

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



6.10.2004

Word-of-a-Whole-Lot-of-Mouths-Advertising

These days, the world is just one big-ass focus group

Ever been to a traditional focus group? With the one-way mirror, the bottomless bowl of M&M's and the roundtable of "average" consumers? It's a completely artificial environment, which in many cases leads to artificial results. There's a group dynamic that leads people to keep their true feelings to themselves. Yet our industry still throws billions away at focus groups trying to pry the truth out of consumers.

Now, the truth is everywhere.

The Internet has given people the freedom to mouth off. Whenever they want, about anything they want.

I once wrote ads for a client who made household appliances. One of the glorious perks of the job was that I got a free sample to take home and test. I was quite pleased with it, as it worked fine for me. So I became a believer. And our client, of course, was convinced it was the best product in its category.

Then I went on Amazon.com, where they sell my client's products. Amazon has a feedback section for every product where people can rate and comment on stuff. Here's a sample of the comments I saw for my client:

"I contacted ***** about my problems and they said 'we don't deal with problems, your only recourse is where you bought it.'"

"Needless to say, I'll never buy another ***** again!!!"

"Now I'm looking for another brand, I don't recommend this product."

"I would recommend this ***** only at a discounted price."

Now, in fairness, there were some really good reviews, but in the aggregate, my client's product was considered below average. And the amazing thing was, as a consumer, I'd trust these reviews more than any advertising or PR.

The Internet has turned the world into one big focus group. Thanks to bulletin boards, blogs, and things like Amazon.com reviews, every consumer has a soapbox. Anyone can praise or scorn something to their heart's content.

If your client has a bad product, or bad customer service, they'll likely never admit it to your face. But now you can find out for yourself. And the ad industry, as well as marketers, had better pay attention. Because changing consumers' perceptions about a brand starts with finding out exactly what those perceptions are.

And, with "traditional" advertising getting continually flogged for its ineffectiveness, there's now a cottage industry pushing the merits of viral marketing, buzz marketing, and any form of word-of-mouth. Savvy marketers are figuring out that trendsetters and influencers can get a product noticed in the right places, and by the right people. If a woman sidles up to you in a bar and buys you a drink, chances are she could be a paid shill for a liquor brand. But you'd listen to her, wouldn't you?

Consumers are so cynical they believe anonymous, faceless strangers before they'd believe anything they'd heard in an ad. So, not wanting to miss the bandwagon, ad agencies and marketers are now starting to manipulate public opinion on the Internet. Marketers are starting their own discussion forums, blogs, and even surreptitiously entering chat rooms to talk up their products. Anything to skew perceptions in their favor.

But adding some positive spin to the mix can't stop consumers determined to tell the world about bad experiences with a brand. Ordinary people have the power to define and shape brands—as much, if not more so, than ad agencies or marketers.

Can we muzzle people? Of course not. But what ad agencies can do is bring these consumer perceptions to the attention of clients, no matter how negative or controversial they might be. Perhaps we can create ads that confront these issues head-on. It's one way the ad business can stay relevant—especially when so many marketers complain that agencies aren't receptive to their business needs or problems.

So the next time you're Googling yourself and your ex-lovers for shits and giggles, try doing it for your agency and your clients. Read the good, the bad, the ugly, and what people aren't telling the focus group moderators. It's all out there.

And it won't even cost you a bag of M&M's.