

# Top of Mind

Perspectives and Commentary

## Lose Control: It's Good for Your Brand

**F**OR many years now, I've listened to brand managers and agency folks explain to me how their brands stand for all variety of lofty, beautiful and esoteric ideas. Listen to these people long enough, and you'll almost believe that merely making a purchase

(or visiting a website) will not only solve most of the issues plaguing our world, it'll silence those little demons muttering inside your head. These branding professionals soliloquize about how their brands' promises extend to the furthest corners of their marketing communications strategy. They gabble about the feelings that their marketing engenders in their consumers. Well, that's all very interesting but...

In my world—the alternative/guerrilla/experiential/whatever-the-current-buzz word-for-it-is world—campaigns don't come about this way. They're created not in the clouds, but on the ground. They exist at eye level with the consumer, seeing in real time how he interacts with products, services and the core brand itself. Does that concept scare you? Well, consider this: It's a trend that's taking over whether you like it or not. You see, the days when you were able to exercise 360°-control over your brand communications have ended. And one thing my experience has taught me is that when the brand lets go a little, consumers start to open up a lot. Put another way: If you let the reigns of your brand go, you might be very surprised at the results.

In his classic book, *Propaganda*, PR godfather Edward Bernays wrote, "the important point to the propagandist is that the relative value of the various instruments of propaganda, and their relation to the masses, are constantly changing. If he is to get full reach for his message he must take advantage of these shifts of value the instant they occur."

Right now, the instruments of communication are largely in the hands of the average citizen. Digital cameras, cell phones, blogs, social networks, Web videos, urban interventions, word-of-mouth and more are

holding ever more sway over society. This new order of communications has, of course, both an upside and a downside. Users are all the better connected and influential. Relishing in the chance to share information, they command messages that motivate others. On the other hand, should they have a negative experience with your brand, that



By Sam Ewen

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message can travel just as quickly through the same channels—and impact on your bottom line. What this means is that the experiences consumers have with brands are open for interpretation and comment in a way that's never been possible before. Smart brands are figuring out ways to make those experiences (the good ones) stand out.

Which is exactly where losing control starts to make sense.

Losing control does *not* mean losing control of your brand and your message. What it does mean, though, is that most brands have a fan base that can and should be trusted without too much of

your hand-holding. Fans of your brand are smart enough to know when they're being marketed to. If a brand takes itself too seriously, they begin to feel alienated. But when a brand allows consumers to become active participants in its evolution, they'll evolve into loyal advocates.

So how does a brand affect a culture where losing control is a good thing? There are five central concepts to keep in mind that'll help you relax your iron grip. First, don't think about what experience *you* want your target to have with your brand; think instead about what experience *they* want. Next, ask yourself what the cultural phenomena are that get people excited. Does your brand fit in with one that you can customize and own?

When it comes to media outlets for your brand message, don't limit yourself to ones that are merely available. If the ideal media for your brand doesn't exist, it's up to you to create it.

Now, turn your attention to the campaign you're creating. Is it so exciting that you're writing home about it? No? Then it's time to start over.

Finally, understand the evolving nature of communications between individuals and groups. Whatever marketing you're developing has to be one that embraces the new "clipping" nature of the social Web. You'll want to furnish icons, visual experiences, sound bites and entertainment in a way that translates easily to sharing—photo, video, blog and mobile.

Just in case you're thinking that some brands that have adopted this ethos of losing control have found themselves in some dicey situations, well, let's just say that I know about those things firsthand. Yes, losing control of your brand means taking risks—but I'm not advocating risk for the sake of a quick hit. I *am* advocating that we furnish the consuming public with brand experiences that are interesting to them—ones that permit them to get involved with the brand instead of just watching a pitch; ones that invite and trust them to deliver the branding message to others. When it's done correctly, losing control is really only a transfer of control—right into the hands of those whose trust you're trying to get in the first place.

*Sam Ewen is the founder and CEO of Interference, Inc., New York. He can be reached at (212) 995-8553 or sam@interferenceinc.com.*