

Conversation Leads to Conversion. Savvy companies don't just collect customers; they connect with them. Move beyond self-absorbed advertising messages, and deliver content that generates awareness for your brand and—here's the important part—makes customers more knowledgeable and engaged.

Many arts and entertainment brands view marketing as a one-way street, and their advertising messages (even the slickest, best-designed ones) embody basic principles: We have the best product! We provide the easiest access! We offer the best service!

Problem is, the “four P’s” of marketing (product, price, promotion and place) aren't compelling enough to create, develop and maintain customer loyalty and long-term relationships. To accomplish that, it's better to view marketing as a two-way partnership. Smart firms don't hunt for deals with their customers as much as they seek dedication.

But how do you become indispensable to your customers or viewers? How do you become partners with them over a long period of time? As former General Electric head Jack Welch said in the Aug. 13, 2007, issue of *BusinessWeek*: “You create loyalty by “giving [clients] a comprehensive, inimitable way to win. You deliver something—anything—that makes you indispensable to your customer's success.”

Sure, the basic goal is to sell more of what you have—movies, concert tickets, DVDs, etc. But the more intricate, valuable mission is to make that product only part of your value offering. To distinguish your company from competitors, you should do aspire to helping

your customers “win,” as Welch puts it. An excellent strategy is to deliver ongoing content that gives them the tools to do so.

That's the gist of custom marketing (sometimes called “custom media” or “branded content marketing”). It marries the marketing ambitions of a company with the information needs of its target audience. It occurs through the delivery of story-form editorial content—via print, Internet and other media—that's so intrinsically valuable, it moves the recipient's behavior in a desired direction.

This is about more than simply writing better sales material, improving the copy on your Web site or generating more effective direct mail collateral (all worthwhile goals). This involves having a deep understanding of the challenges your customers are facing, putting their “win” scenarios in the middle of your marketing plan, and then delivering information that helps them overcome their challenges.

The creation of important, story-form content is what ultimately influences someone to buy a product (or buy into a concept). Some firms that have embraced custom marketing have replaced their overt, passé sales-based messages with content in the form of articles, white papers, podcasts, e-books, video, webinars and in-person events.

Their tactics and industries differ, but their philosophy is the same: To get an audience to pay attention, you must reward them immediately with something of value. In other words, the marketing message itself should deliver value. And more often than not, that value is content—informative, educational or entertaining text that’s targeted to a specific audience and marketing-backed (content with underlying sales objectives that a company is trying to accomplish).

Technology has enabled marketers to transform their spending. Although great value still exists in traditional ad placement, it’s now easier than ever for businesses to educate and influence prospects and customers directly. Companies are thinking, “Why should I place an ad in this publication (or Web site) when I can talk to them without a go-between?”

Recipients of effective custom marketing open their pocketbooks. More than that, they open a dialogue that fosters future loyalty.

The challenge is figuring out what to say. What will absorb and inform your audience? To answer that question, brands should start thinking like publishers. Here are several things publishers always keep in mind:

1) There’s a difference between consumers, customers and audience. Brands are accustomed to acquiring customers (people who pay for goods and services) from a larger pool of consumers (people who use those goods and services). Brands are increasingly realizing that retaining customers and engaging consumers means treating them both as an audience (the part of the general public interested in a source of information and entertainment). Understanding these groups and how to address each one can help you acquire an audience from the ranks of relevant consumers.

2) Acquiring and reacquiring the same audience is expensive. Trade shows, banner campaigns, print advertising and sponsorships all entail costs, especially including public relations, advertising and online agency fees. Many marketers know the cost of each lead and new customer generated through their campaigns, but what do you do with people you’ve impressed but aren’t going to convert right now? Increasingly, brands are learning

that it’s cost-effective to extend the period of engagement with potential customers by providing them with an ongoing communication stream of relevant content.

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3) Every media channel gives customers another opportunity to stay engaged with your brand’s message. Consider not only print, Web and email content, but also rich internet applications and other atomized media. Moosejaw, an innovative outdoor goods retailer, uses a desktop application to put its irreverent brand message in front of its audience daily, along with special offers. (Branded desktop applications, or BDAs, are a flexible and powerful brand publishing platform. With a single grant of permission, the user opts into a set of desktop channels that provides highly relevant messaging, rich media and custom functionality. Messages can be targeted based on user authentication or by self-selected parameters)

4) You probably own all digital assets you need. Cull and repurpose your existing content, including articles, press releases, photos, video and other material generated for internal and external use. The Nick.com LaunchPad is a flexible desktop application whose content is drawn from various Nick.com online properties. By creatively repurposing the Web content for the desktop application and adding new features such as animated ScreenMate desktop characters, LaunchPad keeps Nick.com’s audience interacting more frequently.

5) Consumers are controlling media. Much has been written about Web 2.0 and the consumer-generated media revolution. Using a brand’s audience to generate content that will interest other members of that audience can be cost-effective and generate its own buzz. The blogosphere and social media environments have become critical marketplaces where a brand’s story will be told, retold and commented upon.

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6) It's best to publish on multiple platforms to reach your audience "where it is." Marketing guru Seth Godin frequently points out that "people simply want what they want"—in the exact form they want it, and exactly when they want it. Today's audience tailors its own information space, whether through customized start pages such as My Yahoo!, or personalized environments such as MySpace. Once consumers are ready to opt in to your brand's publishing environment, giving them multiple channel choices will make it more likely that they'll stay engaged longer.

There are challenges to engaging your brand's customers by publishing to them as an audience, but the rewards are compelling. Not only will your audience be more deeply engaged with your brand, but you'll be more in touch with your customers.

The Dish on RSS

Once you adopt a custom marketing strategy and begin providing value-added content to your clients and prospects, you'll analyze ways to distribute that content online. One effective way is through an RSS ("Real Simple Syndication") feed. In a nutshell, it's a relatively new way for people who publish content online to notify others interested in that content whenever fresh material is available.

RSS is both a publication and a syndication channel. The basic concept is very similar to how newswire services work. The relatively straightforward technology changes the model for distributing online content, mainly because it's anonymous ("subscribers" receive your content without ever having to provide their names, email addresses or other contact information), instantaneous (new content is delivered automatically to the subscriber's Web-based RSS reader—two popular ones are Feed Demon and NetNewswire—without the need to "surf" or manually check Web sites for updates) and trusted (search engines recognize RSS feeds as highly focused content).

RSS feeds offer the ultimate "opt-in" model of receiving content. It creates a new channel for consumers who can receive your material consistently, but according to their own preferences. It also gives companies the power

to segment content—written, audio or video—for an audience. You can create content channels (categories of material) that let consumers choose what's of interest to them. Examples include News, Product Development, Case Studies and Research.

As a marketer, relying on consumers to come back and check your site regularly for new content is an increasingly risky proposition. With the availability of search engines, desktop widgets, and RSS feeds, fewer and fewer consumers are willing to spend hours surfing the Web for information. Likewise, an increasingly dying practice is relying on the spam-battered email inbox as the sole repository of key information.

Lots of programs are available that automatically create and update RSS feeds. These are stand-alone or built into blogging or content management software. To learn more about publishing an RSS feed, a great primer is online at www.eevl.ac.uk/rss_primer.

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