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## Why Interruption Still Trumps Engagement

### It's the Sales That Matter, and That Hasn't Changed

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I know we're not supposed to say it out loud, but a lot of CMOs and agency types think that advertising is going the way of the dinosaur, the Model T and conversation without emoticons. Consumers want to engage with content instead of get interrupted by ads, or so the logic goes, so we celebrate social campaigns like the recent one from Old Spice, and find favor only for commercials that are entertaining. Making a sales pitch just isn't credible anymore.

Now that we're well into the social-media revolution, I think it's time to revisit the three assumptions on which this argument is based:

The first assumption is that ads aren't credible so they can't play a meaningful role in our conversations with consumers. But nobody wakes up in the morning hating ads, do they? That's like saying a particular print font angers you, or that the hardcover book format keeps you up at night. I say ads aren't credible when they're useless or dishonest, which, unfortunately, describes most advertising. It took consumers a generation to figure out that we marketers are expert at slicing and dicing the truth. Oil companies claim to care about the environment by hyping inconsequential investments in alternative energy. Pictures of stuffed fast-food sandwiches have the real innards artificially pushed up to the front. Opposing political candidates are in league with the devil. Worse, we've been creating utter nonsense as product benefits since the 1960s. 7Up will make you hip like a Peter Max poster. Use Hai Karate cologne and pretty girls will jump you. It's cool to use a Microsoft PC.

Telling a half truth or a made-up benefit isn't the same thing as outright lying, but it's certainly not credible and consumers know it. Yet we continue to do it. I wonder sometimes if we're too willing to throw out the medium with the message, or at least defeat ourselves with misguided excuses for why we do what we do.

This relates to the second assumption, which is that consumers don't want to be bothered. Commercial speech is an intrusion, so brands must avoid producing anything that even hints at a sales purpose, and then wait and hope to be invited to do so at some later date. "Permission marketing" is a glorious babblespeak idea that easily embraces the egg without acknowledging the hard work of a chicken, and writ large shows that we've forgotten there are good reasons why consumers want to know things they may not have asked for:

**Relevance.** When people find themselves with available time and nothing available to do, they're open to receiving a pitch. Waiting in line. Sitting on a jet looking for its gate. TV channel-surfing. Creatively making those situations better lets you risk selling just about anything.

**Immediacy.** Messages like "move; there's a piano about to fall on your head" are acceptable to anyone, anytime. Give them obvious utility that addresses a need, not just a benefit, and it allows you to sell and them to say yes or no. "There's a sale at the store in front of you" on a mobile phone counts in this regard.

**Meaning.** Most people can't remember how to tell a joke, but something that is meaningful is hard to forget. So proactively offering information that really matters to consumers is doable, irrespective of most times and places, and they're more likely to use that information to buy something later on.

The third assumption is that entertainment is an alternative to selling. It's not, and it never was; it's like thinking all you need for a great book is a lot of words and punctuation, or that a smiling face in a photo constitutes a happy moment in time. Purpose matters, as does how you accomplish something, and it's this 800-pound gorilla that's a part of every conversation we have with consumers. They know we're trying to sell to them, whether we acknowledge it or they consciously think about it. Is it possible that consumers suspect our motives when we produce "content" without any admission of sales intent? Could the all-time lows in corporate reputation and credibility be partially a result of these purposeless conversations? We can entertain all we want, but perhaps we're just swapping empty social calories for the substance we once aspired to deliver via advertising.

Brands always had conversations with consumers, whether via broadcast TV or chiseled on clay tablets. The rules have also been consistent over time: Tell the truth and tell it with relevance, immediacy and meaning. That's why ads that interrupted with sales messages worked so effectively for so long; making the content worth consumers' time meant that brands could risk asking for the sale. It's not a new idea, and today's consumers aren't a new breed of human being. Yet we've assumed that the old rules no longer apply. Delivering engagement and its metrics of time spent and forwards clicked trumps the historic measures of interruption, all of which got to a sales result pretty quickly.

I'd choose effective interruption over pointless engagement anytime. Why wouldn't you?

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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