

Andrew Pimentel | May 2006



Chevy's campaign allowing customers to create their own television-style advertisements using brand assets that they released 'into the wild' was all the buzz among the digital media community.

For those of you who missed it, some customers created derogatory ads about the Tahoe's gas mileage, its drivers' inferiority complexes, and so on. And these customers released their own creations back to the world through viral video services like YouTube, reaching thousands of people with distinctly off-brand messaging. In the past, brand managers or agencies might have been fired for such an event.

But while the results were wildly controversial, there are several principles of Chevy's campaign that media companies and marketers should learn to follow.

The truth is, both the Chevy campaign and the meteoric rise of MySpace are really symptoms of something that is not a revolution at all. **Social media**—loosely defined as the forms of publishing based on user-generated content and high levels of interaction between authors and readers—is an evolution that has been in progress for a long time now. While customer behavior is evolving rapidly because of digital technology, the rise of social media also speaks to the power of inherent customer DNA.

When we say customer DNA, we mean deep-rooted behaviors. Things we see in real life. Things that have a history, that have real inertia, that are built into cultures. These are different from trends, fads, and techno-speak that come from companies who hope their widgets will uncover 'latent need-states.' The most important thing about customer DNA is that it is real, and can therefore be observed, researched, and acted upon.

Behaviors that went unexpressed are now expressed. Unmet needs, starting to be met. Existing behaviors, amplified. Insights that lead us to innovation are often under our noses the whole time, and we simply have to apply the right research technique at the right time to finally see them for what they are.

What other symptoms of this social media shift are taking place? What can provide any insight into why Chevy is letting customers make ads and why MySpace is second only to Yahoo! in page views?

Audience members have assumed a higher level of control over the media they consume. They can:

- Search for precisely what they want (Googlization)
- Ignore what they don't want (TiVo)
- Consume what they want, when and where they want it (TiVo, podcasts, iPods, PSPs)
- Become their own media (MySpace, Xanga, Blogger, Flickr, YouTube, Facebook)

## **Problem:**

How can marketers and publishers engage a new breed of customers who are becoming their own media?

## **Solution:**

With a deep customer understanding fueled by immersive research, companies can learn to give their customers more control and enable them, instead of compete with them.

## **Benefit:**

Creating deep, socially-fueled relationships with more, smaller groups can contribute directly to companies' marketing mixes.

In light of the last point, we are entering a new phase of the media landscape: an environment in which a marketer's own customers are its biggest competition.

Consider the youth audience. To them, MySpace is like a user-generated, 24/7 reality TV network for the masses, and which stars themselves. Their expectation is to have control and they are far more interested in each other than they are in most other media. This has always been true—it's real behavioral DNA—but is now being given means to express itself.

This effect is not limited to the youth market. Consider that citizen journalism is starting to infiltrate news sources like MSN and the BBC thanks to the cameras, mobile phones, and other devices that more people increasingly have on them to record events when they suddenly find themselves at the center of a story. And of course, the rise of blogs, which is a topic that deserves its own separate conversation.

It is a new world where everyone can be a publisher, everyone can be a paparazzi, everyone can be a distributor, where the 'wisdom of crowds'—not editorial sensibility—pushes content to the top, and perhaps most importantly, one in which future audiences are a different species of media consumer.

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What can we do as media publishers and marketers trying to engage these newly empowered consumers?

### 1. From Push to Pull

Given the new found control that consumers are assuming more and more each day, it helps to think of media and marketing in a pull model. Don't assume you can get your content or message out there effectively by spraying a messaging firehose across broad swathes of people. Imagine creating experiences that let consumers pull you into their digital bubbles. Release brand assets into the wild. Let people badge themselves with your brand. Create real value for consumers by giving them something and letting them work with it.

### 2. From Targeting to Connecting

Targeting is not going away. In fact, presenting the right message to the right people at the right time in the right place is a science that is continually evolving. But there is also connecting: creating real relationships with people. Building, nurturing and enhancing the communities and conversation that is already out there happening about brands. Going after more, smaller, highly targeted groups—via human connections as well as technology.

### 3. From Reacting to Understanding

Consumer behavior is changing rapidly, but some trends aren't really trends at all. Conducting the right research at the right time is crucial to understand what customers really want and need. At Avenue A | Razorfish, we regularly help clients conduct everything from immersive ethnography studies to online surveys to discover how audiences really live with digital experiences. In the U.S. and many other countries, people are full-fledged digital consumers now: there is no 'digital behavior' in a separate bucket and a separate line item—there is simply behavior, and it helps to understand this new behavior and translate your brand accordingly. Deep understanding of your audience can lessen the burden to react to every trend: you can measure technology developments against audiences' real behavioral DNA, unmet needs, and pain points instead of assuming you need to react to every latest fad.

#### 4. From Risk to Opportunity

As Chevy's user-generated ad campaign underscores, social media presents marketers and media companies with risks. Your audience is your competition—but they can also be your new greatest ally. It is another sea-change for brand marketers—if not now, then soon many will find themselves in a position where they have to cede some control of their message to the audience. But there are also opportunities. The ability to leverage the social mediascape to meet business objectives is first and foremost for companies dipping their toes in today. But it is also about the future. The web is showing us that part of media's and marketing's future is social, and as other media, from TV to radio, become more digital, it is logical to assume that this movement will touch many other channels as well. By starting now, your brand can be there when it happens.

What do some of these changes look like in real life? Avenue A | Razorfish' experiences with clients like Nike, Maybelline, Carnival Cruise Lines and The New York Times provide a glimpse at what some major brands are doing.

**Nike** leveraged social media when it fueled a grassroots soccer community via a social media campaign on MySpace. By releasing content organically, Nike whispered to a highly targeted community rather than yelled to a mass audience, and the response was positive: soccer fans pulled the Nike brand into their own social media bubbles.



**Maybelline's Pure** and its new WhatIsPure.com experience, promoted heavily on social media sites, invited users not only to participate in timely polls that were relevant to a young female audience, but also to create their own polls. Again, by promoting ideas and user control instead of push messaging about its product, it drew users into a brand experience and let them shape it themselves. By inviting users to put their mark on the experience, customers are able to leave a little piece of themselves within this branded experience and then share it with others.

**Carnival Cruise Lines**, with its CarnivalConnections.com service, is moving in the direction of understanding that people don't absorb brand experiences in a vacuum. By allowing people to plan trips collaboratively, Carnival is taking a step toward connecting cruise-goers in more meaningful ways.



And the new **NYTimes.com** now offers ways to surface stories based on the conversation happening about Times content on the web—'Most Blogged' articles now stand alongside its popular 'Most Emailed' feature, and the upcoming MyTimes launch will put human filters onto the news. The fact that a brand with a venerable tradition of maintaining a distinct editorial sensibility is opening its gates to the larger conversation speaks volumes.

Moving forward, it will be up to us as publishers, marketers and agencies to provide compelling social media experiences, and to do so will require a deep understanding of the customer that can only come from insightful customer research. And we also have to learn as we go, to establish ways to understand the impact our efforts in this area have on our overall marketing efforts so that ultimately we can assess the return on investment that our efforts bring to the mix.



It's a scary and exciting time, a complete inversion of the way many of us have been used to doing things. Above all, it does not appear that social media is a trend or fad. The brands that challenge themselves to begin building competency now will have an advantage as this new landscape comes into focus.

## About the Author

Andrew Pimentel joined Avenue A | Razorfish's strategy practice in New York in 2004. He previously served as the Director of Marketing for mobile startup Upoc Networks, and as a brand strategist at New York consultancy Sterling Group, where he was a project director on branding projects for clients such as MTV, VH1, IBM, Kraft Foods, and Ocean Spray.

While at Avenue A | Razorfish, Andrew has worked with premier media and marketing clients to create new types of services and brands online, as well as to help understand the opportunities that existing and emerging digital technologies present.

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## About Avenue A | Razorfish

Avenue A | Razorfish ([www.avenuea-razorfish.com](http://www.avenuea-razorfish.com)) is the largest interactive marketing and technology services firm in the U.S., and an operating unit of Seattle-based aQuantive, Inc. (NASDAQ: AQNT). Avenue A | Razorfish solutions are entrenched in deep technology, rigorous analytics and a rich understanding of customer needs, including award-winning web media & creative, search marketing services, email marketing/eCRM, and world-class creative, design and implementation of customer websites and intranets/extranets. Avenue A | Razorfish operates three regions in the U.S. – East, West and Central – with offices located in major markets. In addition, the firm's first international presence was established through the acquisition of U.K.-based full-service interactive agency DNA. Clients include AstraZeneca, Best Buy, Ford Motor Company, Kraft, Microsoft, Nike and Verizon. aQuantive, Inc. and all of its operating units are committed to Internet privacy.

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