Introduction

Branding offline seeks to get attention. Branding online seeks to give attention by providing information that answers questions. Whereas offline branding tends to be image and emotion driven, online branding tends to be information and logic driven. In essence, online you brand with your content.

If someone comes to your website and has a pleasant experience while finding and reading the content that they came looking for, your brand is enhanced. If your search engine doesn’t work well, you diminish your brand. If your navigation is poor, you diminish your brand. Every grammatical mistake is a scratch on your brand. If your content is out of date, your brand is out of date. On the Internet, the brand is in the content, not in the graphic.

Content is critical. An A. T. Kearney study published in 2001 stated that, “digital content is becoming key to a company’s ability to develop and expand commerce, foster collaboration within and between organizations, personalize sales and customer service, and disseminate information both internally and externally.”.

The key challenge that branding faces on the Internet is an information overloaded, impatient consumer. A 2000 survey by Roper Starch Worldwide found that 71% of people using the Internet get frustrated when searching. The problem is getting much worse, with vast quantities of digital content being created every year.

According to a 2000 study by the University of California, Berkeley, there were over 550 billion documents on the Web. The question in such an information-overloaded environment is: How is your content going to stand out? Because if your content doesn’t stand out then your brand doesn’t. But the answer is not what marketers are used to. It’s not about flash, but rather about substance. It’s not about getting attention, but rather about giving attention. It’s about having quality content that is easy to find and easy to read.

The thing people do most of the Web

A good way to understand how branding works on the Web is to understand how people behave on the Web. What do people do most on the Web? They read. So, if you want to influence people in a more favorable way towards your brand, influence what they read.

What’s the second most popular activity on the Web? It’s gathering content. No, not searching for content, but rather gathering content. There’s a big difference between the two. Most of the time the reader (customer, staff, supplier, investor) doesn’t know exactly what content they are looking for. They’re interested in a particular subject area, product type, or other general area of interest. Only in a minority of cases does the reader know precisely what content they want. If you want to enhance your brand with consumers, influence the type of content they gather.
The brands that win

Think of the brands that have made it big on the Internet over the last five years: eBay, Amazon, Yahoo, Napster. What is it that all these brands had in common? They are all built around directories. eBay is a directory of second-hand goods, Amazon a directory of books, Yahoo a directory of websites, and Napster a directory of music. Yahoo didn’t spend a penny on advertising before it did its IPO (initial public offering). The Napster brand spread by word of mouth.

These, and many more successful brands on the Internet, grew in stature every time people visited and found what they were looking for. I remember when Yahoo launched. Everyone taught it was amazing. Yahoo was so cool. Strange that an A-Z directory could be so cool. But, you see, this is what the Internet is about. People are out there gathering and reading content, and when they find a website that lets them do those things more easily, they like it.

Marketing managers and advertising executives don’t get it

I am amazed at the amount of websites from major to small organizations who still show a fundamental misunderstanding of what the Web is for. Every time I visit a website and it begins to load Macromedia Flash, I hit the Back button. Every time I come across a splash screen, or a homepage with a towering logo and some tiny black text on a white background, I hit the Back button. Don’t all these graphic-heads know that the Hippie period of the Web is over. It lasted between 1993 and 1996. Then, boy, was the Web full of psychedelic color. Every website was desperately trying to be different. Logo wallpaper was so common. You had white text on a pink background, you had blinking text, you had little mailboxes that opened and shut, you had swirling logos, and drum rolls as you entered a website. It was multimedia for the masses and the masses hated it.

Look at the Web today. Why do the vast majority of successful websites layout black text on a white background. Because Albert Einstein, after years of research, discovered that black text on a white background is easier to read. And guess what? If text is easier to read, more people will read it. And if more people read your text, you have a better chance to sell more of your products; a better chance to enhance your brand in the minds of your target market.

Too many marketing and advertising executives are locked into an Industrial Age way of thinking about branding. They are used to battling for attention in a crazy and saturated offline world. But what is the thing consumers do when they come to your website? They choose your brand. It’s IBM.com, Microsoft.com, GE.com, Amazon.com. When people come to your website you already have got their attention. They’re on to the next stage. They want more information.

The online branding challenge and solution

The key challenge for branding on the Web is information overload. The Web is the Trojan Horse of information overload. It promised information nirvana and delivered overload hell. Someone once said that searching for information on the Web was like drinking water from a fire hose. Or, that the Web was like a library … with all the books on the floor and the lights turned out.


It’s not called Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) for nothing. They are called web pages. Tim Berners Lee, inventor of the Web, did make the following statement: “The concept of the web is of universal readership. If you publish a document on the web, it is important that anyone who has access to it can read it and link to it.”

Traditional publishing sucks

Walk into a newsagent and be stunned by the amount of magazines and newspapers on offer. Walk into a bookstore and be overawed by the massive selection of books available. Remember, even the biggest bookstore in the world can only display a tiny fraction of the books currently in print.

Traditional publishing sucks. Publishing is the art and science of moving content from the creator (author) to the consumer (reader). But it doesn’t work very well. It’s haphazard, slow, and wildly inefficient. Who are the publishers and editors who decide what gets published when? What do they know? Aren’t they overpaid middlemen who always miss the really good stuff? Why should we trust their judgment? Why should we wait for their opinion on what we should and shouldn’t read? There has to be an alternative, right?

The alternative sucks 30,000 times more

The alternative is 30,000 times more frightening. So, you think there are too many magazines, newspapers and books in print. Consider this carefully. According to a 2000 study by the University of California, Berkeley, printed content represents 0.003 percent of all content published annually in the world.
For every sentence published in print there are 30,000 sentences published on computers. For every book printed there are some 30,000 ‘books’ published on computers. Traditional publishing may not be working when it comes to print, but at least it has made some effort to keep the floodgates shut. That’s because the average publisher will reject up to 90 percent of publishing proposals they get.

**Organizations are awful at publishing content**

Imagine for a moment the modern factory floor. Everything is clean and tidy. The machines are well organized. The processes work with great precision. Efficiency and productivity are maximized. A good manager will not allow a thing to get out of place.

Try and imagine what the contents of your computer or website would look like if they were presented like a factory floor. If they are like a great many other websites, they’d look less like a factory floor and more like a local dump—an information dump. The fact is that most organizations are terrible publishers. They don’t seem to understand content. They treat it as a commodity; something that needs to be stored rather than published.

**Just what is publishing?**

Publishing means “to make public”. It’s all about taking an idea, polishing it up and sending it out to a group of readers. Publishers make money by turning ideas into valuable content. In this new economy we are all publishers. Publishing supports the sale of our products and services. It tells people why they should buy something, how they get it to work, and how to fix it when it goes wrong.

The majority of us already participate in at least some sort of publishing process. If we work with content that is intended to reach a readership, whether that be our managers, colleagues, customers or investors, we are already participating in a publishing process.

Here are a few fundamentals of publishing that are relevant to everyone involved in creating content:

- Publishing is about quality control. You will reject far more than you will publish. At the American Economic Review, for example, about 12% of the submitted articles are accepted.
- In publishing, less is invariably more. Critical content is precise and to the point. In this information overloaded world there has never been a greater need to keep it short, simple and snappy.
- The reader is king. If nobody reads you, you’re dead. The publisher who doesn’t truly understand their readers – and publishes content for those readers – goes out of business.
- ‘Time-to-publish’ is critical. It’s not enough to have great content if you don’t get it to your reader before your competitor does.
- Publishing is the business of profiting from content. A viable publisher knows how to make money – either directly or indirectly – out of content.

Today, we are working with content more than we have ever done before. Tomorrow, and for the rest of our careers, publishing will become key to our success. Understanding and gaining the skills of publishing will help us progress. Not gaining publishing understanding and skills will limit our progress.

The key difference between commerce and ecommerce is that commerce is selling with people and ecommerce is selling with content. You buy from a website because it has content that answers questions about product range, features, availability, price, support, customer references, company background, etc.

**Time to publish**

It used to be that within the organization information was like gold. It was hoarded (and still is!). It represented power and influence. If you wanted it you had to make a major effort to get it. But that entire dynamic has changed, driven by an information-hungry society and powered by the Internet.

Now, information has become like milk. You need to distribute it quickly or it becomes worthless. What you know right now is not nearly as important as your ability to learn more. Your ability to communicate what you know is as important as what you know. In an age of stability, those who know inherit the earth. In an age of change, those who know how to know inherit it!

A defining characteristic of business over the last thirty years has been the focus on reducing the time-to-market for a product or service. In 1970, for example, it took ten years to develop a new car. By 2000, it took less than five. If a computer printer develops a fault, the quicker content is placed on a website describing how to fix that fault the better. Publishing that content six weeks after that fault has been isolated delivers far less value than publishing it immediately.

The Web is supposed to make it much easier and faster to publish content. But that doesn’t mean content will be published faster on the Web. Unless you have the appropriate commitment to the Web as a proper publishing medium, and unless you implement proper Web publishing systems and processes, your content is likely to be published faster by print than online, even though the later offers a faster time-to-publish potential.

**Know your reader**

Think of your website as a publication and it all begins to make a lot of sense. Think of the person who visits your
There’s good news and bad news about branding on the Internet. The good news is that people depend on brands online as much or more than they depend on them offline. The bad news is not really that bad. It’s that building a brand online is a slow and meticulous process. Armed with quality content a brand will succeed … word by careful word.

Marketers need to change the way they think when the approach to Web. It’s not about getting attention, but rather about giving attention. When someone come to your website they already know your brand. Your offline marketing has worked. Now you need to make the Web work. You do that by having quality content that answers people’s questions.

To build your brand on the Web, you need to first understand what the Web is used for. It’s a simple thing really: reading. People spend most of their time on the Web reading. If you don’t have content worth reading on your website, then why would anybody visit it?

If there’s one word that describes the mood of people using the Web it’s ‘impatient.’ Every time you leave people waiting for a page to download, you diminish your brand. Every time you help them quickly get to the content they need, you enhance your brand.

The most successful brands on the Web-Amazon, Yahoo, Microsoft, AOL Time Warner, Ebay-focus on functionality over flash. In many ways, AOL has been the ultimate winner on the Web. AOL uses to be the organization that those who were hip and cool, loved to hate. AOL was so boring. AOL focused on Middle America, keeping things simple. Wired magazine once described AOL as “Unsexy and unstoppable.” A bit like the Web.

References


About the author

Gerry McGovern (gerry@gerrymcgovern.com) has just published two new books with Financial Times Prentice Hall. Entitled Content Critical and The Web Content Style Guide, they address content and knowledge management issues.