



Entering the Age of Conversation A Brand Journey

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The global marketing community has always been in a constant state of motion. Yet it probably has never faced such a rapid stage of evolution as seen since the start of the millennium. Social media perhaps is the most responsible catalyst for such acceleration at a global scale.

Social Media has given people a voice, to talk about their passions and everything else that interests and drives them. It's a voice to be heard not only by other people but by the marketers as well.

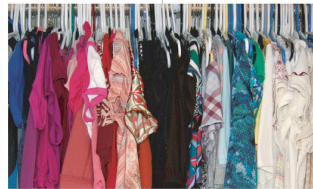
Why? Because it's a very strong voice. A voice that can even affect the fate of their brands! Following the steadfast rise in the global trends, more and more people, the consumers, the brands' *friends and fans*, piloted the brand's success by the experiences they share and the *stories they tell* about it. Today, the voices of the consumers have grown so powerful that it can traverse beyond geographical boundaries, language, culture, politics, race, creed, etc. The result, today's brands are less about corporate values and more about the customers making brand music with their own voices which are remixed,

recharged and renewed. In this relatively new communication ecosystem, brands face more and more dilemmas. On the one hand, **brands need consistency** because they have to provide orientation. On the other hand, **brands need constant renewal and exchange** to face further growth. The challenge is how can a brand have a static brand model and yet inhibit the characteristics of a dynamic brand environment? A bit of careful logic shows us the way. Brand identity means that brands have an *identity*, not that they need to be *identical* all the time, to every customer, every day!

Identity does not have to equate to being identical.

Brands need many faces to connect with their audiences. Experienced brand managers have always known this. The same product may differ in some of its offerings in different markets to meet the customer desires. Similarly, brands must also adapt itself to any specific environment. For example, PEPSI is renamed PECSI in Mexico to adapt to the local linguistics and pronunciation elements. We can also see the Google logo often

changing its attributes to focus on specific events and occasions which taps a global audience very successfully. Such examples by themselves are indeed conversations in promoting the brands.



A brand can be thought of as a closet that contains a dress for every occasion, but who wears it is always the same.

So, perhaps it's high time we started to look at the traditional brand model from a different approach; just as many brand managers have already begun to do so rather successfully. A new model that would open the brand to its different and diverse stakeholders. This model would allow space for co-creation and will encourage personal interpretation. It would integrate the context of the brand, its communication and media environment, the trends and preferences of the consumer that it addresses. It would put the brand's progression

and transformation at the center of the concept.

Yet, is the traditional static brand model able to fulfill all such continuously advancing demands? The simple version of the answer

to this question is surely NO. Therefore, the new brand model for the *Age of Conversation* needs to be flexible and able to adapt to the various contexts and levels that brands are faced within everyday life. This brand model will use **multiple connectors to attract people**. In other words, brands that really want to connect with customers on a deep and meaningful level will have to identify common grounds and areas of similarity and synergy with these customers. This has to be genuine and based on the

real values and vision of the brand. Efforts to attract more people and more customers are better accepted when aligned with the brand spirit and done in harmony with its core identity and main offering.

geography, religion or background. They will naturally feel attracted and subsequently discover that they have many things in common, even before starting the relationship.

Shared Struggles: Politics,

Brands who share the same interests or who can help in realizing the interests and benefits of these groups can establish a solid and continuous connection with them.

Shared Lifestyle: Fashion,



Common grounds will be the soil where positive relationships between brands and consumers will grow and prosper
-Jean-Claude Saade

SEVEN KEY CONNECTORS

Shared Values: Peace, Equality, Liberty... Values are one of the strongest bonding factors for people in general and between people and brands. People who share and cherish the same values tend to come together and stay united in the name of these values.

Shared Roots: Religion, Ethnicity, Language, Culture, Education, Profession, Geography... The secret about shared roots is their ability to bypass the lengthy process of building familiarity. People connect more naturally with the brands that share the same culture,

Environment, Wildlife... Shared struggles and causes rally people and connect them with organizations, brands and businesses that support these same fight and cause. People who are fighting for the preservation of a balanced and sustainable environment or the preservation of wildlife and endangered species will connect with brands who are sharing this same fight like Greenpeace and the WWF. They will also connect with and support businesses and brands that are taking genuine and tangible measures to preserve the environment or to reduce CO2 emissions.

Shared Interests & Benefits: Wealth, Power, Information, Notoriety... Special interests & benefits can lead people to form groups or internet based communities for sharing ideas, knowledge and experiences in certain fields. These groups offer opportunities to interact with peers for sharing, networking and lobbying.

Housing, Restaurants, Vacations... Similar lifestyle patterns create natural synergies between people and between people and brands. Armani, Harley-Davidson, Starbucks, Nike, Boss, Adidas and many other lifestyle brands have earned the status of a "Lifestyle Symbol", which goes far beyond the functionality and the delivery of the product or service they are selling. People have always used their relationship with iconic brands to project certain lifestyle messages to their peers & the outside world in general.

Shared Hobbies: Sports, Arts, Gaming, Collecting, Traveling... Shared hobbies of different natures can also bring people closer and connect them to brands that show interest in these hobbies. Brands like Quicksilver and Billabong have been invented from within the hobby of wave surfing. The essence of these brands is still anchored in the surfing

culture and their key reason is to be serving the surfing community. Regardless if these brands have become overextended nowadays, actual and aspiring surfers will continue to connect strongly with them fueled by the appeal of surfing as a way of life.

Shared Preferences: Food, Drinks, Cars, Music, Clothing... People who share the same preferences will naturally manifest elements of synergy and sympathy. Those who like Chinese food, Swiss chocolate, or a new Corolla would find a common ground for bonding and dialogue. Shared preferences can also favor the formation of certain consumer groups who can favor certain brands or models and promote them directly or indirectly.

In summary, the *Age of Conversation* ushers in a new brand model that is dynamic in nature and yet remains resolute at the core of its real values and vision. Imagine such a core which has a variable layer around it that connects with all its stakeholders using certain mission critical connectors. This new formula can be viewed in its simplified form as:

CORE + AUDIENCE + CONNECTORS = BRAND □

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