

Conversation: the key to the 'Youniverse'

If you want to spread your message online, think PR not advertising. Because it's a conversation, not a billboard...

The internet user is not part of a passive audience. We choose to go online when we feel like it, each on our own path of interest with no two views being identical. And we do this because we want something out of it.

We ask our own questions and select what we want to see, hear or buy. Our computers are gateways to individual multi-dimensional space where we are in charge.

So online isn't one universe as seen by a mass audience through the same spaceship window. Individuals see their own personal piece of it. More than that, they control the shaping of what they want to see.

This is the online Youniverse (not our term originally, but one which we've embraced with gusto). It's revolutionising the e-business world and advertisers are only slowly learning how to approach it correctly.

Traditional ad agencies can still be found using a broadcast approach that simply doesn't fit with the Youniverse concept.

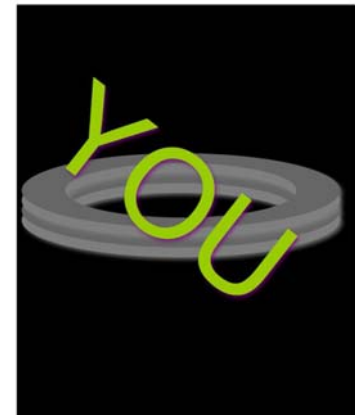
Geared up to reach as wide an audience as possible through established media, advertisers tap into a perceived cultural consciousness and then bombard us with a message designed to strike a chord with that consciousness. These ads are bold statements with no room for negotiation.

The Youniverse works on a much smaller, conversational scale.

While there is no right way of doing things – purely because the online industry is still so young – the old ways are no match for the intricacies of emerging online dialogue.

Traditional advertisers are brilliant mass communicators. They take a single idea and push it at millions of people. But the consumer at a computer screen is an individual, in command of their own space and accepting or rejecting what appears in their inbox.

The internet is interactive and conversational. The online medium is a totally new way of delivering brand values. While traditional audiences passively consume, individuals actively experience.



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By contrast, PR is more in tune with the conversational characteristics of the internet – so many PR campaigns are about engagement.

PR skills focus on customisation and conversation. They approach businesses or publications in a personal manner, aiming their clients' products towards one specific audience at a time.

This method works. The Youiverse is unimpressed with one-sided advertising online. Instead it demands an e-relationship.

Corporate communicators and PR practitioners know how to chat. They know how to develop relationships. PRs seek to influence the individual and understand who they are talking to, in order to work towards a deeper two-way relationship.

These skills lead the change in online advertising content, and all ad agencies must develop them in order to maximise the conversational nature of the medium for their clients.

An example of how the advertising business has typically used communication space is provided by Apple. Funky Apple laptops and sexy iPods have become cultural accessories. The advertising for these products is always dramatic and dynamic – who can forget the white iPod/black silhouette imagery that launched the iPod brand – but impersonal. Great on a billboards, less so in email inboxes.

By contrast, Apple *do* engage with people on a one-to-one level at a store level. Their flagship London shop in Regent Street, is an example of a space in which the corporate engages with the personal. Banks of laptops and iPods offer hands on experience and a chance to talk to assistants about all the things that make Apple aspirational and different. It's that instore conversation that needs to be created online.

Businesses must always remember that there's a human sitting at the other end of the line. If people enjoy the experience of visiting a website they'll be back.

Online is no place for a billboard. The Youiverse is all about talking with, not selling to. It's about people allowing brands into their own private world.

The not so small print

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