

# DDB<sup>o</sup>



## Brand Personality

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**Communicating Character and Authenticity in a Digital World**

The **Yellow** Papers Series

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Digital media technologies have opened many new channels of communication and information, giving companies the opportunity to develop much closer relationships between their brands and their consumers. As a result, both companies and their brands have had to establish the type of strong personality and confident attitude that can engage consumers, inspire trust, obtain advocacy, and sustain active interest and involvement.

Interacting with a brand is analogous to a personal relationship: We are generally attracted to confident, interesting people and find those who lack such qualities and who do not stand for anything to be rather bland and inconsequential.

If you enter a packed party and see TV personality Simon Cowell grabbing a canapé from the buffet, you will probably have the urge to exchange a few words with the controversial panel member from *American Idol*, because we have an intuitive desire to engage in dialogue with people who radiate a strong personality and have pronounced opinions. You may not agree with Simon Cowell's view on all subjects but you must credit and respect his stand and his consistency.

These are the types of brands that people choose to have a relationship with. But it is vital that the brand behavior be rooted in reality, with authentic values and insight into the world of the consumer, because never before have things been so transparent. Critical and dissatisfied

consumers can and will spread the word about negative experiences at a speed that is frightening. And worst of all is that you as a company are not in a position to choose if you want to go to the party – the party comes to you.

The same mechanism comes into play when we enter any store. Brands that differentiate themselves via noteworthy personalities or credible and relevant stories will be rewarded by the consumer. The rules of marketing and competition have changed and today brand conviction is more critical to commercial success than ever before.



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**With digital technology, the number of ways and methods of communication has exploded. Consequently there are also many more opportunities to catch consumers' attention. However, once we have their attention, consumers have the ability to create their own media content and spread their own messages to the masses.**

Using the Internet, consumers can easily find and compare similar products from different dealers in different countries and then share their opinions instantly with each other. These new lines of communication give consumers an unprecedented influence over brand perception and a key new role as co-creators of the brand.

### **Think Macro, Act Micro**

Communication channels to the consumers are extremely complex today because digital technology has fragmented the media picture. This necessitates thinking about marketing and media planning in new terms.

In terms of a brand, the message must be sufficiently unique and effective to function on a number of media platforms, both old and new. In terms of consumers, we must now capture their attention through new, often non-traditional, channels, many of which are more relevant to the brand story than traditional media or their online platforms.

Consumers expect the brands they love will behave in a way that engenders connection and consistent relevance. This is the case with many of the major brands, which think about the manifestation of the brand personality across all channels and platforms: Brands such as Sony, Nike, Adidas and Guinness, which

truly understand their consumers and how to translate unique insights into effective brand marketing.

This is what you could call macro marketing. Except that as a consequence of digital technology, we have opened up many new alternative communications channels. These channels should not be seen as a separate network, but rather as an integrated part of a whole new infrastructure.

This new world will permit companies to reach a global audience predisposed to their market by producing and publishing their own content on the Internet. In combination with other marketing activities, this creates a program where the communication "cascades," extending the reach of all media. It requires starting with something that is worth talking about, and which has attitude and authenticity sufficient to come through the dialogue unscathed but surely tested.

# “Word of mouth is the best medium of all.”

## - Bill Bernbach

Individuals and companies alike can now communicate via Internet sites and social networks with everyone else online. This is a marked loss of control for companies, which can only control part of the information. But it also provides the potential for comments from individuals to be communicated in dimensions hitherto unseen and which can be used to create a stronger brand.

“Word of mouth is the best medium of all,” one of the founders of DDB, Bill Bernbach, said. This applies even more today, because consumers are forming social relationships as never before. The Facebook and MySpace community sites have created contact between millions of people and are now two of the most visited network sites on the Internet.

### **Lasting Relationships**

The digital revolution has had a great influence on how brands compete, how consumers evaluate brands, and the access consumers have to product information. This is particularly true in supermarkets where one can compete on three levels:

- **Price:** Price is a very motivating factor in product selection, generally the first consideration set and perhaps more so today in these troubling economic times. However, with so much competition and so many convoluted offers, it is often very difficult to distinguish the best deals without guidance like special TV programs that help navigate through the hype. The market has sanitized the word “value,” with even the most expensive talking about low price. Just look at the telecommunications market with all its charges, tariffs, binding periods and subsidies – or the airline companies with their low-price tickets where additional charges are levied for luggage, catering and choice of seat before the transaction is completed. Price is no longer a dynamic positioning parameter, but more generic and often frustrating to the consumer.

- **Unique products:** If your products stand out as something that no others on the market can offer, this special status makes the product and the brand attractive in the eyes of the consumers. However, brands are rarely functionally unique and differences often amount to no more than packaging and storytelling. Products with genuine advantages are usually copied so quickly that the copies often reach the market almost at the same time as the original. This puts greater emphasis on the relationship and connection consumers have with your brand and the need to emphasize shared values with your desired audiences.
- **Relationship to the consumer:** This relationship has always been the least favored of the three. Price and product are very tangible, whereas the customer relationship has always been perceived as malleable and elusive. However relationships are critical and demonstrating a thorough understanding of your customers' values and their way of life is an essential starting point for building any valuable relationship. In this endeavor we must consider the product itself as the primary medium, sales secondary, and service positioned as an integral part of the experience. Already here we are talking cross-strategies. If you take this relationship seriously and enter into active dialogue with the market, you will be able to establish a bond that will be personal and difficult for competitors to bring into play.

If you have a striking personality and can convey a good story, you will be an interesting brand to talk with and to be talked about. Bill Bernbach was fond of saying, "If you stand for something, you will always find some people for you and some against you. If you stand for nothing, you will find nobody against you and nobody for you."

When Dove ran a campaign for real beauty showing ads with real women, the company went against the trend of recent decades in which the media and marketing have elevated sickly thin and pouty young women to the modern age's ideal of beauty. Dove's signal is that you should respect and value women as they are and real women should acknowledge themselves as being healthy and natural. This type of brand attitude invites authentic women into an informed and mutually respectful relationship. This insight is striking because no one had the courage to act on it before.

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**In reality, customers are brand advocates who, in the new media universe, influence others who in turn influence others, and so on.**

#### **Use the Consumer as Media**

In the digital world, a well-defined brand can achieve extensive reach through direct contact with individuals and enthusiastic users. The contact can be a conversation about the brand or a related issue initiated by either the consumer or by the company, in a forum suitable to the dialogue and the interests discussed. This is an incredibly interesting topic which DDB's CEO, Chuck Brymer, explores in his book, *The Nature of Marketing: Marketing to the Swarm as well as the Herd*. In it, Chuck relates many cases of how people can flock or flee based on your authenticity and through the influence of key people interacting with your brand.

In this way, consumers themselves play a part in creating and acting out the values that the brand represents. A strong community is a mutual collective based on interest, presence, respect and sympathy. In reality, customers are brand advocates who, in the new media universe, influence others who in turn influence others, and so on. In this way a brand story cascades out via "the best medium of all," the consumer.

It sounds delightfully simple and cheap, but there is not a control button that you can just press. As a brand, you must become involved in a far more binding way. This places entirely new demands on the way in which companies think about market behavior. You are forced to think more holistically in relation to the company's entire existence and to find new ways to think communication. You must be active and surprising because communicating in a passive manner is not attractive.

The digital presence must be backed up by visible physical activities. Even the way in which you think about mass communication must be integrated into the other activities. And this generates completely new demands in terms of both form and content. It is no longer best practice to run a TV burst with a humorous angle backed up by some print and a couple of banner ads.

### **Speak Openly in Your Relationship**

The relatively new ability of consumers to communicate freely with interested digital parties means that demands and complaints can spread as quickly as good brand experiences. When a young Norwegian recently established a group on Facebook to demand that Coca-Cola's soft drink Urge be made available in 1½-liter bottles, the support it received and the media coverage it attracted made the brand introduce the product on the market.

Or when a gamer found a glitch in Electronic Arts Tiger Woods golf game that allowed the digital Tiger to walk on and hit balls from water hazards, this "glitch" was shown on YouTube and picked up in blogs. But it did not force the gaming company to fix the product; instead they produced an advertisement with the real Tiger Woods walking onto a pond and knocking his ball resting on a lily pad into the hole. This was an inspired response.

It gives much food for thought that the brands with the best direct contact to their customers often have quite low advertising budgets. Apple, Virgin and Converse are a few examples that spring to mind. This does not mean that they do not invest resources in their behavior; instead they use their energies in alternative ways. The three companies have control over their entire value chain to such a degree that consumers have their perception of the brands confirmed wherever they encounter them. At the same time, these brands are felt to have a presence in the world in almost the same way as their customers. You sense that they are enthusiastic about what they do.

Critical consumers have found it easier as a community to challenge the promises made in advertisements. For example, potential buyers now regularly check consumer reports prior to purchasing a new DVD player. In their capacity as "day-to-day experts," consumer testimony can prove to have as much influence as any official expert in the field.

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# Customers who complain are the most concerning and at the same time the most interesting group of consumers.

The brand is without a doubt best served by being precisely what it purports to be, so that it can live up to reality checks. If the brand delivers the goods and is also open to dialogue, there are no grounds for complaint about unmet promises or false expectations. The more human and understandable a brand's behavior is, the greater the degree of latitude and forgiveness it will meet in the market.

Customers who complain are the most concerning and at the same time the most interesting group of consumers. They respond actively to the bad experience, instead of calmly opting for the easy solution and discreetly switching to another supplier. These are your most important customers because the conflict seldom remains within the four walls of the company when a customer can easily log onto the Internet and spread the angry message. By complaining they demonstrate an active involvement in your brand, positioning them as potential brand advocates. They can be an important influence on the brand, if at an early stage you can engage their enthusiasm to help solve the problem.

Unfortunately, this fact is not reflected in the brand behavior of most companies. Often there is a great focus on being efficient at attracting customers using every means possible, but hardly ever is there someone at the door trying to retain customers when they leave.

I worked for many years with a leading telecom company where we implemented a determined "win back strategy" aimed at the customers we had lost within the last two years. Thirty percent of these customers came back to us, simply because we showed an interest in them and discussed their needs with them. This is a bigger success rate than I have ever heard a sales campaign achieve. There is much to be won by having a coordinated customer front.

### Are You Attractive?

The brand's personality must resonate intuitively in all who are involved with the brand or are in contact with the company and the products. Therefore, it is essential to build on the values and competencies that already exist in your company.

Today Volvo can brand itself based on a responsible attitude under the catch phrase "Volvo for life," because for decades the company has been renowned for making the safest cars. This shifts the focus from a company that is out to make money to a car manufacturer aware of its responsibilities and that addresses the consumer's need to protect his family.

In other words, Volvo has an authentic justification for profiling itself as a company that accepts the responsibility of protecting its customers and that considers its commitment to safety to be an extremely motivating position. In subsequent campaigns the company has shifted the focus slightly more towards quality of life and lifetime values. This elicits sympathy and here the brand and the customers share a common perception and ambition.

With its consistent focus on responsibility and humanism, Volvo achieves a brand personality that many informed people consider more relevant and valuable than BMW, despite their differences. Another example of a car brand that enjoys a unique position is Volkswagen. For 60 years Volkswagen has successfully kept faith with its humble "for the people" origins so that today, despite its move into the luxury car category, you can still call Volkswagen a car brand with democratic values.

Both Volvo and Volkswagen brands manufacture luxury cars not unlike BMW. However the down-to-earth values and respectful behavior that both brands maintain tell a very personal story that invites a deeper relationship.

A megatrend in society is that consumers generally expect companies to become more involved and accept greater responsibility for themselves, their products/services, their customers and their environment. As a result, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become increasingly important and activity in this area will continue to grow going forward.

In the past, social and environmental concerns were largely addressed by sponsorships, but the demand for authenticity will see companies becoming more wholeheartedly committed to additional activities and playing a more active role. Social responsibility makes good sense – in the same way that it made sense for Dove to redefine beauty and give women more self-confidence.



# We are fantastic, our customers are fantastic, and together we make each other better.

## **You Cannot Fake Authenticity**

We are fantastic, our customers are fantastic, and together we make each other better. We support each other and are unfailingly loyal. We listen, we are interested, and we are open to change. We are equals.

This could be the recipe for an ideal relationship between brand and consumer. It sounds so easy – and it would be if there were no humans involved.

However, to ensure the desired market perception and reaction to your brand, it is absolutely essential that the brand profile and the values are reflected within the organization. Of course, you cannot fully guard against a consumer backlash toward your brand, but you can react appropriately when you find yourselves on the wrong side of the consumer agenda.

This type of issue management requires that even the producer of high quality products be prepared for a consumer backlash generated from a poor quality product in the same genre. There is a good probability that even the producer that excels will find itself involved in the general debate that follows. It can equally well be a country manager, a head of section or the CEO who must answer the critical questions posed by the media and the consumers.

And often they will be expected to answer here and now, not in a couple of days after they have discussed the phenomenon internally. At that moment, it is essential that the brand's attitude and platform be part of the corporate personality, ingrained in all staff, so that no one is in any doubt what the company's reaction shall and must be. Your staff must be the brand.

# Direct communication between brands and their consumers has never been more active and our behavior has never had greater visibility or consequences.

## Let's Be Real

Consumers have a greater influence on branding and commercial success than ever before. New digital technology and social networks enable consumers all over the world to endlessly exchange information, advice, comments and criticism of your brand and company. Consumers now define the brand and have increasing control. You have no choice but to adjust to the new rules of the digital marketplace and the ever growing sophistication and engagement of your customers.

This level of consumer control increases the need for a strategic brand personality that is strong, well founded and sufficiently engaging to inspire your customers to be brand advocates. The company itself must also align with the brand personality and play an important role in developing a value-enhancing and mutually beneficial dialogue with influential consumers.

In the end, consumers add real value to companies. They are people with feelings and attitudes and they expect their brands to know what they are and reflect them. Direct communication between brands and their consumers has never been more active and our behavior has never had greater visibility or consequences. You must now ask yourself if you are among those who view this consumer involvement as a threat because it is difficult to control, or those who see it as an extraordinary opportunity waiting to be captured?

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