

How useful is your brand?

In December 2006, P&G's Charmin built and staffed a public restroom, amply stocked with Charmin toilet paper, in New York's Times Square. And in case passers-by weren't in immediate need of relief, or failed to spot the 30m-high hoarding above the temporary loo, people dressed as lavatories wandered the Square handing out samples of Charmin to drive home the message.

Now this was a great piece of branded utility. In a city renowned for its lack of public loos it was positively welcomed by New Yorkers who, it seemed, didn't mind the massive hoarding – or the walking lavatories. As long as their needs were being met they were happy to think positively about the brand and were probably tempted to buy Charmin on their next trip to the supermarket...

On 1 January 2007 the Charmin superloo, its supply of luxuriously soft toilet paper and its charming attendants vanished as suddenly as they had arrived, leaving the Times Square pedestrians cross-legged once more.

What's interesting about this campaign is that it demonstrates P&G really stretching its marketing comfort zone and playing with the idea of relevancy (and direct contact with consumers).

"Let's face it – there aren't a lot of environments where a bathroom tissue message is relevant," said Dennis Legault, brand manager for Charmin. "But the message is very relevant when people really need to go." And go they did – 428,328 of them in all, according to Charmin's website.

In his *No Man's Blog*, Asi Sharibi observed: "That's right, but it's not about the 'message' mate, it's [about] the service and value and utility. That IS your message."

Sharibi went on to question the gimmickry employed and wondered why Charmin wouldn't want to embrace this idea as its campaign permanently – worldwide.

He has a good point. As the well-trodden stats keep reminding us, the average US and UK consumer is faced with some 3,000 'messages' every day.



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This is too many for the average person and as a marketing-literate society with more to do than ever before, we've grown tired of push messaging from big brands and instead have begun to look for what a brand can do for us, filtering out what's irrelevant, pointless or just plain irritating. We want something tangible and useful from our brands now.

It's called 'branded utility' but perhaps brand usefulness is a more straightforward term because that's how people think. And it's becoming increasingly clear that nowhere is this more important than online.

When we're online we're doing something – we're task-oriented. There's an implicit impatience in our behaviour and it's probably because we view our computers as a tool first and foremost. Who hasn't been irritated by pop-up ads online? Who hasn't been frustrated when reaching a website to find the thing you want just isn't there? Who clicks on banner ads for car insurance when checking stock price movements? Who wants brand messages pushed at them in the middle of a busy online session?

Conversely, who has a problem using a commercial site if it provides a useful service? I got a great recipe for cooking the Christmas goose on the Waitrose site and I'll be back, because not only was the quality of the recipes good, the search facility was very useful – it's now bookmarked.

Pampers (another P&G brand) has always invested in its relationship with parents by making available its deep knowledge of baby and toddler behaviour and development. Its website doesn't focus on its products (doesn't ignore them either) but is a reference site of articles, tips and insights into child development delivered by renowned and trusted paediatric practitioners.

It meets parents' needs and as a result builds and maintains the considerable equity in its brand. It also lets you personalise so that when you go to the site or receive its mailings, they are timed for the growth stage of your baby. A very simple, but hugely useful resource for busy people.

The not so small print

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BP's Castrol website is built to deliver up-to-the-minute information for motor racing followers around the globe. Yes, it also sells the benefits and technology of its products (and has a handy stockist search facility, too) but its principle raison d'être is to be a useful destination for fans of the races it sponsors.

Usefulness is not a particularly modern marketing notion. Michelin realised it was selling tyres to travelling people almost a century ago and is now probably more famous for its travel guides and maps than its commodity tyres – though that's how it makes its money. Its website continues the tradition, giving people instant access to travel guide content. The AA is similar and has a great search facility – backed by excellent content – to help plan holidays, breaks and routes.

We can access lots of other information about Michelin and the AA on their respective sites but the owners know what we're more likely to want and so have made finding it easy. That satisfactory experience – a direct brand touch – impresses us far more than screeds of text about lengthy and rich corporate histories.

There are lots of examples of useful stuff online where brands have realised they can play a bigger role in our lives. Instead of just selling the dream with a 'big idea' (TV advertising does that well enough in its passive environment) Nike's training schedules, time logs and target setters are genuinely useful. As well as its excellently managed news and feature archives, The Guardian's daily email services, in whatever subject you choose, keep you usefully informed. Widgets (the little mini-apps that appear on your desktop) are beginning to be usefully applied now. Honda in Japan is launching one that pops up 15 minutes before you leave work with the latest traffic information about your route home. What a great service.

And it's not just down to big concepts. Being useful online is about the small things, too. When I go online to apply for a loan or a credit card, that's what I want to do. Why risk annoying me with blocks of promotional text telling me what I might want to do with the money when I get it?



Just show me how to get the money quickly and painlessly – you don't have to sell, just make me feel confident and engage me in the process. That's being useful, and is more likely to achieve business objectives.

Being useful doesn't come naturally in marketing. So often, the people tasked with managing a website's content or email programmes are trained to promote, not serve. So it shouldn't be a surprise that sewing machine manufacturer Janone uses its site to sell complex embroidery programmes but doesn't have the instructions for its machines uploaded so that you can quickly reference them when you need to thread your machine once a year. Or (another true example), the once in a lifetime you need to ship your household contents from one continent to another, the shipping company seems much keener on telling you all about its heritage and investors than on giving you the tools to work out routes, times and costs.

The internet was made for brand utility. Finding a website useful or receiving an email that contains something I can use is a good experience and that's increasingly how people are embracing or discarding brand messages.

Charmin's Times Square restroom was an extremely useful direct brand experience for 428,328 people – more so than a cute animated bear family on a TV screen. And if Charmin extends its restroom experience geographically and more permanently, I will certainly go to the website to find the locations.