



The Next Big Idea

Crystal ball gazing three years into the future in today's frenzied, change-obsessed world is an almost impossible task.

Convergence, Internet marketing, Explosion of mobility and its consequent opportunities are talked about in every forum today – yet very little is actually done in any of these fields by advertisers, marketers and the media alike.

It is also an obvious fact that technology will continue to impact our lives so significantly that product categories themselves will be at increased risk from the 'next big idea'. The near demise of greeting cards, photographic film and the walkman and their replacement with the ubiquitous email, digital cameras and I-pods are testimony to the fact that real technological breakthroughs can spell doom for many categories at an unimaginably short notice.

What is going to change, however, is the blistering pace at which technology and convergence will evolve, thereby giving the marketers extremely short lead times to take significant decisions - along with wafer thin margins for errors that could be grave for their businesses.

I do not want to dwell further into the above obvious areas that beyond doubt will impact our lives in 2010 and beyond.

To my mind, there are a few other things that could make an impact by changing the way we go to market in the first place.

A shift from consumption to participation and co-creation

Over time, we will see a shift from straightforward consumption to customization, and even co-production. Instead of asking consumers to watch, listen, play, passively consume, the race is on to get them to create, to produce, and to participate. Consumer generated 'content' will thus be the new name of the game. This is in fact already taking place in the online world: Microsoft 'invites' millions to download beta versions of its software to test and improve it.

Marketers may soon get customers increasingly involved with the design of communication, product and services, have them deliver input on processes, allow them to customize and personalize the offerings. Needless to say, this calls for an attitudinal shift in marketers to not 'underestimate' the creativity of the consumer.

Not just this, marketers will increasingly find that they are simply unable to control messages, unable to control what is being written about them. And this will be a fact that will be very hard to digest. Advertising, Media and Marketing specialists are too used to one-way passive communication – where they are the kings of what they tell the consumer and literally expect the consumer to believe what they say. With the explosion of Blogs and millions of other community sharing possibilities, it is the consumer who can virtually dictate the establishment. Imagine what a negative community share could do for a service like a hotel stay. As a consumer I would tend to believe what a fellow consumer is writing about her actual experience vs. what the establishment is trying to make me believe through glitzy advertising. In a world where we are becoming increasingly alone, community shares of experiences will be bigger opinion shapers than what we can even imagine today.

Consequently, the industry will need to quickly realize that it is not just about engaging consumers to generate

content but the inability to control WHAT content or message they contribute. They would need to serve as a facilitator of messaging from the masses rather than directing.

Finding ways of dealing with “-isms” backlash” and pioneering the ‘Frees’ phenomena

Marketers will have to come up with more 'frees' faster and before anyone else. As the world becomes increasingly aware of what goes into products and becomes acutely conscious of the effects thereof, marketers will increasingly have to come up with propositions that will be different from what we see presently. The fact that McDonalds abroad today serves wholesome wheat bread, healthy salads, grilled chicken and offers bottled milk in Happy Meals may have seemed bizarre just three years ago. And yet it is this strategy that is critical not just for robust growth but possibly for their very survival in the years to come. Sugar free, Transfat free, Cholesterol free - and so on and so forth - will become the buzzwords. The whole mindset will have to change from “being bigger is better” to “being healthier is smarter”, thereby impacting all the elements of the marketing and communication mix.

The other fundamental shift would be reconciling messages that are inherently intended to promote and encourage increased consumption with socially conscious issues related to health, environmentalism, global egalitarianism, greenism and so on. Marketing messages may need to evolve to resonate with the rising social issues of the day. Instead of making people feel special or as members of an exclusive class, messages may need to cast products in a way that they are socially responsible.

There is no doubt that for a nutrition-deficit economy like India these issues will be smaller as compared to their western counterparts. Yet the pace at which a part of the urban population could adopt these may come as a surprise to many a marketer and many a category.

Death of media innovation as a sole implementation tool

Espousing the virtues of a good media innovation is easier than retro fitting an innovation basis the positioning. It is sad though that most media innovations today are really extensions of a pre-agreed positioning route - and almost always after the commercial has been shot.

As a race, we have more options today than ever before and yet less time to enjoy the same. This in turn means that there is an ever-increasing need to converge all the facets that go into a product or service, before the product and communication development process begins. In the coming years, media innovation will cease to be an after thought but would need to help upfront in defining the creative route.

Last decade had seen creative, media and research carving their own niches. Going forward, they will have to work much more closely in order to truly deliver the 'next big idea'.

Because if you don't, someone else will. And that will be at your very own peril.



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