

It's a meatball sundae Jim, but not as we know it

How to engage with customers when both they and the online channel are moving at light speed

The overwhelming importance of online as an engagement channel is plainly evident, and the suddenness (and variety) with which this has come about is, breathtaking. So it's inevitable that skill competencies are 'under development'.

Our understanding of what customers want online, how this relates to offline channels and how best to deliver absolutely everything may be out of the primordial slime but it's still evolving. So, why worry? We'll get there in the end, right? Rome wasn't built in a day.

The problem with that approach is the breathtaking speed of it all. You're building Rome while a competitor over there is already working on their first moon base. And your web-using customers? Well, they're flying at light speed to Mars.

We're already talking about Web 3.0 – broadly the refinement of the application of all the technical and social capabilities described by Web 2.0 into more productive and intuitive user experiences.

We need to start paying a little more attention to our customers so we can realistically address Customer Engagement.

Start by asking the following question and choosing just one answer.

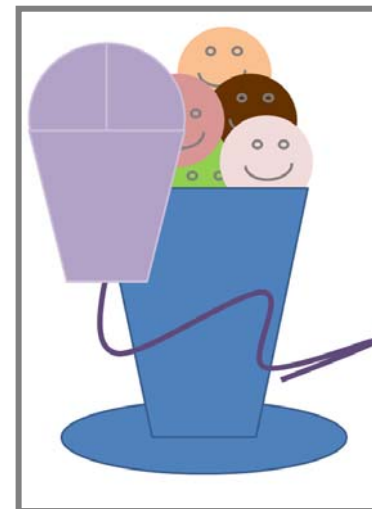
If a brand wants to engage its customers online it should...

Option A Pull together all its current marketing material – TV ads, press ads, poster material, brochures -, and republish it all online so people can look at it on a computer.

Option B Do Option A PLUS spend a little bit more on something digitally whizzy – say an online game or two, an email newsletter, run some polls, archive a few PR pieces, set up a Facebook presence and invite comments and anecdotes about the brand. (*Remember the old joke? "Enough about me, already. What about you? Tell me what you think about me..."*)

Option C Invest heavily in a purely interactive brand-based comms programme with lots of cool (and expensive) digital stuff the web agency is dying to build.

Option D Completely revise its on AND offline comms strategy, work out what's being distributed (including services), what its job is, how it's being received, consider what people want to *access*, build the solution, test it, keep asking people if it is or isn't working and why and over time, start to develop collaborative relationships in territory that was strictly us and them in days of yore.



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In a way, these choices describe a brief chronology (past, present and future) of how marketers are working to harness online channels for customer engagement.

Brands investing seriously in online comms are probably producing customer experiences described in Option B or C, for example Pampers, Bacardi, Innocent, Olay, Walkers, Persil, Orange etc. Consumers are still being treated to offerings from Option A and as yet offerings from Option D are rare

Findings in the **3rd Annual Customer Engagement Survey** support this. Clients and agencies more or less correlate when it comes to the importance of strategy, the recognition of objective areas of investment (media application, function etc) and awareness of current competencies. Everyone indicates there's a long road ahead.

That's why Option D is a rarity. We're still learning how to use online as a comms medium while coming to terms with its functional role as an essential operational platform (tax returns, online banking, flight bookings, weekly shopping, congestion charge payments and so on), to figure out what engages people.

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To get there we need to really understand – the behaviour of people online as well as offline. It means asking people what they expect and would like, and creating it. It means keeping close to people and reaching collaborative conclusions that this service and that product and this way of doing something is going to engage people in a long-term relationship of genuine value to both brand and customer.

It also means knowing how to blur divisions between what's on and offline.

The thinking is that people will say what they're really interested in online is doing something.

For instance, having the conversation with the brand that helps deliver the next generation of products and services, or managing something that makes life easier in the real world.

Something that relates to who they are, what they need and makes a positive difference to their life. Useful content. Content they want to come back to, content that makes the brand worth recommending to others.



The 3rd Customer Engagement Survey from cScape and e-Consultancy. CDA is a member of the cScape Customer Engagement Unit

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Online needs to be an integral part not just of marcoms planning, but business planning, so we don't end up creating meatball sundaes*. We've never had the technical means to engage customers *en masse* in such a direct way before.

There's no reason we should be expert at this, let alone even really understand what needs doing. We're learning at light speed, a new discipline which will rely on changing the way we do everything.

** "A meatball sundae is the unfortunate result of mixing two good ideas. The meatballs are the foundation, the things we need (and sometimes want). These are the commodities that so many businesses are built on. The sundae toppings (hot fudge and the like) are the New Marketing, the social networks, Google, blogs and fancy stuff that make people all excited. The challenge most organizations face: they try to mix them. They attempt to slap new marketing onto old and end up with nothing but a failed website."*

Seth Godin, *Meatball Sundae: How new marketing is transforming the business world (and how to thrive in it)*.

The not so small print

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