

Beyond Branding: from abstraction to cubism

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the limitations of marketing as it is currently practised. It argues that the discipline's desire for credibility, has led theorists and practitioners to base their thinking around quasi-scientific rationality. This has been valuable in creating credence in the Boardroom, but it is not a very good way of understanding the connections between the organization and its customers. Rather the emphasis should be on people and the nature of relationships.

Introduction

There is an adage in marketing – indeed it may be the adage – that it pays to be close to the customer. To become close suggests a communion between the customer and the organisation in an almost intimate way with both sides willing to open up to each other. Close indicates transparency and reciprocity. The primary way organisations have tried to do this has been through the vehicle of market research, which has been a key driver in transforming many organisations from being production led to customer focused. However, there are challenges in using traditional research as a means of getting close to customers and also in the way organizations sometimes misuse research to aid decision-makingⁱ. The key problem is that research must abstract and group and categorise customers. If we accept the specific individuality of people, this categorisation will inevitably be flawed. Yet such is the widespread faith in measurement and systemsⁱⁱ there is a tendency to mistake the abstract for the real: as soon as managers start seeing numbers, they tend to stop seeing people. While market research can be valuable for informing decisions, the argument is we should not over-rely on it nor mistake data for reality. It is at best

an approximation based on the present and past and inevitably predicated on assumptions. As the philosophers, Guattari and Deleuze, echoing Spinoza, say, people tend to categorise and universalise the particular: 'we think the universal explains, whereas it is what must be explained.'ⁱⁱⁱ

From abstract to cubist thinking

While numerical analysis is valuable in informing decisions, we should not over-rely on it nor should we universalise behaviour without questioning the intensive processes below the surface (Deleuze 1994). Research is too often used not as an inspiration to understand how people might think and behave, but rather as a judgment on how they will behave. The example of the Volvo Cross Country car (Ind and Watt) demonstrates the point. This car was developed by the Swedish car maker as a hybrid vehicle, designed to reach a new type of younger customer who might want the practicality of an estate car with the off road appeal of a sports utility vehicle (SUV). At the time this was a new approach and Volvo felt the need for the reassurance of research. The model of the car was tested in clinics but the consumer response was negative: people had never seen a vehicle like this and couldn't put into any existing category. As a result of the research, the project was closed down. However, shortly after, Subaru successfully launched a new vehicle, the Outback, directly into this supposedly non-existent sector. Volvo quickly re-started its own project and launched the Cross Country to critical and commercial success. The lesson is that rather than universalising and abstracting we should see marketing as Cubist; that there are many perspectives of the same thing, where 'solid apprehensible reality seems to give way to a world of shifting relationships.'

In search of the human

The question we ought to pose is whether there is another, more 'cubist' way of building brands? The solution lies in recognising that the relationship between an organisation and its customers is dynamic, non-linear, non-controllable and

difficult to predict. This is about putting quantitative analysis and abstraction in its place. And recognising that it is the customer who has the power to begin, sustain or terminate a relationship. Thus, the organisation should look to reconnect with its customers: to break down the borders between the inside and outside. One of the attributes of humans is our ability to recognise in others feelings that we ourselves have and to link the past with the future.^{iv} This is much easier if we concentrate on a direct dialogue rather than using mediated information.

Some organisations are adept at this process: Linux and the whole Open Source movement are based on the principle^v, as are the sportswear brands Quiksilver and Patagonia and the online game company, Funcom. The design and innovation consultancy IDEO, uses co-creation methods and ‘unfocused’ groups for the development of services and products in such areas as IT, medical equipment and children’s toys. Volvo uses close customer connectivity in developing new models. Interestingly all of these organisations limit market research primarily to a source of insight and some, such as Quiksilver, Patagonia and IDEO reject the abstraction of research. The skate, surf and snowboard company, Quiksilver is a particularly apt example of the ability to break down borders and connect with customers in an intuitive way (Ind & Watt, 2004). Like Patagonia – and the early Nike (Ind, 2001) – it recruits people from the sports it serves; employees who spend their spare time surfing and skating and who are intimately connected with the culture of their sports. From the CEO (a surfer) down, employees attend and take part in sports events. Also Quiksilver encourage interested professionals, such as designers as well as board riders to contribute their ideas. The 240 professional riders and an army of supported amateurs are an extension of the grassroots connection Quiksilver enjoyed in its early days when it was run as a hobbyist surf shorts business. Quiksilver knows creativity has to meet with the approval of the enthusiast audience both to ensure it is a trend leader and to maintain its authenticity. Some innovations are the

direct result of input from riders, such as the development of surfing fiction books aimed at girls or the design of a wet suit range and some ideas are the result of dialogue that provides inspiration for designers. Rapid feedback also tells the company when its products aren't working as they should or its communications aren't connecting. Quiksilver treats its customers as insiders and the language of the company reflects this. The free-flow of ideas out from the company's employees and back in from its network creates the opportunity to build relevant value for the customer. However, it is only an opportunity: to sustain a process of continuous creativity, Quiksilver needs to be an active listener. It has to have the humility to recognise good ideas can come from outside the company and the willingness to share ideas within the company across organisational boundaries. This ensures the continued relevance of the brand to its core customer base. As Quiksilver Marketing Director, Randy Hild says, 'the challenge is to keep an open mind...I look at everything that comes my way. We're very good listeners.'

Summary: a different future

As organisations grow they move away from the intuitive knowledge derived from a close and evolving relationship with customers and tend to rely more on the abstraction of research. However, abstraction needs to be explained and the intensive processes that lie under the surface explored. This indicates the value of moving to a more human focused approach that encourages a direct relationship between the organisation and its customers; a relationship founded on trust and a willingness to take down the border between inside and outside. Organisations have to try to engage customers and to involve them in the process of creating relevant value. This has several implications: the boundaries of the organisation need to be challenged, managers need to encourage transparency and work at active listening, employees need to be encouraged to engage with customers and communications need to flow across internal boundaries. Companies will have to re-work their organisational structures so

that the customer is no longer a box on the outside but a connected part of the organisational machine. Also rather than concentrating on internal departmental units, the flows between them, that enable customer knowledge to be shared, need to be emphasised. By combining structural and attitudinal changes the customer can become an active presence rather than a mere spectre in the organisation.

ⁱ Philip Kotler in 'Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning and Control' Prentice Hall 5th Edition identifies six pertinent complaints about market research, one of which is 'marketing information is so dispersed throughout the company that it takes a great effort to locate simple facts.' p188

ⁱⁱ Dostoyevsky writes in 'Notes from Underground' 'But man is so partial to systems and abstract deduction that in order to justify his logic he is prepared to distort the truth intentionally'. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 'Notes from Underground' translated by Jessie Coulson, Penguin 2003 p31 (originally published 1864 as Zapiski iz Poolpolya)

ⁱⁱⁱ Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix (2003), What is Philosophy? Verso, London p49. Benedict de Spinoza writes in Ethics (II/135) 'how easily we are deceived when we confuse universals with singulars, and beings of reason and abstractions with real beings.'

^{iv} Barresi, John (1999) 'On Becoming a Person' Philosophical Psychology No12 pp79-98

^v In 'The Cathedral and the Bazaar' (1997) Eric Raymond calls the approach the Bazaar model and contrasts it with the Cathedral model where the source code is a carefully guarded secret. He suggests that the Bazaar model is a more effective way of testing software code than the Cathedral model which has to second guess customer reactions.

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