

Brands Are Dead

When it comes to marketing, rethink everything

This is an essay about reprogramming the consumer marketing brain. It comes at the end of one great arc in the history of society and the beginning of a completely different era. It's a new narrative about accelerating issues of complexity, commoditization and industry evolution. These are big themes of massive change and transformation coming at us with a speed and level of intensity that no one has faced before.

And in the offices and boardrooms of companies as diverse as Best Buy, Pfizer, General Mills, Procter & Gamble, Coca-Cola and ExxonMobil, the same conversation is taking place, driven by an elusive feeling of organizational mismatch with the operating environment and unease that marketing expectations aren't being met, and that something should be looked at, both from the point of view of whether it is the thing to do and in terms of how to do it. And these managers want a fresh creative response, a fundamentally different strategic dialogue about how to play on this new field.



BY JOHN G. SINGER

marketing must admit to itself that all the rule sets—the entire collection of values that determine how marketing activity unfolds—are completely out of sync with reality and logic. A meteor has hit the profession, and the mammals will soon separate from the dinosaurs.

Something very big is happening and it should drive a fundamental rethink of every-

thing. Marketers can no longer view the world through the lens of Brand as the locus around which planning should revolve. In the words of Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi: “Brands have run out of juice. They

mind. It has to think big picture and develop a system-level definition of strategy. This is a perspective that backs as far away as possible from analyzing customers at subatomic levels and targeting them with micro-media and a fancy nameplate attached to a bunch of content (or embedded in it, for that matter).

It's a larger vista centered on coordinating an environment of connections and interactions with the marketplace. A system-level definition of marketing will include reframing “creative” for an age where there's a free flow of content and ideas around the world. Design is the new creative, specifically social systems design, and it will serve as a method to innovate, define new business strategies and purposes, and introduce high-value solutions (vs. high-volume) to help organizations forge new kinds of relationships with their operating environment. The future belongs to those marketers with a successful model for system-level competition. They will be the ones with an ability to shape change, not be the victim of it.

“Marketers behave like marketers in their offices,” observed Ellen Oppenheim, chief marketing officer of the Magazine Publishers of America, a sponsor of the ANA conference, “but when they get out of their offices, they behave like consumers.” Maybe they should act like consumers all the time. ☎

John G. Singer (john@bluespoonconsulting.com; 612.337.9065) is principal of Blue Spoon Consulting (www.bluespoonconsulting.com), a marketing architecture consultancy based in Minneapolis.

The fact of the matter is that marketing must admit to itself that all the rule sets—the entire collection of values that determine how marketing activity unfolds—are completely out of sync with reality and logic.

The annual conference of the Association of National Advertisers was held early in October. Judging by some of the coverage, turnout was higher than expected. Nearly one thousand marketers with a “siege mentality” had traveled to Phoenix looking for new strategies to create better marketing output in the face of rampant audience erosion. I don't think they found it. The fact of the matter is that

are dead.” Radio and television advertising is ignored. The Internet is the great equalizer, commoditizing products and services on a global scale. And consumers opt out in ever greater numbers, hiding behind technologies that exempt them from the onslaught of product promotion.

If they don't want to become irrelevant, marketers need to develop a new kind of