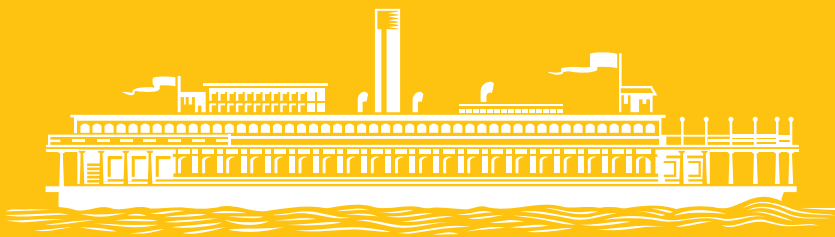


How to bridge the digital gap
and keep ahead
by Allen Adamson
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You'd have to be caught in a *Mad Men* time warp not to realize that digital technology has changed marketing and brand building in a way even quick-draw Don Draper couldn't have imagined. His challenge to stay ahead of the trends in the industry was nothing compared with what industry execs must do today to understand the impact that digital technology and dynamics are having on brands and brand building.

Like most branding professionals, I've been spending a good deal of time these past couple of years trying to get up to speed on the effect digital technology continues to have on the way companies create and manage brands. I became so enthralled by the topic, in fact, that I decided to write a book about how the best companies use digital technology to their advantage and for the benefit of their customers. The folks I talked with in preparation for *BrandDigital* came from both sides of the table: those who represented companies with branded products and services and whose expertise at traditional branding is well documented, and folks responsible for developing new and even more innovative ways to use digital tools and communication tactics in branding initiatives.

It was fascinating for me to see the knowledge gaps between those who did and didn't know how to make sense of the latest digital branding opportunities. It also fascinated me to see which traditional branding organizations were highest on the digital learning curve in adopting new technology to further their branding efforts and which were taking their time getting up to speed.

One of the most interesting conversations I had was also the most level-setting. It was a free-flowing talk with the former chief marketing officer of eBay, Gary Briggs, about his perspective on brand building in the digital age. He joined eBay in 2002 after cofounding an e-commerce company in 1999. Gary and I have known each other since 1993, when we worked together on the Pepsi brand. We've spoken on and off as each of us increasingly has worked on digital branding initiatives in the past 15 years. I've learned something new from him with every conversation.

Success factors

The reason I say my most recent conversation with Gary was level-setting is the simple fact that he was involved in the ways of the digital economy before

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its warp-speed evolution. He's fully aware of what goes into making one digital brand a success and another merely a passing blip on the screen.

eBay, as we all know, is a company that was born and bred as a digital brand. It existed long before there was a blogosphere, a YouTube, a Facebook, or QR codes on cell phones. As such, eBay played a part in laying the foundation for the digital economy and for priming consumers (and organizations) for what was to come.

Gary has played an integral part in supporting the evolution and continues to explore from the perspective of someone with an experiential knowledge of the space—both the technological developments taking place and the human reactions to this technology.

As he and I talked, we agreed that the digital space has not changed the basic principles of brand building. As always, you have to gain a keen understanding of your customers and get insights about what's really important to them. You need to establish a brand promise based on what you want your company to represent in the minds of consumers. And you need to deliver on this promise consistently. We also agreed that the dynamics of the digital space have magnified the basic principles of branding. In this transparent, audible, sharable environment, there are more ways than ever before to find out what matters to consumers. There is absolutely no excuse for not listening to what they think and how they feel about products and services.

The digital arena also magnifies what the competition is doing and consumers' reactions to the choices they have. Smart brands use this readily available knowledge to establish brand promises that are both different from what's out there and relevant to the consumers they want to attract. If you don't deliver on your brand's promise, the magnifying factor of digital technology will cook your goose in about three seconds.

Customers as owners

According to Gary, brand organizations should view this instantaneous feedback as an enormous asset, something that enables them to deliver what consumers really want when they want it. In fact, engaging consumers and making them part owners in brand development is a good part of what has made eBay so successful.

Gary explained that there are four key factors any brand organization must heed if it wants to take advantage of the digital economy and achieve a leadership position in its category. He told me he'd even go so far as to say, digital brand or not, those factors must be taken into consideration when assessing the entirety of the brand experience and regardless of market segment or category. Given how quickly digital technology is changing marketing dynamics, how quickly people learn about the differences between one brand and another, and how quickly word spreads, it's essential that all companies take those four factors into account when assessing their brand promises and their branding strategies.



A pioneer of the digital economy, eBay primed consumers for what was to come.

The digital space is not only here to stay, it's rife with the components for triggering the hyperdevelopment of brands. When a brand experience comes to you on your laptop or your cell phone, it becomes even easier to incorporate the brand into your life.

The key to success for any brand in this digital environment is to adhere to the four factors responsible for the success of the earliest digital-bred brands: A brand must represent and demonstrate comprehensiveness in whatever market it's in. It has to make some aspect of life easier or more convenient for consumers. The brand experience has to be fun, engaging, and worth sharing. And, in an age when all is visible, earning the trust of consumers is of the essence.

What was once true for digital-only brands is now true for any brand looking to leverage the digital space in its branding efforts. While there are relatively few solely online brands anymore, all brands have, or will have, some online components in their branding strategies. It's critical that they take a page out of the branding playbook of the first digital entrepreneurs to appreciate how the four factors for online success factor into their brand promises and their branding strategies. Don Draper, as competitive a marketer as he was, would, today, gladly exchange the click of his Zippo lighter for an understanding of the part digital clicks play in the art of selling brands. ■

Lessons from the experts

Gary Briggs' four success factors that all brands can learn from digital brands

Comprehensiveness

With so much choice and access out there, a company must demonstrate the comprehensiveness of its brand's offer and service no matter what category it's in. One of the digital brands that set the bar in this regard was Netflix. It's got everything a movie buff could want, from the array of movie choices to the process of making and cataloging personal selections.



Playfulness or fun

The first digital brands determined that making something engaging and fun was a key to success. Burger King picked up on this when it created its Subservient Chicken branding initiative. It got across the point that "You can have it your way" while also giving online viewers an amusing experience worthy of sharing with others.



Ease of use

One thing the digital world has made evident is that if one brand makes something easier or more convenient to do than another brand, consumers will latch onto it. On the bricks-and-mortar side, consider Washington Mutual. "Banking made easier" is a foundation of its brand promise and one of the reasons for its success in a very competitive category.



Trust

Underlying the three previous factors is ensuring that your company and your brand are seen as trustworthy. The consumer reaction to Facebook's introduction of Beacon last year, for example, highlighted how sensitive consumers are to data use and its link to their trust in the brand.



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