

People power

BY LIZ TORLÉE

Consumer clout is not to be trifled with

Remember "Think global, act local"? At least a couple of decades have been spent anxiously expounding the virtues of global branding and other lofty principles. But somehow, the second bit, that "local" thing, got lost. The globalization mission became such an all-consuming passion that companies were suddenly scrambling to stitch together far-flung strategic alliances. In the process, many functions and a lot of thinking were centralized or, worse, exported.

Now, let's take a very big breath here-why exactly is being global a good thing? How does it benefit the guy from Moncton with \$700 to invest in his RRSP? If he goes to his local branch and there's a long line-up or his customer service rep is having a bad day, we can only imagine his opinion of the bank's global stature.

Fact is, people-and businesses- are demanding local expertise, community sensitivity, personal relevance. Quietly, but with great finesse, the target customer has moved from being someone you talk to, to someone you listen to, to someone you must work with. Measuring their level of brand awareness, their evaluation of a product and their opinion of advertising is like closing the gate after several horses have bolted. Instead, companies are beginning to do what trendwatching.com calls "tapping into the intellectual capital" of their consumers, actively seeking their advice, their design skills and their creative brainpower in everything from product and service prototypes to marketing initiatives. Boeing has actively courted suggestions from the public (120,000 so far) to help it make a better plane. Niketalk.com posts regular comments from consumers about their products and service; Apple credits its visitors to ipodlounge.com with alerting them to problems that helped improve their entire product range. Companies which actively engage their consumers are not only getting some great ideas but reassuring them that each one matters, and that this is a two-way relationship.

When they are not invited in, when they don't feel their opinions and needs count, consumers can flex some powerful marketing muscle. Word of mouth has always been considered a formidable vehicle. Now we have "word of mouse." Because of the diminishing respect for many large institutions, including government and big business, consumers are trusting each other far more, and can now seek out the opinions of like-minded people-even if they don't know them. There are countless blogs, vlogs and websites designed to help navigate through different product options- everything from movie reviews at rottentomatoes.com to sites for the swapping of horror stories. All of them underline the need for local expertise and individual recognition.

So how best to work with consumers rather than risk having them take the brand's marketing into their own hands? From a lot of work in the field, there are two recurring themes:

De-centralization: While it might be a tall order, many people on both sides of the consumer/brand relationship are yearning for it. Field marketing personnel used to be a

mandatory component of any large company trying to do business across the country. They had small budgets and a brand "bible" with clear guidelines, and were encouraged to win friends and influence people in local communities.

Many smart companies are either still doing this or realizing that they need to start. In a recent health-care study, several pharmacists fondly recalled the days when reps from the big drug companies would actually call on them. It helped them to learn about the buzz in the industry, to get immediate answers to their questions and to have their own local concerns actively addressed. Now, it's all "head office driven" and "nameless, faceless and useless."

Grassroots partnerships: Setting up consumer panels for regular, informal dialogue is becoming increasingly popular and the Internet makes all this so easy. Consumers love to join website-hosted chat groups and this is a great way to gather unsolicited input and important insight into local culture. They like learning from each other, exchanging their experiences in certain categories, swapping tips, new ideas and coping strategies. The company or brand that actively facilitates this as an objective partner is well regarded. However, it's one thing to ask for input and quite another to genuinely welcome it, respond openly to it and act on it. Pretending doesn't count.

Today's consumers are reasserting the old "power to the people" mantra and will do things their own way if their input (not just their opinion) is not actively sought. Really working with consumers means inspiring and rewarding their interest in the brand in a tangible way. If it can't be face to face on their main street, then it needs to be the next best thing: mouse to mouse.

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