

Maverick At The Door



*Encouraging customers to participate in marketing is the only way forward
in these competitive times says consultant, Stefan Engeseth*

RECENTLY, in the run-up to the launch of its Bravia range of LCD television sets, Sony earned itself a load of publicity when it commissioned Fallon, London, and Danish director Nicolai Fuglsig to shoot a TV commercial with 250,000 multi-coloured ‘superballs’ bouncing down the empty streets of San Francisco. The spectacle of so many colourful balls flooding the streets had the desired effect — it got people talking, and primed them for the launch of the product.

Now while this is obviously a novel attempt at busting the clutter, could Sony have taken the idea even further by involving the consumer in the entire exercise? ‘Why not let the balls be captured by 250,000 consumers or Sony fans? Then they (Sony) could connect every ball with an offer to buy the new colour full-screen that they are promoting. This idea would build buzz and storytelling. Every consumer would then get a story to tell about the product... The balls would build PR globally, that would pay for the cost of the 250,000 screens by increasing the selling volume,’ writes branding consultant and author Stefan Engeseth in his blog. In another entry, commenting upon the new movie Flightplan starring Jodie Foster, he writes: ‘Why not make this great movie into theatre? It would be great if it then could be played in an airplane! It would be good if Boeing was brave and sponsored it with a plane, landing at Broadway in New York. Then we in the audience would get the real fly deal, when we are sitting inside a real airplane that is shaking and moving around with

the story. In the end, the actors and the audience become ONE and play the story together.’

Radical these suggestions may sound, but Engeseth, author of Detective Marketing: Creative Commonsense in Business and ONE – A Consumer Revolution for Business, is convinced this is the only way forward for corporations and brands in an environment where empowered consumers are increasingly becoming anti-advertising and antibrand: “Technology, like the internet, with its chat rooms and blogs, has made the market extremely transparent, and consumers now see through empty advertising promises.”

All For ONE

In today’s connected world, Engeseth cautions, “One unhappy customer can use technology to air his grouse, and sooner or later, the media will take it up. This way, you stand to lose not just customers, but eventually even stock value. The consumer is very strong today and can make or break corporations.”

In his opinion, brands and their advertising need to not just engage but involve consumers and make them a part of the message. In other words, be ‘one’ with the customer. “When consumers are saying no to advertising, it’s a signal for a need for evolution — ‘One’ is a strong point of that solution,” says Engeseth. He demands that corporations build the concept of ‘One’ into their DNA, and insists that if they don’t,

consumers will soon start creating their own brands. Citing the examples of Napster, Linux and the open source movement, Engeseth points out that consumers are sending signals that corporations ought to heed. He says: “Today, I want one part of my solution from Apple, another part from some other PC maker. Everything is moving towards customisation and personalisation, which is why Linux and Lego blocks are so popular.”

Engeseth is also fairly critical of companies that profess to have listened to their customers. “There are a lot of fake opening of doors — Microsoft, for instance, says it is open to open source, as long as this is on its terms. Consumers see through this. Today, ‘customer value’ is something that corporations decide all by themselves, but it is created by listening to your customer, and not the other way round,” he says.

The problem, according to Engeseth, lies in the fact that corporations have ceased to live the lives of their consumers. “There is a disconnect because the gap between brands and consumers is big and growing,” he says, adding that this is driving consumers to shop brand and store labels. “The relationship between retailers and the consumer is stronger, and anyway many big brands aren’t great products. So when the consumer sees a copy that’s better than the original, she goes for it.” He, however, urges companies to look at this as an opportunity. “Consumers are essentially knocking on the door, wanting to come into the organisation.”

In the same breath, Engeseth avers that to get there, corporations need to first change attitudes. “At a lecture, I had a CEO tell me that he won’t change his corporation’s DNA. Now why can’t you let in consumers with ideas that can add value to what you do? FedEx sued a customer who built furniture out of FedEx shipping boxes for misuse of the FedEx brand. Now if FedEx had been really clever, they’d instead have capitalised on this by saying ‘we deliver ideas and concepts apart from packages.’ Now how’s that for brand building? Instead, with the lawsuit, they got themselves into a PR nightmare.” Engeseth cites his consultancy’s own experience with Apple: “We created a design for a projector for Apple and sent it to them — the only people who have answered are their lawyers. This is not going to inspire people.”

Engeseth maintains that the only way brands can succeed is by gathering a fan following for themselves. “Fans to companies are creating fan tattoos, websites and blogs. A fan of Google, for example, has named his son Oliver Google Kai. And Google is proud of it, not sending in the lawyers. Corporations should be inspired by its fans, and this will lead to the creation of more fans. If you work as ‘One’, the consumer will be your biggest and most powerful media channel,” he says.

There also exists a dire need within companies to think creatively, Engeseth feels. And this is where the concept of ‘detective marketing’ comes into play. “Detective marketing is a methodology of finding new patterns in what you do and say, and see in what ways you can stretch this,” he explains. He gives the example of a concept that his firm has given Nokia to illustrate his point. “Nokia has been investing millions of dollars to say ‘Connecting people’, so that now ‘Connecting people’ is actually a sub-brand of Nokia. Can they use that ad budget to design a phone that gets people to connect not only in the way of technology but in a physical way? We have designed a prototype of a phone that can do that.” The trick, Engeseth says, is to think laterally.

And this is where, he feels, ad agencies can contribute in real terms. “If people in the advertising and brand business worked closer with design and R&D and product people, there will be huge value-add,” he insists. “Why should agencies limit their creativity to the communication business? Agencies must sell all their creative energies and talents to the client. Advertising needs to spread creative thinking everywhere — it must enable top management to think creatively about all aspects of the brand.”

