

Introduction

Once upon a time, the art and science of marketing was pretty well understood. Brand awareness was built on TV, radio and print. Consumers were a captive audience. If your advertising did its job, and your product delivered on its promises, you won. The internet has changed all of that... or has it?

True, courtesy of the internet, a few things have changed:

- Consumer experiences are more distributed than ever
- Consumers are willing (and able) to engage with your brand much more deeply than before.
- Consumers will engage in conversations about your brand whether you like it or not.
- The cost of producing a creative product gets lower every day while new technology makes it easier.

So what hasn't changed? The big idea. Great brands are still inextricably linked to great products that express clear, honest promises. Consumers still vote on those promises with their wallets.

So how do you convey the big idea in this complex new era?

Ironically, it's simple -- hand your brand over to your customer. Invite them to play with your brand and make it their own. Open the door and say "come on in." With a few simple strategies, you can make your brand more consumer friendly and start reaping the benefits of give and take marketing. You have to do it in order to compete. That's right. Go native. Release your brand to the wild.

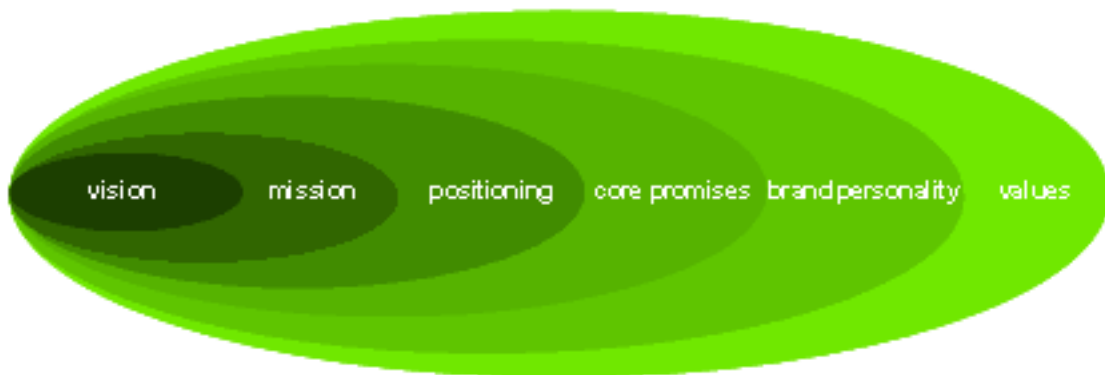
1. Start with the brand

No matter the medium, the foundation for any marketing program is a clear definition of the brand. This also applies to the world of heavy consumer interaction. So start by clearly outlining the basic principles of your brand and what makes it stand out from the competition, including:

- What makes your brand different
- The basic principles of your brand
- A clear positioning strategy
- Your distinctive personality traits
- Your core promises
- Your values

You must have all this in place before you engage the consumer. Think about it: you can't ask someone to play if you don't know who's playing, what the game is or what's at stake. By defining the brand you provide parameters that any experience should have and the core concepts you will want to reinforce when consumers are given the chance to engage with your brand.

At Avenue A | Razorfish, we refer to this foundation as a company's BrandPrint, as illustrated below.



2. Know thy customer

Once you've defined your brand, consider your customers' online behaviors. What do they do? Where do they hang out? What are they looking for? Your creative needs to resonate with your customers -- mapping to their habits and their habitats, what they do and where they do it.

Example: When Burger King advertised on Heavy.com (a site that is all about video content), they sent King masks to two dozen of the site's regular contributors, inviting them to create their own commercials. To BK's credit, they didn't edit the videos, but instead ran them with a qualifying message that this was user-generated content.

The result: The target demographic embraces brand and runs with it. BK wins.



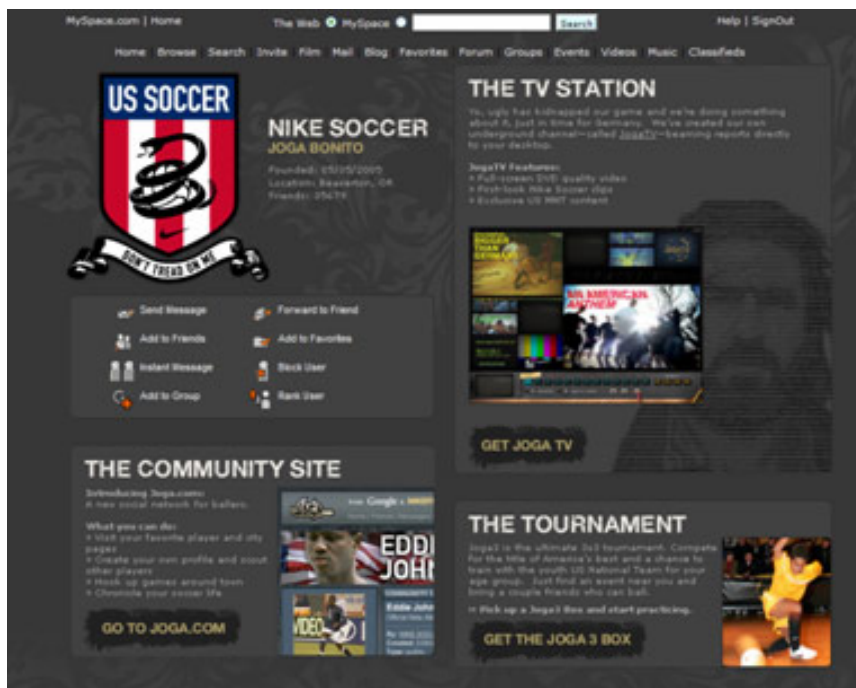
Consumer-produced videos aligned with Burger King's marketing programs and gave customer's ownership of the brand.

3. Go niche

Web 2.0 is just around the corner – an internet where chunks of content (audio, video, text) are strung together by metadata (i.e., producing the now-famous "Long Tail" phenomenon). At the same time, the generation of people who grew up on the internet is now fusing brands, music, video and their own words to tell their story. Forecast: a powerful collision of brands and customers with enough momentum to push you over the edge to success.

Example: Recognizing that its consumers live out on the Long Tail, Nike Soccer built its own site on MySpace in May 2005. The site has 44,000 "friends" and is only one degree of separation from many of the U.S. Soccer team players. What's amazing is that if you look at the sites of these "friends," they've adopted the Nike Soccer logo and feature the soccer video from Nike's JogaTV (part of the Soccer brand).

The result: Nike has become an integral part of its customers' lives, connecting a widely distributed audience with a shared (but personalized) identity.



Nike Soccer's MySpace page

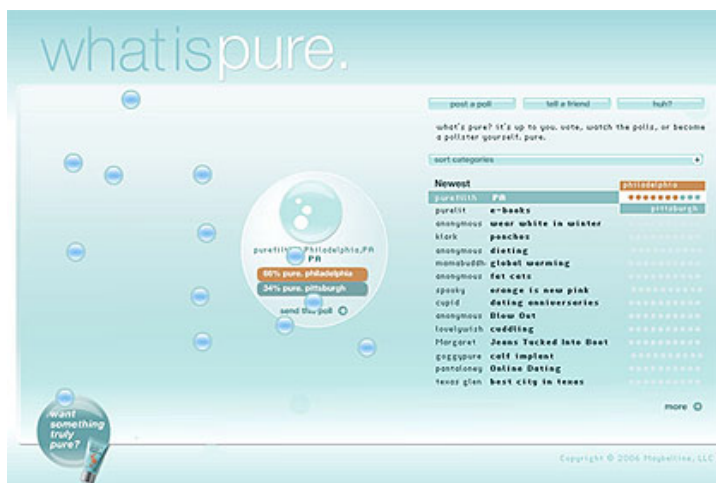
4. Let them mix it to their tastes

If you connect with your customers' passion points, they'll forge emotional attachments to your brand. Tools that allow customers to express themselves in creative ways result in longer engagements and viral legs -- they're more apt to share with their friends when there's a little piece of themselves in it.

Examples: Check out New Line Cinema's www.snakesonaplane.com and Maybelline's www.whatispure.com for two good examples of branded experiences that connect with customers' passion points -- whether it's making your own trailer or sharing hot topics (or hot gossip) with the world. New Line's embrace of user-generated content is going to change the way that movie's are marketed. Whether or not anyone can capture lightning in a bottle the way that they have is another story, but it found a cult following before it was released in theaters!



The Snakes on a Plane Toolkit facilitates user-generated content.



Whatispure.com features user-generated topics and real-time vote results.

5. Embrace evolution-- fast!


As the tools to create user-generated content become ubiquitous and YouTube and other platforms become household names, consumers are going to find ways to celebrate or denigrate your brand. In a world where consumer attention is extremely difficult to capture, marketers should be opportunistic and consider how to ride the wave created by consumers.

Consider the case of Diet Coke and Mentos in the [Eepybird Video](#). This video was created by two members of the Oddfellow Theater group in Maine. The video illustrates the combustive power of mixing Diet Coke with Mentos -- it's a good laugh. It has been viewed well over four million times online and was a guest -- along with its creators -- on Late Night with David Letterman. It also has a life well beyond -- there are more than 1,200 videos that appear when you search for "mentos + diet coke" on YouTube.

So, is this a good thing for Diet Coke and Mentos? If it does not stray far from your BrandPrint, it is a great thing. Mentos jumped on board quickly and has scooped up all ad inventory associated with the video, and have featured the eepybird video on their homepage. The Diet Coke brand team, on the other hand, has let the video run its course and is staying in the background.

In most cases it will be possible to ride the wave and stay on brand, but it will take creativity and a nimble attitude.

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The Eepybird video, ready to roll.

Conclusion

So are you ready to go native? Hand over the reigns of your brand experience to customer X and consumer Y? If you choose to release your brand to the wild, have fun and take notes. It'll be a learning experience for everyone -- your brand and your customer.

Consumers are only going to get more engaged, so there is no time like the present to get started.

Additional resources:

How to Talk WITH Your Customers
5 Brands Make Their Mark on MySpace

This article originally appeared in iMedia Connect, October 2006.

About the Author



As VP of Client Services at Avenue A | Razorfish, Pete applies his experience as a business strategist and interactive marketing consultant to develop effective strategies for understanding and influencing consumer behaviors. He has led a wide variety of projects in the areas of strategic planning, integrated interactive marketing, relationship marketing, and e-commerce system development. Pete has been fortunate to work with some of the world's most powerful brands, including Eastman Kodak Company, Viacom, Condé Nast, The New York Times, Nielsen Media Research, BMG and Bertelsmann, Daimler Chrysler, and Microsoft.

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About Avenue A | Razorfish

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