

Art&Commerce

Chattering Classes

When everything is branded, how can you legislate talk?

So, Commercial Alert wants the FTC to investigate buzz marketers for “large-scale deception.” Why would we ask buzz marketers to play by a strict set of rules in a world where branded experience is most experience?

Since when did we decide to legislate talk? As human beings, one of the ways we relate to each other is by talking about stuff. How much difference does it really make if the man or woman who sits down next to you in a bar to tell you about the newest flavored rum is a paid “buzz agent” or an overly chatty twentysomething killing time? Don’t we all have the right to engage, ignore or politely listen just enough so it’s clear that the “Closed to telemarketers” sign has flashed across our eyes?

While it does take all kinds—buzz, viral, seeding, roach bait—to connect brands with consumers, it also takes a buyer to make a seller instead of a defunct business. Today, the range of sell tactics includes everything from paid “whisperers” who advise you online or face-to-face to try the new new thing, to sponsored works of art like Vans-financed films, to the Fay Weldon ode to expensive branded jewels, *The Bulgari Connection*. While some people are skittish about their leisure time being branded, the younger the audience, the savvier they are about



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consumption, and the less bothered they are about getting something for nothing, if it’s a win-win.

Yes, there might be such a thing as too young to target, but branded messaging reaches kids by the time they can see-hear-think, let alone talk. So why would any of us differentiate between legislating word-of-mouth and legislating kids’ television or the use of brands in children’s edutainment? A brand is intruding only when it’s inappropriate for the setting. So, while I’m all in favor of banning pornography in any permutation, paid or

unpaid, organic or contrived, from kids’ playgrounds, I’m not sure I understand why we’d try to eliminate fly posters of cool shoes or toys from a child’s zeitgeist, when these same items are being marketed to them via cable and network TV, in malls and magazines, on the radio and online.

Consumers are wise to the dollars that go into and come out of these marketing deals. They are aware on some level that their eye space is being bought. So what are they doing? Averting their gaze. Choosing what to pay attention to. But why should this be legislated? And how can buzz marketing be legislated when no two people can even agree on a definition?

Today, brands are part and parcel of our gossip and chat. Branded news blurs with pure news, if such a thing exists. Celebrity endorsers appear on news shows and talk up their causes. Tom Cruise is a perma-commercial for Scientology. The outfits and jewels adorning our favorite celebrities at glamorous award shows are the result of intensive behind-the-scene negotiation and positioning. Nothing is ever quite as it appears.

Chatter is how humans relate to one another. Gossip has been with us since ancient times. The German word *schadenfreude* (“malicious pleasure”) nicely encapsulates how learning about the frailties of others can gratify us. Should we now have consumer advocates ban this kind of dialogue too, since it’s increasingly tough to tell the story of Britney and Kevin or Nick and Jessica without invoking references to brands, be they media or products or other celebrities? Maybe it’s time to mandate consumer literacy classes for one and all, not to ban discourse, sponsored or unsponsored, scripted or unscripted.

By the time a child is, say, 8, hasn’t he or she learned to walk away from strangers? For a twentysomething in a bar, isn’t that the script played out most nights, again and again?

LETTERS

AE of the future? Spot the elephant in the room

Both Bob Jeffrey (“Revival of the AE,” Oct. 3) and Robert Gibraltar (“Let’s dig in and compete for top account talent,” Oct. 10) missed the obvious. How can we put prestige back into account management? It’s not simply about “managing complexity” and “keeping clients happy.” Nor is it just about “hiring the best.” It’s about defining and owning a real value-added role, both internally and externally.

Quick, spot the role. It’s related to a word that has been overused, misinterpreted and bastardized since its inception around 1989. Yes, *integration*, or as I prefer to call it, “brand idea navigation.” The AE of today (not tomorrow) should be the expert on all disciplines and touch points. This is the person who should be able to advise clients that:

- This isn’t an advertising job ... we have awareness. This is about assisting the sales team by building understanding/preference via experiential/event marketing.

- This requires a very aggressive demand generation component.

- This *is* about awareness. But to build credibility, we need third-party endorsement, so a PR component is a must.

No, this role does not take away media’s role—it complements it. No, this does not infringe on planning—it builds an intuitive bridge between the planning group’s “why” and the end “how.”

AEs of today: Demand that your agency allow you to get real experience in direct, interactive, PR, advertising, experiential, etc. And if your agency can’t offer you that, leave and join a different discipline on your own ... then go back.

How do we put the prestige back in account management? By leading teams (our own, planning, creative and media) into areas they never thought of and empowering everyone to come up with boundless ideas that are unexpected, exciting and that work. Just what the doctor ordered.

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ADWEEK Online Web Poll

In light of recent global wins by BBH and StrawberryFrog, are big clients becoming more willing to use smaller shops?



Results are based on 643 responses between 10/17 and press time, 10/20. For this week's question, visit www.adweek.com.