

The Ethics of the New Philosophy of Invisible Marketing

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Abstract

This paper introduces a new ethical debate in social and Word of Mouth (WOM) marketing. In an area where communications are developing much quicker than regulation, ethics are of great importance (Balasubramanian, 1994). We propose that a new philosophy of marketing is emerging, which we call invisible marketing, and discuss how this philosophy makes redundant existing ethics debates and places marketers in danger of being social engineers.

Introduction

Marketing has been changing and evolving since the birth of the industrial revolution. We have seen numerous forms of marketing philosophies become dominant including pure production, product development, sales and selling, marketing to consumer needs and wants, through to the present relationship and societal focus. This paper will present and discuss the apparent emergence of a new marketing philosophy, which we call invisible marketing.

The New Marketing Philosophy: Invisible Marketing

In the last 3 to 5 years a slow evolution of the philosophy driving the behaviours of various marketing organisations can be observed. This philosophy is characterised by two objectives that are imposed in addition to the objectives of typical marketing effort: (1) decreasing a consumer's awareness of the fact that they are the subject of marketing effort, and (2) making a consumer a (potentially unknowing) agent for the marketer in spreading their marketing message. These two objectives mark a major philosophical shift in the marketing discipline and give rise to new challenges when considering the ethics of marketing practice. To illustrate this we will draw on literature and accounts of experience in WOM marketing, an area pioneering this new philosophy.

WOM marketing has experienced a considerable growth in popularity amongst marketers in recent years. This popularity has arisen from the apparent message 'clutter' in most markets and a consumer base that is more sceptical of marketing messages (Cotte, Coulter, and Moore, 2005; Grewal, Gotlieb, and Marmorstein, 1994). Numerous books, web-blogs and discussion pieces have been written about achieving the invisible marketing objectives. For example Dave Balter (2008) describes consumers participating in WOM as "marketing products, but without looking like marketers, talking like marketers, acting like marketers, or most important, thinking like marketers" and continues on to describe how to build and manage consumers to generate WOM. Marketers are recognising that opting out of traditional channels where the consumer knows they are being marketed to (objective 1) gives them credibility, increased reach, increased impact, numerous economies, as well as other similar benefits. As described by Dave Evans (2008) "social media is more like a hurricane that gathers its strength from conversations as they circulate and coalesce across the social Web." In addition, fostering consumers as agents for the marketer (objective 2) reduces the effort required by the marketer extending these benefits further.

Confronted with growing consumer resistance to marketing communications, practitioners have responded with covert, harder to identify campaigns. Take, for example, Plant It 2020's (a not-for-profit promoting the protection and revival of indigenous trees) entry into Second Life, an online, 3-D community. It spent a year learning "the culture, language, ethos and key concerns" of Second Life residents and built key relationships with community elders (Unknown, 2008b). Armed with ethnographic insight and relationships defined non-commercially, the charity set up a virtual, endangered forest where people could donate by planting trees. It avoided 'donor fatigue', a consequence of repeated and overt marketing appeals for donations (Hall and Kerkman, 2005), by allowing consumers to independently encourage each other to 'save the forest'. Indeed, the marketer's 'presence' was limited. Instead, focus was on an immersed experience controlled by the consumer.

Similarly, ExpoTV.com have withdrawn the presence of the marketer, limiting promotion and concentrating on consumer reviews through their 'Video Opinion Program' (Unknown, 2008a). Providing an online video hosting platform, consumers share experiences with products or services. Content is not controlled or dictated and all information introduced by manufacturers is clearly labelled: ExpoTV.com gets consumers to *participate* in an online dialogue, rather than appeal and persuade.

ExpoTV.com facilitated communication between consumers. In a different case, Unilever both facilitated and created content through social networking site MySpace. Here, the presence of the marketer was 'disguised' as an online survey called "How Gamekiller Proof are You?" (Unknown, 2008a). Over 75 000 users completed and spread the survey virally. Unilever, brought their target of 18-24 year old males together through a simple, topic of conversation: the Gamekiller (a person who interferes with your efforts to pick up women). In this case, the marketer orchestrated social behaviour by using the online conventions of communication (web posts, forum activity and online surveys).

Such invisible marketing allows marketers to overcome apparent message clutter by getting consumers to spread the message themselves (objective 2) allowing the marketer to appear to consumers to not be marketing at all (objective 1). The objectives of decreasing awareness of marketing effort and making consumers marketing agents have always to some extent existed within the marketing domain, as have most of the objectives present in the various marketing philosophies prior to their dominance within the discipline. It is convenient to quickly adopt the subtle, but profound philosophical changes into the practices of marketing represented by WOM. Adopting such changes while claiming that marketing remains ostensibly the 'same' is exceptionally dangerous. WOM marketing, along with other areas such as guerrilla and ambient marketing, represent a philosophical change in tactics and also - as will be discussed in this paper - in self-consciousness about ethics.

The Ethics of Invisible Marketing

This evolution towards a philosophy of invisible marketing presents new challenges for marketing ethicists. The models of marketing communication on which most of the current ethical discussions have been based are beginning to change. As evidenced in prior discussions, marketers are starting to extend beyond traditional marketing channels and are *actively* targeting new social channels for spreading marketing messages. Traditionally, marketers worked off a clear, linear model of communication between the organisation and

individual. Advertising and other traditional marketing effort is the source; consumers are the audience (Stern, 1994). Even in early models of *influencer* and opinion leadership marketing there is an easily tracked 'two-step flow' where opinion leaders were explicitly targeted by a marketer (Burt, 1999). New models of marketing consider the exchange of information among consumers without regard for the marketer, except perhaps as a "surreptitious instigator" (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004). The increasing presence of such models indicates discussions are needed to understand the ethics of this new philosophy.

Source recognition is one of the key arguments in ethical marketing. Consumers should be able to identify that they are the subject of marketing effort (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004). This is typically of little concern as advertising is highly recognised by consumers as marketing. Similarly the more ambiguous techniques such as advertorials have accepted ethical practices of labelling them as paid for (Petty and Andrews, 2008). WOM and other invisible techniques give rise to a new conundrum. The objective of these techniques is to get the naturally occurring behaviour of consumers to be undertaken in such a way so as to promote business outcomes. There is no clear source in many cases as messages are taken by consumers and spread seemingly organically. While this has occurred to some extent throughout the history of marketing the technology is coming into existence that will permit the prediction of such organic spread allowing for the manipulation of it for marketing purposes.

At this time, the technology to permit this prediction is only in its infant stages, but it is not too far away. Research is being undertaken in numerous areas of WOM communication and social forecasting including: how to characterise the motivations within social interactions (Chung, 2007; Dichter, 1966; Horowitz *et al.*, 2006; Rubin and Martin, 1988; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster, 2007), building on this how to forecast the individual level exchanges occurring between pairs or small groups of individuals (Burt, 1999; Gilly *et al.*, 1998; Henningsen and Henningsen, 2003; Kiecker and Hartman, 1994), and finally how individual level behaviours transform into the aggregate level behaviour of networks and communities (Alexandrov and Sherrell, 2006; Burt, 1980; Granovetter, 1982; Iacobucci and Hopkins, 1992; Larson, Foster-Fishman, and Keys, 1994; Leskovec, Adamic, and Huberman, 2007; Rogers, 1995). This provides the first insights into how social phenomenon can be used actively and effectively as a part of a marketing strategy.

This new ability gives rise to the question of whether marketers are at risk of becoming seeming social engineers manipulating society from behind a desk. The problem of social engineering arises from the desire of marketers to use the naturally occurring social relationships among their target consumers to spread marketing messages and promote business objectives. As a result we risk becoming a society in which every social interaction is coopted into being a function solely for economic exchange.

For a society to function what is required is autonomy of the consumer. Autonomy in decision making, and autonomy in behaviour. Any challenge upon this autonomy cannot be accepted by any ethical standard presently held. Consumers must be able to make informed decisions suitable for their needs, free from subversive influence that may result in them making less informed decisions less suitable for their needs. This is an extreme case where social interaction is coopted to a near total extent. While this extreme is unlikely to ever occur (one hopes) it is clear that such an extreme cannot be accepted.

If coopting social interaction entirely can clearly be identified as unethical then it must be questioned whether the charge of marketing becoming social engineering presumes that

certain areas of social interaction should be left untouched? To date no discussion of to what should be left untouched and to what extent marketers are free to engage with social phenomenon to achieve marketing objectives. This is a debate that needs to be held within the marketing discipline. Guidance for both practitioners and academics is required to ensure that the rights of consumers are respected.

Conclusion

Are we invisible or is it just a sign of transformation? It could be a noble move forward, releasing control from the marketer and allowing – with encouragement and assistance – the consumer to transmit and interpret their own information. Social interaction is the new arena for marketers who are used to a ‘conspicuous marketing’ that is, as the experience of recent years provide, too intrusive and potentially unethical for this new philosophy of invisible marketing.

Current marketing ethics practices and debates are primarily concerned with when a marketer should act in the interest of the business and ‘let the buyer beware’, and when they should act in the interest of the consumer. Academics and practitioners have developed and continue to develop ethical standards around this concept of how much the buyer should beware of us as marketers. This new philosophy of invisible marketing raises a new marketing ethics question: do consumers need to start being wary of each other? Now that we are starting to shift to this new philosophy of marketing we need to start a discussion as to how much to ensure that a new phrase does not enter into the business vernacular: ‘let friends beware’.

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