

More than a load of old bull

There are places in Spain that offer a very good analogy for the media landscape (well, we think so)...

You drive round the corner of a hillside, or look up towards the mountains and catch sight of a giant bull, a billboard silhouette, standing in proud relief against the surrounding Spanish countryside.

He's there to remind you about sherry and in a landscape populated by little more than olive trees and goats he makes a distinct impression.

But imagine a different scene, where the bull jostles cheek by jowl with a giant carton of Del Monte orange juice. Inflatable, 40-metre high Coca Cola bottles sway in the breeze. A few yards away the Michelin man does battle with the Goodyear hot air balloon. You cease thinking about sherry... or tyres. Your visual cortex goes into overload.

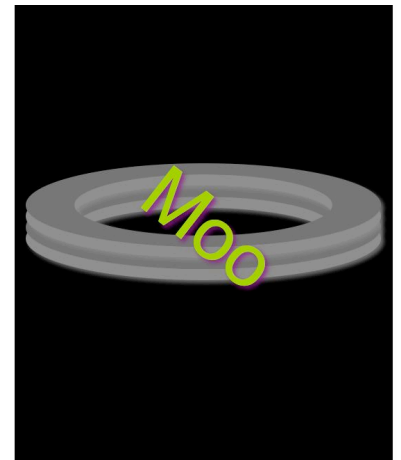
In effect, that is what has happened. Marketers vie for attention, promoting brand virtues and selling factors so we will choose one product over the other. To do this they use an ever more sophisticated and ever growing media arsenal: The shingle outside your shop is superseded by the sandwich board, the newspaper ad, the radio commercial, the television sponsorship deal and an ad on someone's web site.

Marketing relies on a plethora of media approaches to grab the ever more fickle attention of its audience as they go about their increasingly busy lives. But who is actually seeing, listening and reading?

On the internet we are exposed to sponsored copy, 'optimised pages', ads – down the side, across the top... at the bottom and still 'popping up' as we try and navigate web pages. We're enticed to choose the sponsored links when we search.

Is it any wonder that the media landscape – and the online media landscape in particular – has become cluttered?

But at the same time the consumer has become educated in the way marketing works – so it is no longer simply a question of pressing the right buttons.



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Neither is there a Pavlovian response to external economic stimuli. High streets in the UK are ever more aware that periods of economic stability don't automatically send people rushing out to the shops with their credit cards clutched in eager hands. Neither does a downturn stop them spending (at least, not right away).

Even when things are going well for them they are still prepared to bargain and seek out discounts. Couple that with a media-aware audience less likely to fall for fancy ads and sales artifice and traditional marketing faces a problem.

In his book, *Right Side Up*, author Alan Mitchell pointed out that for its first hundred years, marketing – and business itself – revolved around a single driving imperative: helping sellers to sell. It was seller-centric. It employed what is called the “sell to” model.

“A soap powder brand – the classic icon of traditional marketing – is a good example of seller-centric value,” Alan Mitchell wrote. “The value is defined by what is convenient for me the producer to make in my factories, not what is convenient for you the consumer to achieve in your life.

“Having brought this value to market, I expect you, the consumer, to come searching for it and to organise your life – the things you have to do to realise its value such as washing and ironing – around it.”

Alan Mitchell then expounded a new buyer-centric world – the “buy from” model, or reverse marketing – in part fuelled by advances in technology but also by the ever more sophisticated consumer. Even the term “consumer” takes on a slightly derogatory feel when you analyse it in depth. It defines people more by appetite than aspiration.

In a buyer-centric world increasingly sophisticated buyers choose what they buy and from whom exerting a collective will to ensure their needs are met. They use the tools at their disposal – including new technologies – to effect group power, compare and choose.

Consumer agents facilitate these new-style transactions. They act as a conduit between buyer and seller.

The not so small print

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Early examples of this include facilities such as on-line auctions and buying collectives. The consumer agent brings people together so they can buy from – not be sold to.

As a result sellers need to not only think in more detail about what they sell but the way that they sell it. Seth Godin talks about Permission Marketing™ in his book of the same name (to which he adds the strapline: Turning Strangers into Friends and Friends into Customers).

Permission marketing offers the consumer “an opportunity to volunteer to be marketed to. By talking only to volunteers, Permission Marketing guarantees that consumers pay more attention to the marketing message.”

Not that this guarantee is cast iron. The internet has seized upon Godin’s own success with Permission Marketing and reduced it to its simplest form – “Click on this and win a prize” or “...get a discount” – but the increasingly media aware consumer is no longer so easily bought.

This is more than simple media geology as new philosophies and models come on the horizon. The media landscape is experiencing a seismic shift thanks to the pace of new technology and the accelerating information flow, born on the back of the media explosion, which has educated the buyer.

And while the marketing industry musters its forces to meet the new challenge at least one thing seems certain: all the bull will have to go.