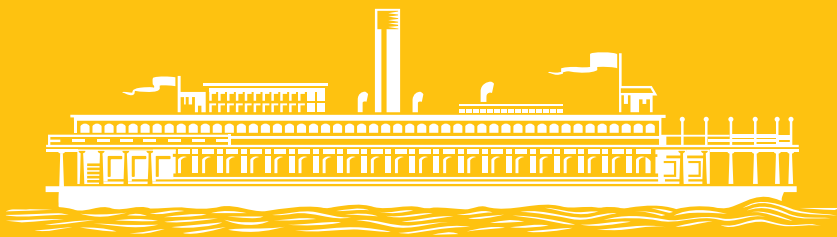


Beyond the buzz  
by Leslie Crombie  
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*Executive Decision*  
May 2008



**Landor**

# Beyond the buzz

## Designing an effective digital brand experience

**Second Life, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, RSS... it's hard to avoid the cacophony of buzz-worthy new media without pausing to consider your own brand's digital presence. Does your current digital experience best reflect your brand? How are you using new technologies and digital media to enhance the experience you offer consumers?**

By design or default, every brand has a digital experience. In today's world, a company's digital presence is quickly becoming the *only* experience that potential customers may ever have with an organization. The availability of new technologies, the increasingly digital-savvy consumer, and the success of online-only brands has made it imperative for companies to evolve their perfunctory corporate websites to 24/7 dynamic brand experiences.

Wondering where to start? The following suggestions will help you decide where to invest in your digital brand experience.

### **First, know thy brand**

Apple, eBay, and Nike are often praised as best-in-class brands because of their ability to create effective and inspiring experiences. They share a common trait—a strong brand promise that provides meaningful differentiation, creates preference, and offers relevance to their audiences. A brand promise embodies a clear idea and value proposition, and it connects with people on functional *and* emotional levels.

The best companies understand the need to deliver their brand promise in the digital environment. Nike partnered with Apple to create Nike+, a digitally driven offering that combines the products and services of Nike with Apple's iPod Nano. Runners can wirelessly connect Nike's sensor-embedded running shoes to their Nanos, which in turn enable them to create personalized workouts and playlists. Performance results can be uploaded to personalized accounts on the Nike+ website, and runners can review their progress, connect with other Nike+ runners around the world, and download workouts

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This article appeared in slightly different form in *Executive Decision* (May 2008). [execdecision.com](http://execdecision.com)

created by world famous coaches. The result is a multi-touch digital experience that delivers Nike's brand attributes of performance and innovation to its target customers in a unique, relevant way.

Can you define your organization's brand promise? What do you want your customers to think, feel, and experience about your brand? Why should they choose your brand over your competitors? Why should they pay more for your products and services? If you can't answer these questions, neither can your customers. Your investment might be better spent on brand strategy development.

#### **Walk in your customers' shoes**

Plenty of companies fail to understand the needs and desires of their key stakeholders and end up building cookie-cutter websites driven by what they *think* their customers want or need. The result: a digital experience that neither differentiates the brand nor has relevance to customers or employees.

To avoid this, you need firsthand knowledge about what your customers are looking for, what they want and need, and what they dream and worry about. An in-depth, insight-driven look at how a brand touches customers at various stages of interaction—from initial awareness, through trial and purchase, to loyalty and advocacy—is crucial to building an effective digital strategy. Don't make the mistake of neglecting the post-purchase experience. Consider product usage, maintenance and troubleshooting, and ongoing customer service. Does the digital experience help or hinder your customers' journeys through these phases? Are you branding them effectively?

#### **Become a digital detective**

To improve your brand's future digital experience, you must first understand what it is today. A baseline understanding should include both breadth of experience (i.e., your brand's portfolio of digital properties) and depth of experience (i.e., drill-down view of specific experiences).

Take inventory of known properties and search for websites that might be lurking under the radar. Companies with little or no governance structures are fertile environments for site proliferation, which can confuse consumers. A financial services client that we recently worked with uncovered hundreds of websites without a unifying digital brand strategy. If the company was surprised (and shocked), what did its customers think?

Conduct a cross-organizational audit of all online touchpoints with customers or other key audiences. An audit can uncover places where the consumer experience is not aligned with their needs or the brand's promise, and places where there are tremendous opportunities to deliver that promise. One client's recent audit revealed that some of its websites contained outdated information, creating a potential legal liability and an annoying experience for customers.

The explosion in social media has created the need to explore not just how you are building your brand online but also how others are creating experiences of your brand for you. A quick search on YouTube for a health care client returned a video of a sales rep belting out Shania Twain's "Man, I Feel Like a Woman" at a sales meeting. This is probably not the way the health care brand wants to build its credibility, especially in a category where the online environment is critical to its information-hungry consumers.

#### **Explore all forms of digital brand expression**

A brand comes to life in the digital environment through design, content, technology platform, functionality, and navigation. Savvy brands use all of these to create a compelling digital experience. A brand positioned as easy to use or intuitive is behaving off-brand when its online checkout process is clunky or complicated. It's not enough to promise "easy to use," the brand experience has to demonstrate it. For example, Zappos.com

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successfully translates its brand promise of great service by using navigation, functionality, and content to create a service-driven digital experience that makes it fast and easy to buy shoes online.

How does *design* drive relevance and differentiation for your company's digital presence? How does *content* help reinforce your brand's best attributes? Does your website's *functionality* (i.e., checkout, product registration) enhance or detract from your brand's positioning?

## Start a conversation with your customers

A.G. Lafley, CEO of Procter & Gamble (P&G), challenged marketers attending the 2006 Association of National Advertisers' conference to stop trying to control their brands and allow customers to engage with them in creative ways. Companies such as BMW, Converse, and Mars have embraced this idea and now allow their brands to serve as blank canvases for personal expression. Consumers can designate the exact features, colors, and designs of their Mini Cooper cars and Converse sneakers, and brides can serve monogrammed M&M's at their weddings.

This collaborative revolution impacts more than brand management, it changes the way that companies do business. Don Tapscott writes in his best-selling book *Wikinomics* that the traditional "plan and push" mentality is being replaced by an "engage and co-create" economy. This new world of mass collaboration is based on four key ideas: openness, peering, sharing, and acting globally. Companies such as P&G, Dell, and Apple that have begun to foster sharing and openness with customers have found that this collaboration also drives innovation. P&G recently launched its connect + develop website dedicated to open innovation by soliciting externally developed intellectual property and providing an environment to share knowledge. This new

approach has created more than 1,000 active agreements, according to the company's website. Another example is Apple's tech support; customers who visit the Apple website looking for help find that a large part of it is provided through user-generated discussions.

## Take advantage of technology to create on-brand connections

A compelling digital experience requires that brand and technology are integrated by design. It is not just about using the latest technology or new media tool, but about creating connections with people in a branded way. With an ever-growing array of choices of technologies and applications, you can take advantage of these innovations to reinforce and optimize your brand in the digital environment. Find a partner or partners, internally or externally, that understand how technology can be used to deliver the functional, emotional, and experiential promise of your brand. Apple is a powerful example of how an intuitive, human brand idea and game-changing technology come together to evoke tremendous consumer devotion.

Creating a compelling, relevant digital brand in today's climate requires digging beyond a box-check called website on a touchpoint to-do list. As old technologies evolve and new ones burst forth, establishing credibility in the digital environment gets a little bit scarier and a lot more challenging. Don't be intimidated by the likes of Second Life, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, and RSS—they can add depth and dimension to your brand offer. Find a trusted advisor to help with the translation of technology to brand experience. Keep in mind that it all starts with a clear articulation and internal understanding of your differentiated brand promise. Success in the digital realm will hinge on creating the right digital experiences with the right technologies to reinforce your brand strategy for your key customers. ■

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