



It's all about the product

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The internet means that brands now have to focus on their products rather than their image. Tribal DDB's Jeroen Matser highlights three solutions to this problem.

On a recent visit to an office in our network I spotted a quote on a wall. It was one of those well-known quotes from the late William Bernbach and it said, "The magic is in the product".

As one of the founders of DDB and a leader of the creative revolution of the 60s and 70s, Bernbach was known for his purist view's on putting the quality of the product at the forefront of many famous advertising campaigns.

The quote made me realise how relevant a lot of Bernbach's thinking still is when you try to understand the impact of technology, both in terms of how it affects people's behaviour and what it means for the marketing and advertising industry.

Today, the internet has shrunk the knowledge gap between the experts and the public, and you could argue that information transparency and social media have created a communications playing field with only one golden rule: Your product is the future of everything.

When your audience is one click away from expert reviews, consumer opinions, price comparison sites and a range of other tools that will help them to make well informed and considered decisions, advertising that makes people look in a slightly different direction because you don't really have anything meaningful to say or you have a mediocre product is no longer an option.

Applying Bernbach's thinking shows there is now a great opportunity to use the new space driven by technology and social media to amplify and focus on the one characteristic that really makes your product stand out in your communication.

There are three basic principles developed by the technology sector that are now starting to creep into the world of advertising and marketing. All three allow communicators to extract more magic out of the unique aspects of the products they are promoting.

The first of these principles is that of open source. Open-source software usually refers to “source code under a license (or arrangement such as the public domain) that permits users to study, change, and improve the software, and to redistribute it in modified or unmodified form.”

This kind of thinking can also be applied to physical objects. A good example of this is the Roomba robotic vacuum cleaner. Whether or not it was originally intended to be an “open” platform, the fact that the software for this small disc shaped vacuum cleaner is quite user accessible and that its body can be opened easily with a screwdriver has turned it into one of the very first and most popular robotic devices for the home.

The Roomba’s user friendliness allows individuals to customise, modify and personalise their version of the product, leading to great stories in the social media sphere. Even more importantly, it creates a notion of openness and approachability around a product that is usually seen as very mechanical and non-human.

The fact that there are now more than 2,000 videos on YouTube where people demonstrate how they have adopted the Roomba and made it their own is a great case for any manufacturer and marketer.

When you present yourself and your products as being “open”, you invite intelligent and powerful entities (individuals or companies) to further develop your product and to amplify its presence in the relevant context – core functions of marketing.

Here’s another example: ie, the key aspect of the latest Apple iPhone is not its 3G connectivity but the launch of the Apple App Store; where third parties can go to create their own applications using Apple’s platform to launch their individual ventures. All of which will help generate great user experiences and get the product talked about.

The second principle that can be used to unleash more magic is the idea of networked objects, or “the internet of things”.

“The internet of things” is a post-desktop model of human/computer interaction that is thoroughly integrated into everyday objects and activities. Any company marketing products that could potentially have a link with the internet should start to consider the way they market those products.

The success of Nike+ (the integration of Apple technology into a Nike running shoe) is a great example of turning what once was quite a simple product – a good running shoe – into something much bigger – a great running experience, through the principles of networked objects.

Through its use of technology, Nike has become a facilitator of virtual personal trainers, global running challenges and social media environments for runners.

What originally started as a piece of clever and meaningful collaboration has now grown into one of the bigger experiential sports marketing platforms out there. Its latest iteration is the global 10k, which is expected to draw over a million individual runners.

Nike's partnership with Apple is a classic example of how the integration of networking technology into the core of the product has resulted in an experience that adds a great amount of value to people's perception of the Nike brand.

The third and final way to get more magic out the product is a more advanced use of what can be described as user experience. Technology offers immense opportunities to create engaging, interactive and involving user experiences that can really help a brand amplify the magic of its products.

A great example of how technology can extend a product experience into marketing communications is the O2 Memory Project installation that toured the UK earlier this year. UK mobile operator O2 commissioned the artist Jason Bruges to create an experience to introduce a new product called Bluebook – a service that stores all your valuable pictures and memories in a secure online vault.

The artist created The Memory Project; a 21st century “cyclorama” which toured the UK in April of this year and created a lot of talk in the press and blogger community.

The structure “camera-captures” panoramic moments in time and stores them within its digital memory bank. Inside, visitors were able to explore the stored history of the installation and interact with the displayed 360 degree images by using their body movements to navigate the installation's memory.

It was basically an engaging representation of the key product feature that truly involved the user in the actual product experience.

Using these three principles allows brands to focus on their resources on the truly great features of their products, emphasise point of difference and engage consumers via their communications.

At their heart lies the fact that the product has something to say that is more compelling than alternatives. In the digital age, consumers don't have to accept anything less than great products, and brands that fail to deliver will be dropped.

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