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The uninvited brand

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Abstract Brands rushed into social media, viewing social networks, video sharing, online communities, and microblogging sites as the panacea to diminishing returns for traditional brand building routes. But as more branding activity moves to the Web, marketers are confronted with the stark realization that social media was made for people, not for brands. In this article, we explore the emergent cultural landscape of open source branding, and identify marketing strategies directed at the hunt for consumer engagement on the People's Web. These strategies present a paradox, for to gain coveted resonance, the brand must relinquish control. We discuss how Web-based power struggles between marketers and consumer brand authors challenge accepted branding truths and paradigms: where short-term brands can trump long-term icons; where marketing looks more like public relations; where brand building gives way to brand protection; and brand value is driven by risk, not returns.

1. The party crashers: Marketers and the Social Web

Brands today claim hundreds of thousands of Facebook friends, Twitter followers, online community members, and YouTube fans; yet, it is a lonely, scary time to be a brand manager. Despite marketers' desires to leverage Web 2.0 technologies to their advantage, a stark truth presents itself: the Web was created not to sell branded products, but to link people together in collective conversational webs. As more branding activity moves online, marketers are confronted with the realization that brands are not always welcome in social media. Amid the cultural conversation, most brands seem inauthentic; their presence intrusive and out of place. Brands, as much as we might wish otherwise, are uninvited crashers of the Web 2.0 party. The technology that was supposed to empower marketers has empowered consumers instead.

Brands rushed into social media, viewing social networks, video sharing sites, online communities, and microblogging sites as the panacea to diminishing returns in traditional mass media. Despite declining audiences, consumers' increasing desire and ability to skip advertising embedded in programming, and a tremendous amount of clutter, prices for traditional media increased steadily year over year. Social media, by comparison, looked cheap and easy; a matter simply of switching spending from traditional to online forms. The shift seemed

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like a no-brainer, with the average consumer in 2010 devoting 32% of his or her media consumption to online channels, up from 26% in 2008 (Lang, 2010).

The Social Web offered a toolbox of tantalizing technologies for delivering against brand management goals. Web 2.0 technologies permitted two-way conversations with customers, and rare opportunities for the brand to listen to consumers and respond. Web 2.0 afforded the collection of in-depth information about consumer preferences and lifestyles, enabling micro-targeting and addressable, customized messaging. By all counts, emerging Web technologies would finally grant marketers the power to deliver on relationship marketing in the true spirit and intention of the term.

Unfortunately, brands' early attempts to crash the social media party were largely ignored and rebuffed. When marketers jury-rigged their television advertising and posted ads to YouTube and Facebook, consumers largely ignored them. As more branding activity migrated to the Web, consumers resisted advertising in their new social spaces. The Web, after all, was made for people and their conversations; it was not a new media channel for communications about marketers' brands.

An interesting paradox presented itself: in social media, everyone—and no one—was the audience. While YouTube served up over 2 billion videos per day, no one was compelled to tune into a branded video, and most did not. Brand marketers no longer controlled the reach of their messages, consumers did. Exposure was a function not of audience size but of consumer volition; a by-product of viewers who voluntarily rated and ranked content, shared it with friend networks, or re-posted it to content-sharing sites like Digg.com. Marketers lost control of their content and the reach, frequency, and timing of the distribution of their messages (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Brands could be everywhere in social media and yet still be ignored.

While disheartening, this failure to break through the clutter was not the most troublesome part of the Web 2.0 branding game. As brands struggled to leverage social media, consumers learned how to leverage brands for their own purposes and ends. Marketers hoping to nurture relationships with their consumers launched online communities and Facebook profile pages, but people came looking for price deals or a convenient place to complain. When marketers created stylized content that could be spread virally through Web 2.0 technologies, they were horrified to see these same sharing capabilities used against them. Consumers hijacked brand messages and turned them into parodies. They played with brands to entertain themselves. They exposed company weaknesses and shortcomings. In an ironic turn of the tables, consumers were using social media to target brands and companies, rather than brands using social media to target them. Branding had become an open source activity, via which anyone and everyone had a say in matters of the brand.

Herein, we explore the branding challenges associated with the shift in power from marketers to consumers on the People's Web. In the ensuing sections, we illuminate the emergent landscape of what we call *open source branding* and identify marketing strategies directed at the hunt for consumer engagement on the People's Web. These strategies present a paradox, for in gaining resonance, the brand relinquishes control. We discuss how Web-based power struggles between marketers and consumer brand authors challenge accepted branding truths and paradigms: where small, short-term brands can trump large, long-term icons; where marketing looks more like public relations; where brand building gives way to brand protection; and brand value is a function of risks, not returns.

2. The landscape of open source branding

Open source branding takes place when a brand is embedded in a cultural conversation such that consumers gain an equal, if not greater, say than marketers in what the brand looks like and how it behaves. Open source branding implicates participatory, collaborative, and socially-linked behaviors whereby consumers serve as creators and disseminators of branded content. Social media technologies such as blogging, video sharing, social bookmarking, social networking, and community platforms enable open source branding by empowering consumers to create their own personalized experiences and by providing venues via which they can easily share content with like-minded friends. A new branding landscape has developed in the context of these novel technologies: one that is complex and challenging, and perhaps not as inviting or collaborative as many critiques suggest. Next, we talk about these shifts in context, organizing our discussion around four powerful and challenging Web-enabled themes: The Age of the Social Collective, The Age of Transparency, The Age of Criticism, and The Age of Parody.

Within our discussions of the Ages, we report on different strategies that brands have adopted in order to cope with each new cultural dynamic. Our analysis suggests three overarching managerial approaches—The Path of Least Resistence; Playing Their Game; Leveraging Web 2.0 Interconnectedness—each varying in its risks and rewards. The Path of Least Resistance involves ceding control of the brand to