Why the Brand Idea Still Matters in the Age of Social Media
A brand, wrote Stephen King in 1971, “has to be a coherent totality, not a lot of bits.” The founder of JWT’s planning department knew that brands are most effective when all their elements—name, packaging, retail presence, advertising and the rest—come together as a single unique personality.

What would King make of today’s world of marketing where communication is delivered quite literally in bits: a Facebook comment, a 140-character tweet, a Pinterest image? It’s been 40 years since King first called for coherence in branding, yet our means of communicating brand messages have never been more fragmented.

The driver for this is, of course, social media. In every sector of society where individuals and organizations interact, social media has emerged as a disruptive force. It enables humans to do what comes naturally: create, share, criticize, organize. And we have responded in force, building massive virtual communities and opening up our lives to friends, family and absolute strangers.

While the benefits of social media to marketers are many—opening a two-way dialogue with consumers, influencing word-of-mouth, building rich stores of data—the challenges for brands can’t be ignored. In particular, brands must consider how to tell a coherent story across a growing array of platforms and amid a cacophony of consumer and competitor voices. Brands have decades of practice carefully refining their stories and disseminating them through precisely timed campaigns using highly controlled media channels. What brands lack, however, is much experience managing communications in the still-emerging world of social media.

How can marketers take advantage of all that social media offers while protecting the integrity of the central brand idea? Is it even realistic that one idea can support conversations with millions of consumers across hundreds of platforms in multiple formats? The answer is an unequivocal yes. Given the demands of today’s media landscape, it’s never been more important for all marketing efforts to be unified under a powerful brand idea.
A Strong Brand makes for a Strong Business

“"A brand idea is meant to dictate all aspects of your brand offering; it should be what you innovate against; how you invest.""  

Jack Perone, 
VP, strategic planning director, 
JWT Canada

If marketers are to respond competitively to the challenges presented by social media, it's helpful to start with an appreciation of what a brand is and the value it offers to a business.

A brand is the unique meaning wrapped around a product, service or entity; the more unique, the better equipped the brand is to defend itself from competitors in any media environment. The brand exists largely in the consumer's imagination, based on impressions formed from chance encounters: a product experience, a customer service representative on the phone, a television ad, a comment from a co-worker. Brands have a powerful influence over consumer decision-making; according to BrandZ, the world's largest brand equity database, 4 out of 5 consumers now say that brand alone is an important purchasing determinant.

At the heart of every well-managed brand is the idea, the essence, the story. By any name, it's a statement that captures all that a brand stands for. For Dove, it's "real beauty"; for Shell, it's "creative energy"; De Beers and its diamonds are "the ultimate symbol of love." "A brand idea is meant to dictate all aspects of your brand offering; it should be what you innovate against; how you invest. It goes beyond communication," said Jack Perone, VP, strategic planning director at JWT Canada.

A strong brand isn't just an asset to the marketing department; it's proven to deliver hard financial returns. BrandZ's portfolio of the world's strongest global brands well outperformed the S&P 500 over the past six years, increasing in value by 46.3 percent. To the good fortune of their owners, these brands have acted as what Peter Walshe, global BrandZ director of Millward Brown, described to the Financial Times as a "great insulator," buffering corporations against recessionary pressures.
For any brand, the hope is that social media will enable its message to travel far beyond what any marketing budget could buy.

Into the tightly controlled world of the brand, social media has exploded. Social media went from a tertiary consideration for adventurous brands to a must-have for most in a few short years. Why has it become so important to marketers?

With 1 in every 3 people on the planet now online, according to the Internet World Stats, it’s safe to say that digital and social media are well-entrenched in everyday life. In developed markets such as the United States, Britain and Russia, roughly half of adults use Facebook and similar social websites, according to the Pew Research Center. As millions more in lower-income nations gain access to the Internet, their first stop is typically a social network.

Why are millions of people of all ages typing comments into and posting photos on a battery of social apps and websites? The answer is that it’s in our nature. Humans are inherently social and creative creatures; we have a primal need to do what The Futures Company, a trend consultancy, calls the Four Cs: communicate, collaborate, create/curate and consult together. Social media offers the ability to have a say on any topic at any time, spurring a great outpouring of self-expression.

Of course, one of the things consumers talk about online is the brands they love and those that have disappointed them. This chatter fuels the most powerful form of advertising: word-of-mouth. Always valued by marketers, word-of-mouth has truly come into its own with the advent of social media. It can be encouraged at every point of online contact and spreads instantly across the digital universe.

That leads to one of the most significant reasons why social media is so important to brands: It holds the promise of exponential returns. It’s a marketer’s nirvana: the campaign that, as Thomas Gensemer describes it, “breaks into the zeitgeist beyond the brand.” Gensemer, managing partner at Blue State Digital, is best known for initiatives that became broad-based movements, including the 2008 Obama campaign and the anti-bullying project It Gets Better. For any brand, the hope is that social media will enable its message to travel far beyond what any marketing budget could buy.
If the benefits of social media are so attractive, why isn’t every brand already a social brand? First, marketers need to make tough choices about how to manage a message across the established platforms—and how to deal with new platforms that emerge with alarming regularity.

An app could be a novelty one day but mandatory the next, depending on mainstream uptake. Will one of the leading sites—Facebook, YouTube, Twitter—be a primary platform and the others act as traffic drivers? Or will they be given equal attention and resources? Every decision has implications for marketing department priorities, budgets and staffing.

Once the platform is chosen, marketers need to exercise caution when “muscling into” the semi-private, semi-public space of social networks, the TNS Digital Life report warns; 57 percent of people in developed markets do not want to engage directly with brands via social media. Brand community managers must grasp the subtle, unwritten rules of conduct if they don’t want to be seen as interlopers.

Once inside, brands face intense competition from other voices: millions of consumers, armies of bloggers, rival brands, established media, institutions, nonprofit organizations—the list goes on. A single brand must work hard to ensure its message lands with its audience.

Finally, as consumers interact with each other and brands, great streams of quantitative and qualitative data are generated. Unfortunately, marketers still lack standardized tools and measures; the analytics industry around social media seems to be growing as fast as the platforms themselves. In the end, marketers are only generating a fuzzy picture of the value that social media offers to a brand. “What is a Facebook ‘like’ worth to a brand? How do you quantify that?” asked Ingrid Bernstein, Director of Experience at JWT New York. “Actually building an ROI model is actually quite elusive for most brands.” Instead of bottom-line numbers, how many CMOs will instead be satisfied with intermediary outcomes such as the amount of comments, likes and sharing?
It’s Time for Brands to Embrace a New Role

Today, a brand’s responsibility in social channels is to actively manage the right narrative, to set the conditions for consumers—particularly influencers—to circulate the right stories.

Marketers who want to take advantage of all that social media can offer need to first understand that social media has forced brands and consumers into a new relationship.

At its heart, advertising is the act of storytelling. Not too many years ago, a brand could, without doubt, lay claim to being the teller of its own story. A message was broadcast through one-way media channels—television, radio, out-of-home, print—to an audience that was only ever intended to receive.

Today the roles are recast. “Who we define as an audience and who is defined as a teller is radically transforming because of social media,” said Perone. Brands are no longer in charge of how their stories are told. Instead, consumers armed with comments, apps, reviews and blogs have emerged to become the de facto tellers of brand stories.

Does this change mean that the brand should simply surrender its voice to the consumer and hope for the best? Not at all. Today, a brand’s responsibility in social channels is to actively manage the right narrative, to set the conditions for consumers—particularly influencers—to circulate the right stories. “It’s the brand convening the conversation about itself,” said Gensemer, “and leveraging the most positive and creative voices of the people that are its fans.”

A strong brand idea makes this achievable. The brand idea acts as an anchor point, said Perone. “People can make decisions about what they listen to and what gets filtered out as noise.” When a clearly articulated brand idea is at the heart of all communications—whether it’s Kit Kat and “the break” or Johnnie Walker and “the power of personal progress”—consumers are primed to accept stories that align with their understanding of the brand and reject those that seem inauthentic.
To succeed in social channels, marketers can embrace one of the things that social media does best: the propagation of content. Social channels have a voracious appetite for content that can be easily commented on, liked, tweeted, blogged and pinned.

Brand content answers that need by offering up entertaining or stimulating material, whether in editorial style or fiction. The goal is still to be “invited into consumers’ lives,” as Russ Lidstone and co-authors put it in Admap. However, the means is now content that offers the consumer insight, entertainment or utility—something to talk about and share.

American Express offers small business owners advice and resources on its Open Forum site. General Mills hosts an extensive and easy-to-share recipe collection on its Tablespoon site. Can any brand be a content brand? Strategically, it’s a significant undertaking, starting with finding a white space in the category. “When brands create content, they aren’t competing with other brands; they’re competing with publishers and other content creators,” said Bernstein. For a brand to go head-to-head with magazines, newspapers, books, movies and television shows, it needs to have a point of difference from existing media. Brand content needs to add value to the existing discussions or start new ones in an authentic and “ownable” way.

From a production standpoint, it can be challenging for a brand to transition from episodic communication—tidy quarterly or annual campaigns—to the always-on cadence that social media demands. Many marketing departments are simply not staffed or organized to produce content at the pace of a daily newspaper, nor are they prepared to react in real time as their content provokes response. “The more the brand can live in the here and now and seize on current events, the more effective that brand is going to be,” said Gensemer. Oreo demonstrated that even a simple cookie could be responsive to current events; its Daily Twist site showcased a different Oreo image every day, capturing cultural moments from the Mars rover landing to gay pride.
Beyond strategic and production hurdles, the danger when marketers chase social media is that the brand idea will simply become lost in an inundation of technology and content.

How can the brand idea avoid becoming eroded in a sea of Facebook activations, YouTube videos and Twitter hashtags? Is there one model for brand ideas better equipped to hold its own in an increasingly cluttered marketing environment?

Maurice Saatchi was an advocate of what he called one-word equity. “Each brand can only own one word,” he proclaimed to the marketing industry at the 2006 Cannes Lions festival. “Take great care before you pick your word.” Saatchi’s position was that, in a multi-platform, multi-device media landscape, only “brutally simple” ideas break through.

John Grant, author of *The Brand Innovation Manifesto*, argued for the opposite approach. Grant called for expanding brand idea by layering on new ideas regularly and paring the old, thereby keeping pace with cultural change. “Over time, the brand becomes like a molecule,” said Grant, “built up of successive and connected ideas.”

This is an ongoing tension in the world of branding, according to Lee McEwan, group planning director at JWT London: the conflict between the singular thought versus a clustering of ideas. The singular thought gives clarity and focus to a brand’s every undertaking. However, not every brand is a global giant like Coca-Cola, with the scale and resources to own what is otherwise a generic word—“happiness”—across channels, markets and cultures. As well, the hunger of social channels for fresh content forces the question of whether a portfolio of ideas is needed in order for marketers to develop many different narratives. The middle ground, said McEwan, is to see marketers as managing lots of supporting ideas that have distinct roles, all encircling the central brand idea.

Whichever approach is right for a brand, the point is that advancing technology is no reason to retire the brand idea; it should be just as central to marketing efforts now as it was when traditional media channels were the only options.
It's an exciting time to be in marketing. Traditional media channels are making way for a universe of digital options. Advertising is evolving past blatant commercial messages to include content and community. And consumers equipped with all manner of apps and devices are taking an active role in helping brands prosper.

As long as marketers continue to serve up relevant, compelling ideas, consumers will open up their lives and their networks to brands.

As long as marketers continue to serve up relevant, compelling ideas, consumers will open up their lives and their networks to brands. With this as the context, a clear and distinct brand idea is vital. Whether a brand has the means to own a single word or needs the support of satellite ideas, the primary task of the brand idea remains the same: to bring coherence to an overall offering.

Social media makes it more challenging to achieve coherence but also more necessary. Online platforms are multiplying, and anyone with a blog or Twitter account can be an expert. In this chaotic environment, a strong brand idea is essential to unify efforts and to ensure that consumers absorb the right messages and filter the rest.
Stephanie Myers
Director, New Business
JWT Canada

Stephanie is a dynamic business leader with more than 15 years of experience delivering local results for global brands. With an integrated view of marketing and expertise across brand, digital and direct, Stephanie helps brands respond competitively to the realities of the new media landscape. She offers senior-level marketing counsel combined with a nuanced understanding of global business issues and trends. Stephanie holds a Global Master of Arts from Tufts University and a Master of Business Administration from York University.
References


TNS. (2011). Digital Life: Understanding the opportunity for growth online [PDF].


