Creating authentic connections in an era of uncertainty and transparency: why emotion marketing works

Marketing to skeptical consumers has never been easy, but the challenge has never been greater than it is today. As information becomes more rapidly available, as consumers adapt to the fast pace of change in contemporary society, as levels of certainty shift almost moment to moment, the drivers behind purchasing decisions change; today’s marketers need to adjust their approach accordingly.

REFERENCES


It’s an exciting time for marketers who understand these shifting paradigms; the opportunity exists to reach new customers and make emotional connections that can strengthen brand perceptions and building lasting relationships with important audiences. Deep understanding of target audiences—combined with an unprecedented level of emotion and transparency—has become critical to the long-term success of a brand.

BRANDS CAN PROSPER IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES

How has the value of the world’s top brands held up in this era of constant change? In 2009, as we slowly emerged from a year of global financial turmoil in which every key financial indicator plummeted, the value of the world’s top 100 brands actually increased by 2 percent to $2 trillion, according to the BrandZ study of top 100 brands.

At the same time those top brands are increasing in value, Americans are growing more pessimistic about the economy. The economic indicators released every month no doubt influence consumer confidence and optimism. The housing market remains soft, with RealtyTrac reporting about 10.8 million homes, or 22.5 percent of all homes with mortgages, were in foreclosure at the end of November 2010.2 Last July, existing home sales hit their lowest level in 10 years, and new home sales sunk to their lowest level since 1963.3 Unemployment continues to hover around 10 percent, with a record 4.7 million out of work for at least a year.4 Even with the recent extension of tax breaks, the economy will likely struggle along through 2011. Although consumer confidence rose slightly in November to 54.1 percent, nearly half the nation remains guarded about the economy.

In fact, a recent Harris Interactive poll5 indicates only one-third of Americans are very happy, while recognizing happiness is very individualized and complicated. Even watching news coverage of natural disasters and thwarted terrorist attacks can impact one’s happiness. In times like these, consumers look for ways to boost their emotional well-being and find balance, contentment, and even joy.

All consumers, even those with jobs, continue to tighten their belts and scrutinize every purchase. But, according to BrandZ, even though they are retreating to home, they are spending on small pleasures they can enjoy with family and friends, presumably to achieve that elusive feeling of happiness and contentment.

Value has become the key trigger for consumers. Affordable indulgences, like sunglasses and lipstick, are still selling well, but as people become more astute about the price they pay for quality, they also seek ways to simplify their lives, the BrandZ study indicated.1 Technology that helps to organize, simplify and add capabilities to life remains a priority. Brands that recognize and respond to these needs will continue to develop strong relationships with customers.

BUILDING TRUST AND CONNECTING EMOTIONALLY

With all the uncertainty consumers are facing, they have begun to turn to new resources to connect with others who share their concerns and interests. Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, was named Time Magazine man of the year for connecting well over 500 million users—one-twelfth of the world—through his social media platform.6 Twitter now has more than 105 million users. These platforms, and others like them, spur more peer-to-peer interaction and give people a voice in how they choose to interact with the brands in their lives. People look to others whom they trust, which helps to underscore the trend toward using technology to simplify and add capabilities to people’s lives—especially the capability to connect and participate. Participation is easier than ever; we have the ability to connect online at almost anytime from almost anywhere.

It bears repeating that being “on emotion” elicits stronger reaction than being “on brand.” Building relationships that withstand the test of time and grow and develop along with technological advances helps build trust and deliver an ongoing and relevant experience for the customer. For more than 100 years Hallmark has used emotion to connect with its audiences in both advertising and product, effectively tying emotion into the DNA of the brand creates authentic relationships with customers.

Brands that understand what consumers want and connect with them on a personal and emotional level will be successful in this ever-changing world. Brands that support their audience’s value system, allowing people to look smart, committed, caring, etc. will be successful in this connected world. Brands that understand the tectonic societal shifts we’re undergoing, and relate to consumers in an authentic fashion will be successful in a world where relevant interactions mean more than corporate image programs.

Marketers can’t deny a shift has occurred. Companies no longer have a choice about creating authentic connections; their success depends on it. Today, creating a lasting bond with customers means finding ways to build relevancy, connecting on an emotional level to make them feel important and special, and reinforcing their smart decision to do business with you. How do you do this?

Make your message emotionally relevant – If you can tap into emotional drivers, you will spur action. Infusing relevant, authentic emotion into your marketing message allows you to truly connect with people.

Connect in many ways – Connecting with consumers means interacting with them where they are—in media, through direct mail and ads, and, of course, through the people with whom they interact, either in person, on the phone or online.

Infuse a strategy for emotion – This new filter can shape the overarching voice of the brand, the primary messages of the brand and the specific tactics a brand leverages to activate consumers. Let this strategy drive marketing decisions and plans.

Know your brand – Understand your brand vision and values; they will be critical to creating an authentic customer experience you can infuse into every marketing tool, and into your employees, the brand ambassadors of your business.

Understand your audience – Determine who your target is and, equally important, who doesn’t fit in your target. Certain products or services lend themselves to an emotional strategy while others may not.

Julie Cunningham brings more than 15 years of marketing experience to Hallmark Business Connections, where she leads the company’s customer marketing team and helps business clients find solutions that create authentic connections with their target audiences.
All these campaigns use different variations of positive emotion. Particularly, P&G and Apple use everyday situations in an easily identifiable way. Old Spice cuts through the clutter by creating a conversation using humor in a way never seen before.

While most marketers today, especially in our doom and gloom economic and news environment, are trying to tap happiness, fear also drives action. Fear is one of the strongest, most visceral emotions. It cuts through the clutter like nothing else and is memorable. We seek to escape danger, perceived or otherwise, to the strongest, most visceral emotions. It cuts through the clutter by creating a conversation using humor in a way never seen before.

FEAR IS A LEGITIMATE AND POWERFUL EMOTION FOR MARKETERS

Tapping into the fear factor can be as simple as playing on the fear of getting older and the sudden overwhelming desire to spend hundreds of dollars on anti-wrinkle creams and potions. In fact, the fear of looking older may be more worrisome than the fear of getting older. Olay, for example, advertises its products as a magic potion to help lessen the need for more drastic (read: surgical) measures in the fight against aging skin.\textsuperscript{[12]} The global market for anti-aging products and services was worth $162.2 billion in 2008 and is expected to grow 11 percent by 2013 to be a $274.5 billion industry.

Fear can also be tapped into on a more visceral level, such as the desire for true safety and protection. OnStar taps into this emotion to connect with consumers, offering them a safety net in scary, uncontrollable situations. The company’s Live On campaign demonstrates how successful marketers can effectively tap the emotion of fear to make an authentic connection.

Today, OnStar has 6 million U.S. and Canada subscribers. Every month the service processes 2,600 automatic crash responses, 10,400 emergency services, 600 stolen vehicle assistance calls and 62,700 remote indoor unlocks. In 2005, the company had 100 percent brand awareness among new vehicle buyers and 80 percent of existing subscribers said they would only consider vehicles with OnStar for their next vehicle purchase.\textsuperscript{[14]} Fear tends to be an emotion carmakers use because it places consumers in relatable situations, such as a vehicle emergency or car crash, and the payoff comes from providing relief from the fear. The brand gives people a solution: safety.

INFUSING AUTHENTICITY AND EMOTION INTO YOUR MARKETING

Today’s successful brands extend beyond traditional marketing to personal interactions, both online and in-person. They offer consumers real solutions to meet their needs on a physical and emotional level, creating a true connection to the brand. The BrandZ Top 100 brands employ consistency in all representations of the brand using traditional tools (ads, point-of-purchase, media and direct marketing), new tools (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.) and real people (customer service reps, sales clerks, agents, even the CEO, etc.) to demonstrate the brand values.\textsuperscript{[1]}

As people turn more and more often to others of similar interests and life stages, their confidence in traditionally trustworthy sources—the White House, Congress, the media, colleges and universities—has declined. Corporate scandals have made people wary of trusting big corporations. Instead, they are turning to trusted sources, such as friends, family and online communities. They rely on authentic connections that are emotionally safe in this time of uncertainty.

Because of this need to connect and share, opportunities to engage in online conversations, share thoughts and recommendations, and form new relationships, are proliferating. Mommy blogs like The Crazy House connect mothers who have similar interests; travel sites like TripAdvisor allow people to share recommendations and complaints about a given restaurant, resort or hotel. Every day, marketers encourage readers to comment on their online stories. All of these give consumers the ability to not only share opinions, but also the emotional drivers behind them.

For marketers, these online tools are powerful and persuasive, and much more difficult to manage. They move some control of the brand message from the company to consumers themselves. Studies by Twenge Verhaughe, Van Ben Den Bergh and Colii\textsuperscript{[9]} show that when consumers, especially Gen Y, make buying decisions, “They often put greater trust into the opinion of their immediate social circle (peer group members, parents and even store personnel) than into big marketing and advertising campaigns.”\textsuperscript{[9]} Consumers increasingly turn to others “like them” for advice on everything from dealing with teething issues, and selecting a movie to determining where to stay when they travel and which home repair specialist to use. In fact, in his book Socialnomics, author Erik Qualman\textsuperscript{[9]} contends 50 percent of Internet users consult a blog before making a purchase. Social media is surpassing TV, magazines and newspapers as the trusted source for consumers seeking insight and advice not only on purchasing decisions, but much more.

In this new, open and more authentic model, content screening is discouraged and responding to negativity transparently is encouraged. Whether you’re an individual, a company or a brand, there’s an increasing insistence on two-way conversations. These conversations transcend the “one-to-many” models traditionally used by brands in marketing to consumers; they are one-to-one conversations between individuals and the brand. As a result, the perception of how authentic and sincere a company or brand is has become an essential component of success.

In their book, Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want, J. Gilmore and B. Pine\textsuperscript{[9]} contend, “People increasingly see the world in terms of real and fake. They want to buy something real from someone genuine. Not something fake from some phony.” Building trust in today’s new order requires brands to be transparent and authentic.

One company that finally realized the importance of this authentic connection is BP. Months after the oil spill of 2010, BP hired Ben Feinberg to manage the $20 billion fund set aside for victims. Feinberg attended countless town hall meetings with victims of the spill listening to their concerns, calling for patience and accepting all blame. He understood making an emotional connection with those affected by the oil spill requires personalizing the brand and truly listening to people.
According to Raj Raghunathan of the McCombs School of Business, “The earlier you make the emotional connection the better, because once consumers have decided they like a particular option, the more difficult it is for them to backpedal. Their thinking falls in line with their emotions.”

**EMOTIONS DRIVE DECISIONS**

Just as people are looking for more and deeper connections, research is demonstrating that emotions are drivers for every decision we make in our lives, even purchasing decisions previously considered triggered by a logic-based approach. What do these macro trends and new understanding of emotional drivers mean for brands and their ability to reach customers, gain their trust and inspire real, lasting relationships? How do companies factor in the desire for deep connections when creating their marketing programs? And how do they connect on an emotional level with those who matter most to their business?

In *Emotionics: Winning Hearts and Minds*, Dan Hill states our brains are made up of three parts: visual, emotional and rational. They are hardwired so emotion drives reason, reason does not drive emotion. Feelings happen before we are even conscious of them. The emotional part of the brain is larger than the rational part. And, according to Dr. Donald Calne, the essential difference is that emotion leads to action while reason leads to conclusions. Visual, emotional and rational work together in our brains to make decisions, but emotion is the leader.

Overall, it has been discovered, people feel more than think. We feel first and last in the decision-making process. Most of our mental activity happens beyond our awareness. And, mental activity is initiated by visual, sensory impressions that lead to emotional responses, which we communicate mostly non-verbally. Based on this new understanding of our brains, it makes sense that consumers buy brands that provide emotional reinforcement of who they are. They buy brands that reflect their values and reinforce the decisions they make.

For marketers, then, it’s all about being authentic and transparent. Really capturing the emotional drivers and understanding these are different for each individual customer. Being “on emotion” elicits a stronger reaction than being “on brand.” And that translates across the board. It drives interactions with customers and employees, how you recruit, how you manage, how you market, how you connect at every level.

**TAPPING INTO CONSUMERS’ FEELINGS**

Unlike rational thought, emotion is action oriented. Specific emotions signal specific behavioral outcomes. Emotionomics outlines seven core emotions that drive behaviors and actions: happiness, neutral (surprise), fear, anger, contempt, sadness, and disgust.

A company has a choice in how to express its brand to leverage an emotional connection. Many, such as Apple, attempt to tie the experience to happiness. Making the association with happiness can be done in such a way that an emotional association with a brand/product is tied to happiness—a state we know consumers desire right now.

The interesting thing about happiness is we know we don’t need it to survive. But, once we’ve met our basic needs, happiness is our next order of business. People are willing to pay more for things that make them happy. It’s a reward we all believe we deserve.

One of BrandZ’s top most valuable brands in 2009 was Apple, Inc., which ranked as the sixth most valuable brand. The issues the company experienced with the latest release of its iPhone demonstrate the loyalty Apple fans exhibit. The brand embodies key features of what is relevant for consumers right now and allows them to emotionally connect with the brand. Apple:

- **Has personality** – imagination, innovation, passion, hopes and dreams. Apple makes an emotional connection with its audiences.
- **Meets a need** – Apple simplifies life through technology. It creates products that allow consumers to connect with others and enjoy little indulgences, like a favorite new song.
- **Understands consumers** – Apple gets that its brand perception is created through the entire customer experience, every touchpoint from ads to in-store customer service affects how people feel about the products and the company.

**Uses emotion effectively** – The company uses emotion to capture the imagination of consumers and drive brand loyalty, as exhibited in its recent iPhone campaign highlighting the phone’s FaceTime application.

Apple loyalists take pride in the fact they are connected with people “like them.” Being part of this elite group stokes their self-confidence and self-worth.

Another company that truly understands the power of brand connections is Procter & Gamble. With three brands in the BrandZ Top 100 (Pampers #31, Colgate #56, Tide #85) P&G knows how to reach and emotionally engage with its target audience—moms.

Moms are time-starved today. They are also one of the fastest growing groups of online bloggers and social media users because they need quality information from trustworthy sources. As a result, moms are very likely to turn to social media—and other mothers like them online—for recommendations and advice. They are also highly invested in the success of their children.

P&G gets all this, and created a campaign designed to appeal to the emotional side of moms in a very authentic way during the 2010 Winter Olympics. The company’s “Proud sponsor of Moms,” campaign ingeniously touched the emotions of moms everywhere, in a very authentic way, to gain their brand loyalty.

Reaching consumers with an authentic, appealing message today doesn’t require television. The wildfire growth of social media makes it an extremely effective channel for reaching consumers. The viral hit “Smell Like a Man” Old Spice campaign demonstrates how effective the two-way, one-to-one approach social media offers can make a compelling way to connect emotionally and authentically with consumers.

Launched with a TV ad during the Super Bowl, this campaign captured everyone’s attention. It targeted both men and women—no easy task. In addition to the television ads, an online campaign used the same concept, but the scenarios were created by users who commented on streaming videos featuring the actor, Isaiah Mustafa. Isaiah’s online dialogue and actions were inspired by real-time interactions with Old Spice fans, capturing their imagination and creating positive emotional ties. The Old Spice message leverages the innate power in humor that speaks to a variety of audiences. It doesn’t alienate or exclude but provides clever associations. It achieved success by crafting a message that connects with not only the Old Spice-buying audience but the general public.

Since the “Smell Like a Man” campaign broke in February 2010, Old Spice has become the number one brand of body wash and antiperspirant/deodorant. According to S. Small’s Old Spice case study: