radwanick

et al, "Digital Natives suggest communications to become social"(2012, 14). The problem is that the "Digital Natives" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) are not the prime coin of this change anymore. Everybody is. We are all connected regardless of age or generation.

In the report concluded by IBM Global Business Services, entitled "Beyond Advertising: Choosing a Strategic Path to The Digital Consumer", accomplished by Saul Berman, et al (2009), it structures three types of publics in development: the "Massive Passives", the "Gadgetiers", and the "Kool Kids". The first one, the massive passives, are more into mass media and do not lean into screens of computers. The second one, the gadgetiers tend to look for new technology and they do consume passive media, but they are more halfway into digital stuff. While the kool kids are totally into the digital media and pursue a device for everything. They want and need a total device. Here comes the smartphone. The smartphone has become undoubtedly this gear the kool kids are looking for. And since brands use their strategies to engage and entangle us in their ecosystems, the smartphone is highly relevant for brand connection because they allow apps and games.

Chris Anderson speaks of "Hyper-Distribution" (2007) and Mark Pesce speaks of "Webcast"(2007). They are basically speaking about the same phenomenon. However without this distribution, neither piracy networks, or Netflix would perform the way they do now. We are children of the broadband 5G networks era and it means that now we are all connected to brands that bypass save, they foment sharing and all goes up into the cloud. The total device is the device that works out as a remote control for all these tasks besides functioning as the center for relationships' technologies.

8 THE SEARCH INTERFACE

We look into the news and we narratives involving CEOs that are actually influencers, like Jeff Bezos from Amazon, or Elon Musk from Tesla, or Tim Cook from Apple, or DJ Koh from Samsung. "Consumers don't buy as much Products as they buy Narratives"(Gibson, 2010, 21). We are into narratives, we love characters, stories with a bad side, and we also love heroes. Now, if we consume more narratives than products (because of the news we consume), where is the search interface comes in? It began with search engines and especially with Amazon. Pretty much every app we use and website we log into has a search command.

There is just too much information. We need guidance. "(...) when a Consumer makes the initial Connection, it's not about 'Content'; it's about the 'Brand'. (...) There was a time when 'packaging' had little impact (...). For Visually-Oriented, Media Savvy Generation, it's about more than just the message; it's also about the 'Brand'" (Cooke, 2012, 33). And this brand is something we search for, inside it, like it happens on Amazon, the now called "Everything store".

Today "Engagement" (Passikoff, 2014, 1) is crucial. We stand deep inside the "Orwellian Event"[Orwell style] indicated by Bauman (2000, 27). The Digital Strategy of Brands implies that we remain inside the control space of brands. They talk to us, they guide us and they suggest products to us. The generation more inclined to be at the mercy of the brands are the digital natives, or the so-called iGen. Stephen Molloy defends that "the iGen ['Internet Generation'] is the under 18s – a young but powerful market with significant sway over their parents. They were born after the rise of the Internet, so they know no world without it" (2013, LOC 1945-76-4186).

Search is relevant in a world where everything is big. There is just too much data, characters, products, communities, issues and trends. Sasaki speaks of the "Big Narrative scheme"(2012, 20) when it comes to transmedia, but generally speaking brands are working out a big scheme, they are all wired up to engage us regardless of whatever it is we are doing. From a media perspective this is what Jenkins calls a "Convergence Culture" (2006). It took a while but it is the architecture we are facing now.

CONCLUSION

Now we swipe on Facebook and there is a flow, we notice the Twitter feed, and there is flow. We open a foldable smartphone into tablet mode there is continuity. We use the Apple Store App on an iPhone there is continuity. We share pictures from a Huawei smartphone straight into a Huawei laptop with no lag. Simultaneity means that all these things and more work around us thinking about us thanks to big data and machine analytics. Giovagnoli thinks that the basic characteristics of the "Narrative Contract" are what is Hyper-Connecting the authors to the Users (2011, 24). Yes, there is a hyper-connection. We cannot flee from that in the age when smartphones are 5G broadband enabled. Mark Poster, for instance, notices that "In the Second Age of Machines Reality

becomes Multiple” (2000, 43). And we are still dealing with the problems of being connected all the time in multitasking especially.

Another interesting fact is that Bauman assures that for the Social Media Users, the networks have become their “Default Address” (2011, 2). And from the brand’s side it means that now they know where we stand, much as Amazon knows where we live in. On the other hand there is this spread of “Fun Culture” (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2010, 173) on YouTube, Reddit, Vimeo, and Facebook. While we are being entertained with these funny videos and other trivia, brands seem not to be something stable. Lunenfeld criticizes this paradigm labeling this kind of activity as “Unfinished Brands” (2001). And as matter of fact, brands today are unfinished, that is why they are always requiring connection, updates and upgrades. They want to synch with us to establish a better branding imperative and make us avoid searches. They already know what we want.

For Ridley & Parsons this is an “Imagination Age” (2010), because what we look for, actually exists. For Daniel Pink this is a “Conceptual Age” (2005, 49-50), since we are the future as long as we think, think holistically. Other author, like Izsak unravels that “this is not an Information Age, this is an Everything Age” (2013, Chapter 1, 3-39, para.1). And the Amazon’s concept of “Everything store” proves this right. We search the interface and we have access to everything. It is also what John Schwartz, Sun Microsystems CEO in 2005, labels as the “Participation Age” (in Prinz, 2014, 1). We are more connected. It is McLuhan’s “global village” in its darkest side. Maybe there is too much connection and less humanity. And just maybe this is where the digital strategy brands come in. Isolated, individualistic, narcissistic and consumeristic audience are perfect for the brands, which in turn look see a society where consumerism is still the key.

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