

Multichannel Marketing: new practices, same principles

By Chris Grannell

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Marketers who 'get' digital are frequently struck by an apparent paradox. Digital changes everything, including the way firms interact with their customers and markets. And yet the fundamentals of marketing are the same as they always were. How can this be?

On the one hand, everything feels different. And I mean everything. There are three main areas where digital is affecting marketing today. One is data - the fact that today we live in a giant database where most things can be measured and ROI is rapidly replacing smoke and mirrors. Two is access - our vastly improved means of communicating with and selling to customers, regardless of geographic proximity. Three is interconnected consumers - people increasingly confident and able to share opinions widely and listen to those of others.

On the other hand, the essential tenants of marketing remain unchanged: the value of targeting and relevance; differentiation, alignment and consistency; and the importance of market-based assets such as trust, reputation, relationships and user-base.

Answering this paradox is simple. It's practice that has to change, not principles.

A naive response to the digital tsunami sweeping business today is to throw out everything you did before, to jump straight to the tools, and to forget some basic rules of business. These include the principle that your business must appeal to enough customers to make it viable, or the notion that it must remain distinctive from the competition or get sucked into a race to the bottom.

Does this mean I'm suggesting that things don't need an overhaul? Far from it.

The ill-informed will suggest that 'digital' is a happy world where there's room for everyone to have fun; and where ideas about strategy, competition and rivalry are conveniently put on the shelf for later. This is dumb. It is precisely because digital touches everything that we need to consider how the core of our business strategies and models need to change.

Those who really understand the impact of digital aren't satisfied by fiddling about on the surface. They get to grips with the implications for channel conflict, with direct distribution and with advocacy. They routinely take a multichannel approach to measurement, and they know which customers are where. They work out who are their friends, who are enemies and who are occupy a hybrid role somewhere in between. They experiment and make the most of opportunities to test-and-refine.

But one thing they don't do is throw out the enduring principles of good business or good marketing: remain relevant, remain distinctive. Make a stand.

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