

ADWEEK

VOL. XLIX NO. 1

JANUARY 7, 2008

www.adweek.com

The Birds and the Bees

Why brands need to harness the power of human swarms

The next time you're at the beach take a look at how the flocks of gulls move as one. The birds don't have a leader. No other bird is telling them what to do. Instead, they are paying close attention to the birds next to them in order to fly in one precise, coordinated movement.

This action is referred to as swarm theory. Hundreds, even thousands of birds, moving independently as one.

But what does this have to do with marketing and advertising? The answer begins with the birds and the bees. Specifically, birds, fish, bees and other swarming species capable of forming a collective brain that enables them to think and move as one organism.

Watching a school of fish or a flock of birds, it is impossible not to be impressed by the harmony of their actions. All are coordinated to such a degree that they turn without any visible leadership within the group. But this behavior is not unique to animals.

The Internet and the growth of digital communities like Facebook, I believe, have given rise to human swarms.

Whether through social networking communities or a simple e-mail address book, the power of one can overnight become the power of 20, 200, 2,000, 2 million or disperse. The power of these human swarms is remarkable. They wield tremendous influence for or against causes, ideas, beliefs and even brands. When it comes to working for a cause, *Wired* magazine calls these human swarms "crowdsourcing," like the thousands of volunteers who joined the high-tech search for missing adventurer Jim Gray, revealing a powerful, "pulsing, breathing world" out there.



CHUCK BRYMER
is president and CEO of DDB
Worldwide. He can be reached
at chuck.brymer@ddb.com.

That power has made all of us the new, new media. One of the more obvious and commercial examples of this is Facebook's latest spin on word-of-mouth marketing. Called Beacon, the program enables the sale of ads carrying members' profile photos adjacent to brand messages. This is then circulated far and wide to Facebook friends. At least that was what was supposed to happen, but Facebook never cleared Beacon with users.

All for not having asked permission, Facebook has had to backtrack twice, risking the trust and community it has built with users while setting in motion the instinctual urge to flock or flee and rendering the perception of Facebook as a predator instead of protector.

In fact, many of Facebook's more than 50 million users were already relaying product or brand picks to friends. Beacon was planning to commercially capitalize on that, and the fact that due to the power of digital technology we are more in touch and in tune with our peers than ever before.

Along with our family it is our peers who are our most trusted sources of information, not the media, not religion and not the government. In a recent study by Roper, trust in family and friends topped the list around the world when it came to exchanging information. And just this month DDB sister company Ketchum and the University of Southern California found that advice from family and friends is the No. 1 source consumers turn to when making a variety of decisions, ranging from buying consumer electronics to planning a vacation. Next highest was expert advice on anything from medical decisions to a product's carbon footprint.

Yet, surprise, the survey also found that only 24 percent of communicators have a word-of-mouth program in place.

Make no mistake, this gathering swarm combined with trust in friends and family is a commanding force. Inevitably this swarm will change the nature of what we as marketers do to build our brand and sell product because digital human swarms, our modern day communities, will not be told what to do. Our human swarms do not want to be targeted with campaigns. They want long-term conversations within engaged relationships. A good example of this is the Nike+ Web site where runners make friends with fellow runners from all over the globe while trading information and inspiration.

What does Nike gain from the site? Increased influence brought about through its peer-to-peer relationship with those on the site. Influence is one of the most valuable assets a brand can have today among human swarms. Influence is a brand metric and as such should be measured right alongside share of voice and share of market.

Why? Because the power of influence can be game changing for brands. Influence empowers small brands to take on large brands, the strong to grow stronger and even gives brands the permission to fail, as Apple demonstrated during the launch of its controversially priced iPhone.

Influence, fueled by swarm communications, is yet more empowering. For us in marketing, the challenge will be to transform from outsider to insider within these communities. How we do that will be consistent with how we build great brands, specifically by developing trust and authenticity.

At DDB, we are looking at the development and recruitment of chief community officers for all of our regional offices and, eventually, for each of our offices and clients, all of whom will be charged with identifying, embracing and moving with consumer swarms. These groups are akin to what trendwatching.com calls twinsumers, "fellow consumers who think, react, enjoy and consume the way they do." Be ready because this feels an awful lot like the new customer relationship management.