DIGITAL'S INDELIBLE MARK ON BRAND BUILDING FUNDAMENTALS

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EVOLUTION OF "BRAND"

It's worth reviewing where the word "brand" comes from. Not what's debated within frosted-glass boardrooms, coffee houses or expletive-strewn white-boarding sessions, but the actual entomology of the word we utter every day. What does it mean, and what are we working towards? Websters-Merriam lists it as: "a mark that is burned into the skin of an animal (such as a cow) to show who owns the animal." They date it back to Olde-English and Proto-Germanic usage for affixing a permanent record to livestock, goods and even persons who were banned from specific regions with an emblazed stigma.[1] Having only slightly evolved today, we stake claim to and spend millions of dollars through the broadcast of all-encompassing efforts to brand our clients' products and services. We've added refined legal specificity like "wordmark," "trademark," "logo infringement," etc. to define our territory; we've created an entire marketing suite of tangible, distinctive elements designed to be procedurally applied (with great precision, reach and frequency) for the purpose of re-enforcing a singularly implied owner and authority.

This is today's most systemic and destructive brand trap.

Building a brand in the digital age means truly accepting the ownership fallacy, embracing it memorably, and then quickly discarding it amongst other outdated marketing myths and urban legends.

A brand, in its modern environment, can fundamentally not be owned (I mean legally, yes, and that's great for the lawyers). Today, brands are shared. Although expertly crafted for mass appeal and influence, a brand exists solely as a finite amalgamation of distinct elements and experiences curated by any one individual at any one specific moment of recall. This is where digital has left its largest and most impactful mark on our industry. People expect digital things (technology, platforms, software, hardware, etc.) to react *with* them. Whether via touch, keyboard, mouse, gesture, camera (or any other form of input), there is a dedicated exchange taking place. This is in stark contrast to traditional brand building and strategic planning sessions where we discuss marketing to them, or worse, *at* them. Digital devices, screens and experiences have forever changed the expectations of interaction between people and brands. As an industry, we're reacting to this via tailored experiences and tracking through opt-ins, micro-sites, loyalty programs, eCRM, custom offers, codes and AdChoices.[2] But the very notion of brand "building" still details ownership, and rigid, chronological steps: location, foundation, first floor, second floor, rooftop, façade, until a single, cohesive, towering structure emerges. Something the architects and financial backers can be proud of. In many ways, your prototypical brand, soon to be adorned with a monumental-sized logo for all to see. But the building itself is now fixed, it can't be moved, and in thinking of a fixed structure, we've epitomized the opposite of the digital age.

> **PEOPLE EXPECT DIGITAL THINGS TO REACT WITH THEM. THIS IS IN STARK CONTRAST TO TRADITIONAL BRAND BUILDING ... WHERE WE DISCUSS MARKETING TO THEM, OR WORSE, AT THEM.**

MAKING SENSE OF BRANDS IN THE
DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

What you find upon examining the digital world's structure are flexible, interchangeable, programmable elements, specifically designed for maximum portability, customization and user interaction. Born outside of traditional "push" media, digital by design reacts to, and, encourages our "pull." Digital has created a hyper-connected, on-demand, networked ecosystem that is always changing. Based on indexed search data, Google estimates that the Internet consists of around 15-20 billion unique webpages with 2-8 billion being created or removed any given week over the last year.[3] Google sorts and routes almost 100 billion queries a month,[3] navigating a massive network of devices, people, machines and content. And behind the façade

of webpages, blogs and YouTube videos quietly lies a profound impact to brand-building fundamentals... HTML and XML (Hyper-Text and Extensible Markup Language).

They are the building blocks of the web, and along with the pixel, have transformed the way we create, deliver and measure branded communication. These elements and others like them allow, for the first time, the separation of content (i.e. images, words, video, etc.) and form (ad, website, blog, etc.) We no longer plan for, or exclusively associate "video" with television, or "headlines" with print or even "commerce" with stores. The massive communication impacts, executed across

millions of keystrokes, thousands of platforms, and pretty much anything with a plug, represents a true extinction-event for the "one-way" marketing epoch. Digital has ushered in a new era for highly personal, social and meaningful marketing at a one-to-one level. This poses major challenges for brands clinging to traditional best-practices. How can we segment "audiences," budget production / placement by "channel" or account for costs in "Paid," "Owned" or "Earned," while digital continues to democratize the content and media worlds. Today, a one million euro commercial might garner less attention, engagement and publicity than a one minute YouTube video. Digital provides us a medium between devices, platforms, places and

content whilst simultaneously building a virtual network between those elements, where *we* become active participants. Millions of links, likes, posts and reviews sway opinions daily. User-generated content is loaded to the web at a blistering volume of 100 hours of video a minute,[4] and over 145 billion text messages being sent around the globe[5] supplying a constant flow of exchange. In her book, Daina Middleton welcomes us to "The Age of Participation" where power shifts to a "two-way" marketing world between people and brands, screens, devices, databases and bank accounts instantly.[6]

BUILDING BRANDS IN TODAY'S
DIGITAL NETWORK

The digital environment I've described is highly complex, uniquely personal and completely networked. But then again, so are its creators.

We have evolved to be as efficient and flexible as possible, rushing to connect form and content, make sense of a complex environment and the ability to make decisions with great speed and accuracy. And like the web, the brain's virtual network is vast, growing with every exposure, experience, memory and data-point we process. The repeated recall of all those elements can be resource intensive, so the brain creates "paths" to link decisioning steps into shorter outcomes. These are known as "Heuristics," a psychological underpinning literally hardwiring our brain's nerve cells and synapses to create shortcuts for logic sequences at moments of confrontation and choice.[7] And when you diagram decision heuristics, you are in essence building an optimized neural network and also modeling the precise series of cognitive events that successful branding efforts are hoping to circumvent.

Marketers are taking note of these similarities. We are inventing new ways for marketers to observe, adjust and plan for a data-driven environment. But digital should not be just seen as a disruptor, it's an enabler. Enabling connection between people, places, products and ideas. Enabling relevancy, preference and participation with brands. And enabling the virtual world unrecognizable from the physical, intrinsically linked through a seamless connected infrastructure. We should be planning brands around this; how people think, research, make decisions and connect to the world.
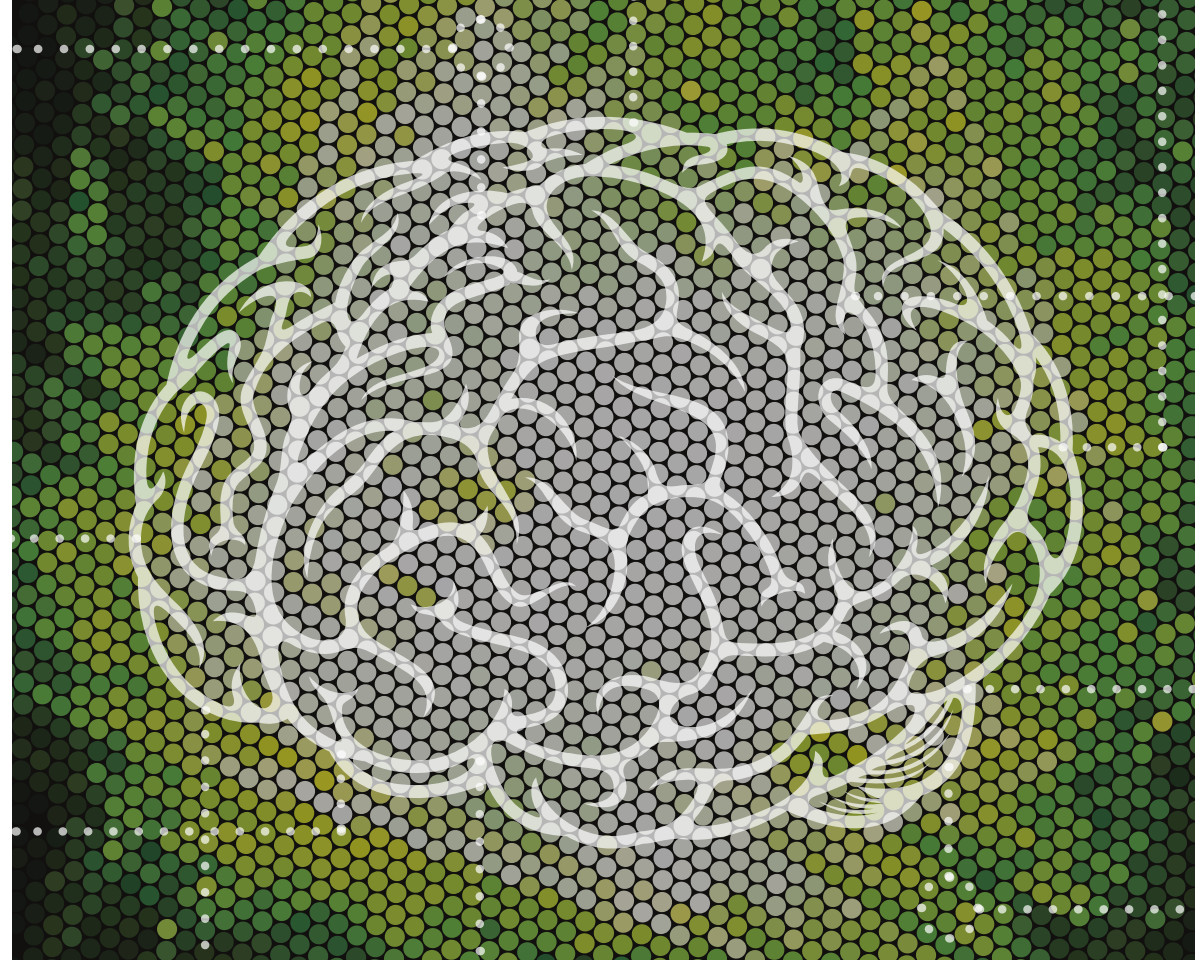
THREE IDEAS

FOR RETHINKING HOW TO BUILD (OR NETWORK) BRANDS FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

1

MARKETERS AND AGENCIES NEED TO LOOK LESS LIKE FIXED STRUCTURES (DEPARTMENTS & PNLS) AND WORK MORE LIKE ACTIVE NETWORKS TO BETTER MITIGATE EFFECTS OF DIGITAL FRAGMENTATION.

Networks are made up of nodes and connectors, allowing for points of exchange to upload or download information. However, they are not linear, and certainly not siloed. In fact, both digital and cognitive networks actively create new nodes and forge lateral or multiple connections based on real-time stimuli.[8] This results in a dynamic, action-based environment that promotes learning and adaptability. Google crawls the web millions of times a day, hunting for new "nodes," websites and pieces of content in part because 15% of all searches performed on Google are ones it has never seen before.[9] And unlike traditional media, digital has a pre-disposition for change as code, content and form can be virtually transformed rather than needing to be physically manipulated. This has significant impacts on how, when and where we engage with brands, on what screen(s) and for what purpose. Think for instance about someone pausing the television to take a cell phone pic from a local television broadcast that gets loaded to Facebook, edited online, posted to Reddit and instantly downloaded a continent away on someone's morning commute. This type of fragmentation is inevitable. We should be embracing it. Now think about the approvals, schedules and hurdles we face in getting our tech and marketing teams to synchronize updated product imagery online. (Nevermind the Facebook strategy).

Is your organization structured for digital?

2

BRAND BUILDING SHOULD TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE HUMAN DESIRE FOR SHORTCUTS AND THE OVERWHELMING VOLUME, IMMEDIACY AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION DIGITAL SUPPLIES US.

Decision heuristics have evolved because, like bandwidth caps on wireless/ethernet speeds, our cognitive processing capabilities are scarce. The brain has limits on what it can process, perceive and pay attention to.[8] Marketers must compete for valuable mental real-estate needed to create as many "nodes" and "connections" for recall and evaluation as possible. But quantity of connections is not the answer. Brand efforts need to focus on the quality of association, drawing closer together the fit and relevancy of touchpoints through reinforcement and participation. From a choice standpoint, today's potential customers are an army of problem solvers. They actively interact with their environments, reference information from a variety of sources, process this information, make decisions and then provide feedback on that choice to others. This is commonly referred to as the decision funnel (yet another outdated, analog marketing myth). A funnel is a terrible metaphor because digital defies linearity. People now jump from consideration, to purchase and back to awareness in an active, dynamic way. Leading this

behavior is search, the dominant cognitive and brand building heuristic of the digital age. It commands the largest share of digital media spend[10] and takes the lions' share of web traffic[11] because it is a useful shortcut. We use it as a navigation tool, product comparison platform, awareness and discovery engine, and frankly when we are just too lazy to remember something... *"Google it."* Search is ubiquitous and is embedded in marketplaces like Amazon, social platforms like Facebook and across thousands of affiliates via feeds and biddable placements. As humans are continually inundated with increasing choice, one-click search offers confidence and simplicity in decision making through links, reviews, opinions and trusted content.

Is your digital presence shortcut optimized?

3

BRAND BUILDING MUST EMBRACE THE NOISE OF THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT, ADAPT GREATER PERCEPTIVE CAPABILITIES AND MOVE FROM VALUING IMPRESSIONS TO MEASURING EXPRESSIONS.

In a networked environment, engagement becomes the lowest common denominator, not the end-game. Engagement is a pleasant byproduct of attention, but we must focus our efforts on strengthening the creation and connection of branded nodes. Brand networking is about forging connections between the mental dots, helping lead us to decisions. Just like each memory or experience with our environment builds cognitive heuristics, each element or exchange with a product or service helps build a brand. Because of the massive fragmentation and volume of touchpoints today, breakthrough marketing necessitates creating more personal, more relevant and more motivating connections than ever before. Good news? We have only begun to scratch the surface of the insight and data-points that digital provides. I won't talk much about "Big Data" here because it's not new; it's always existed in digital but we are just now learning how to process it. We are getting a broader picture of how real-time networked nodes and connections work, the cross-channel impacts on communication,

effects between store and site traffic and creating new methods for measurement, attribution and econometric modeling. Social-listening is moving from marketing to operations, branded communities are being created and customer feedback is solicited and applied. We are beginning to more precisely and scientifically associate participation metrics with marketing performance ROI.
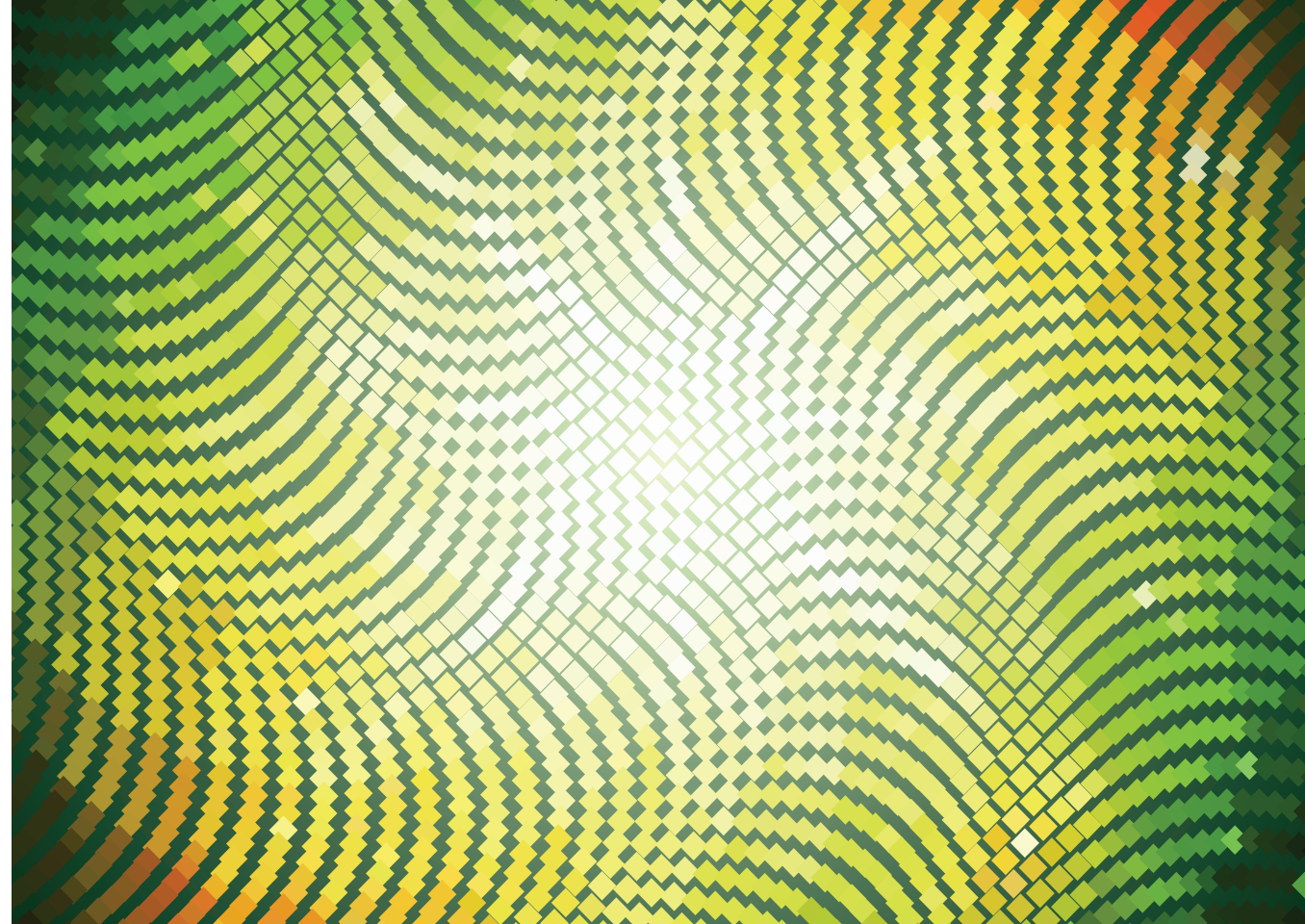
How are you measuring digital participation?

REDEFINING BRANDS FOR
TOMORROW

This is a time of unprecedented complexity and connection. Every two days, humans create more data than was produced from the dawn of civilization to 2003.[12] We should structure our brands for the way our brains are pre-wired to draw conclusions, as a network; a network of vast information (data), places (platforms), language (code) and experiences (screens).

I'll end with an example and a question. Tomorrow's technology like Google Glass is networked via Bluetooth to your smartphone, connecting GPS and social media signals to automatically identify a friend's presence in a nearby coffee shop. With a verbal or gestural nod, you alert the barista you'll be arriving, notify your friend via Facebook, check -in via RFID and automatically pay with earned loyalty points. You meet your friend, stop to pick-up (and then Instagram) your waiting grandé espresso and sit down to rehash an upcoming campaign. This is what I call digital's "networked effect." Everything is connected and we can never go back. The big question is "are we building brands for the digital age" or "retrofitting what we have believed has worked in the past?" I think it's time we re-define brand fundamentals from the ground up.

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