

# Brand Image, Brand Action and User Experience

## by Kathryn Tector

### Introduction

The unprecedented pace of technology growth, adoption, and application over the past decade, and particularly over the last five years, has led to a customer experience tipping point. The consumer is now in the driver's seat with the power to "demand" more than ever before. Brands need to channel this consumer power and influence the direction that is favourable to the brand, yet allows consumers to create their own path. Companies who are able to find the balance between delivering the brand message and user-centric functionality will take a leadership position. At T4G we view this as delivering on both brand image and brand action.

### The Open Brand

Technology has enabled the delivery of content on demand, the pausing and shifting of TV, connecting people around the world, and has fundamentally changed how people plan, browse and shop. "Today, cross-channel sales – stores sales influenced by online research – total almost \$397 billion and are poised to grow to more than \$1 trillion by 2012." – *Forrester, Web-Store Experiences: Department Stores December 2007.*

Wider availability of broadband and relatively affordable digital capabilities have provided consumers with the opportunity and medium to speak their minds (with words, images, and sound) to a growing number of people whenever they like. So no longer is the organization completely in control of the brand from a mass-marketing perspective, and no longer are online experiences simply in place to superficially support the brand.

Mass adoption of the Internet has allowed consumers increased control of what they hear, read and watch – in the format of their choosing. As online continues to mature, offering new experiences and functionality daily which surpass yesterday's experience, more and more customers are choosing online as their primary place to learn, share, and shop. The speed of information to online and the ability for consumers to read and learn from other users provides a new contextual layer to the experience. This additional layer is forcing corporations to examine their brand and ensure that it is authentic and real, encouraging marketers to move from a position of broadcasting their desired brand attributes (both online and offline) to one of connecting their authentic brand through social design. This is known as the Open Brand.

From our experience, if this role is not taken seriously through planning and monitoring, it may work against the growth and development of the brand - customers will use their power to express their opinions online regardless of the company's involvement. The role of connecting brand image and brand action will need to be transparent to build credibility with customers, which can be done successfully by acknowledging the power of the customer in marketing to the social web. The opportunity is in being aware, interested, and engaged in these conversations to make a meaningful impact.

In *The Open Brand* (New Riders Press) authors Kelly Mooney and Nita Rollins highlight two "macro-trends" that "anchor" the new "open" brand framework. The first is the emergence of consumer "notoriety" in the increased visibility and impact of individuals, communities and networks, as opposed to the relative consumer anonymity with regard to brands and the world in the past. The second is "the emergence of creative production, the opposite of simple, uncritical consumption." There has been a fundamental shift in the level of "engagement" and we have truly entered "the experience economy."

The authors have identified four categories of experiences to help companies move off the closed singular brand focus: **The On-Demand Experience** - characterized by efficiency, ease, control, findability and immediacy; **The Personal Experience** - characterized by acknowledgement, dialogue, customization, privilege and popularity; **The Engaging Experience** - characterized by participation, belonging, immersion, entertainment and inspiration; and **The Networked Experience** – characterized by self-expression, ego gratification, co-creation, community and social change.

### User Experience and Usability

Successful brands today focus on customer experience from the highest levels of executive level down throughout the entirety of the organization, and view customer experience across channels as an integral part of their strategy. This focus has allowed for better online experiences that connect brand image to the brand action. Consumer expectations are that functionality and features available on any website (be it in any vertical) can be easily adopted or used within another site. They do not consider how difficult it may be for an organization to connect legacy systems or change a company's marketing approach to effectively deliver the same functionality. Web 2.0 tools are a perfect example. Today gen Yers (18-26) and gen Xers (27-40) are leading the pack in their interest in social networks from a favorite brand.

The integration of the experience from catalogue and merchandise through to the website and customer service centre is essential to connect brand image and brand action. Connecting the experience and extending the experience from inspiration through to purchase must be built from a solid strategy and understanding of the customers' needs, as well as the customers' important touchpoints with the organization (i.e. customer service spends all its time improving service within X time only to provide the wrong item, what do you think the

customer will remember?). Their expectations of brands to connect the tools and functionality that will allow the user to browse, share and shop are the same for any brand – large or small. An online presence, if built with the end user in mind, will support their decision-making process of how they browse and purchase products, as well as the social element of how they engage with others to make that purchase decision.

As companies move to this consumer-centric, experiential-focused, cross-channel driven offerings, the evolution of brand and how organizations are structured must begin to move in this direction as well. Those who are able to distill, simplify, and leverage data to help figure this out will become increasingly critical to the success of brands and their companies. These analytics coupled with a solid understanding of consumer behavior, which can go far beyond demographic and media habits, allows the framework for an interactive experience that delivers to the business goals as well as the consumer's goals with precision impossible to achieve with traditional research methods

Consumers expect to be in the driver's seat, and expect the control of their online browsing or shopping experience. Based on research conducted by T4G Limited and reinforced in an article by Forrester (*Rich Internet Applications That Build Brands, March 2008*), consumers want to experience an engaging and emotionally pleasing online experience, coupled with usable functionality that support the mental model of an online browser or shopper. For example, based on focus groups with women in Toronto for a client in 2006, it was determined that the functionality of the Reitman's site, which allowed a consumer the opportunity to see different tops with the same pair of pants was significantly more appealing than the H&M online experience, which focused primarily on their brand image through a number of short films they produced. Although the groups found the films 'interesting', they did not feel it added to their browsing experience and it did not showcase the clothing – the primary reason they visited the site.

The difference between the two online experiences was H&M's website was supportive solely of their brand image and did not provide enough useful functionality to help a consumer make a choice. Reitman's on the other hand, was not as brand rich, but the functionality of the site made the process seamless for the consumer. Finding a balance between the two is the differentiator.

"Whether they buy online or off-, shoppers go to websites to inform purchase decisions by getting answers to their key questions. Sites that don't support consumer goals frustrate and annoy visitors – negative emotions that transfer over to the brand." – *Rich Internet Applications That Build Brands, March 2008, Forrester Research.*

Determining the appropriate cross-channel experience for the online browser and/or shopper will help differentiate any brand in the marketplace. At T4G, we ask our clients to continually consider these main questions:

## **T4G – The Intelligent Application of Technology**

1. What is the #1 objective of this site?
2. What is the single-most important thing this site needs to communicate?
3. Who are your users?
4. What are their motivations and needs?
5. How can we design experiences to help them accomplish these?

How do we align these with your business and marketing objectives? By exploring and determining the behavior pattern of your target market – beyond the demographic and psychographic information – to understand their needs. Through this knowledge we can design experiences to support their desire to learn, share and engage with your brand. This will deliver on brand image and brand action, differentiate your offering, and deliver on objectives.

### **The Author**

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### **About T4G**

**T4G** is a project-based technology services and consulting company specializing in building top performance teams who solve critical business needs in all areas of information delivery – from application development and technology infrastructure, through to content, design and consultation. Through the intelligent application of the right technology, we create sustainable value for our clients while developing leading-edge solutions that keep pace with and extract the best of what technology has to offer. For additional information please email [mary.lou.zietsoff@t4g.com](mailto:mary.lou.zietsoff@t4g.com) and visit [www.T4g.com](http://www.T4g.com).