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Opinion piece: Web 2.0 commentary

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Web 2.0

When push comes to shove the assumptions at the heart of marketing are pretty simple. Marketing is about persuasion by communication. Marketers send persuasive messages to consumers, who internalise these messages and then act upon them.

These assumptions define the marketing agenda. Marketers want to know what sorts of messages are best to send, how to get these messages through to consumers and how effective they are in changing consumer attitudes and behaviours.

They naturally see new phenomena such as Web 2.0 through this lens. They worry, for example, that Web 2.0 services are competing for consumers' attention, thereby undermining their influencing abilities. So they track the latest data about shifting media consumption patterns and time spent viewing different media in obsessive detail.

They wonder if the changing context in which information is presented — the presence of third-party information not created by the brand manager for example — may reduce their ability to influence consumers.

If their focus is database marketing, they look for opportunities for better data capture, predictive modelling and message targeting.

They may talk eagerly about the new opportunities opened up by, say, peer-to-peer information sharing, but only because it might help them make messaging even better: 'if we can't influence consumers as effectively as we once could by direct messaging, perhaps we can get consumers do it for us indirectly, by electronic word of mouth!'

So, the marketer's instinct is to approach every new innovation from the perspective of the same unchanging agenda, 'how can we use it as a messaging enabler?'

Yet, if we look at change-makers like Google, MySpace, Facebook and YouTube, none of them are driven by messaging. The one thing they have in common is they are all driven by different forms of volunteered personal information — information individuals volunteer in the course of pursuing their own goals: search queries, user gossip and profiles, user generated content.

The goals themselves are not new. Individuals have always gossiped, been creative and searched for the information they need to make and implement decisions. The internet is simply helping them do these things better.

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Volunteered personal information

The really big change, then, is in the information flows that define the marketing environment: a shift from ‘top down’ B2C messaging by companies to ‘bottom up’ C2B information volunteered by individuals.

Volunteered personal information is the new oil of the information age. It has the potential to address all the central questions of marketing. What should we make/sell (and how much)? Who should we connect with? When? How?

But it does not fit the messaging agenda. It is not about persuasion. It is about adding value by helping people achieve their own goals. It does not come from directing stimuli at consumers and harvesting responses. It comes from encouraging consumers to express themselves — to send their own messages — and reacting accordingly.

It is a different *mental* model as well as a different operational model. The real challenge of Web 2.0 is not ‘out there’. It is in our heads. This will be explored further in the next issue.