Atticus Essay

The Atticus Under-30 Essay is designed to discover some of the brightest young writing talents in the WPP fold. This year's subject was: *Marketing is the Price Paid by Consumers for Being More Important than Producers. Discuss.* Here is the winning entry, from *Eleanor McDonald*.

Now, this may be hard to imagine, but there was once a time when women needed men. Oh yes, there was a day when marriage was the required destiny for all of the fairer sex, and the gentleman had his pick of eager young women. A woman might take any offer from a vaguely appropriate suitor for fear of ending up as that most heinous of all things – a spinster. Well, well, haven't times changed?

You'd be hard pushed these days to find a woman whose primary ambition was "to find herself a good husband"; she is perfectly fine without a man, thank you very much – there are plenty to go around when and if she decides she'd like to settle down. Mr Right has become Mr Not Right Now and suddenly relationships are not so straightforward.

This plight of the male species can be seen as somewhat analogous to that of the producer in our new century. In bygone days producers could be sure of their consumers, just as men could be sure of a bride, safe in the knowledge that their offering was one of few to answer a particular need or desire. Today we live in a very different world.

It is now extremely rare for a product to achieve differentiation through superior technology (the iPod being a notable exception for a while): ergo the reliance on marketing to create a brand distinction in lieu of a tangible product difference. The transference of power from producer to consumer has thus swiftly engendered the prominence and pervasiveness of marketing. Similarly, the proliferation of choices a woman now has in life has necessitated a change in behavior on the part of the newly dispensable male – my goodness, this analogy is working well.

Little Miss Contrary

Another important factor to consider is the rise of the 'Critical Consumer': a consumer so well versed in the marketplace that they are increasingly hard to persuade. Consider this example: would you ever hear the following conversation in a store selling washing machines?

Consumer: "Do you have a machine which will get my clothes clean?"

Sales person: "Yes we do, madam."

Consumer: "Great, I'll take it."

There are obvious discrepancies between this and something we may encounter today.

First, this conversation is more likely to be in the form of a live web chat on the store's website.

Secondly, the consumer, after surfing the internet, reading the trade and talking to friends, will already have an idea of which model is best suited to her needs. All she requires from the supplier is a better price than the competition. She has knowledge at her fingertips, literally: she is the Critical Consumer and boy, is she making life hard for the producer! She wants a service tailored to these needs she has on her mental checklist, or off she goes to the competition. And yet the producer, our hapless male in this analogy, wants a homogenous product line and economies of scale, i.e. he's a man trying to attract a powerful and intelligent woman without wishing to spend his entire earnings and bend to her every whim.

There exists a yawning chasm between this informed and demanding consumer and the manufacturer of a homogenous product. All hail the illusory power of marketing which can bridge this gap.

Successful marketing in today's world means forgetting about product parity and concentrating on consumer individuality. Thus we begin to see the value of new marketing tools which have this ability to speak to Miss Critical as an individual. Interactive advertising, premium content on demand, addressable messaging, these are no longer part of a sci-fi future. They are viable and valuable communications in a world of consumer control. A successful suitor is not the guy standing in a bar yelling "I'm a good catch". Similarly, a successful brand does not drop a 30-second spot on national TV and think "job done".

Who gets the girl?

To establish and nurture a relationship with Miss CC is paramount. It is not enough to simply present yourself and wait for her to concede. Before anything can happen, before the first date can even take place, the target must be understood right through from her moral values to what she likes to eat for breakfast. Gentlemen, it's about touching her – in the right places, at the right time, and in the right way – and if you don't there is a battery-operated appliance that will.

So, when we talk of CRM and communications planning it is not just industry jargon or a strategy for incremental revenue: it is the natural and necessary evolution of marketing into a more finely tuned weapon.

An iron fist in a velvet glove

You may be wondering by now, what exactly is the "price paid" by the consumer in this dynamic? Don't you think facing thousands of suitors every day is exhausting? Give the girl a break, would you? Remember that the more highly prized the target, the more deadly the weapon; Miss CC could be hit before she even sees the gun.

Today's strongest brands are those who seed themselves in to the lives of their consumers, weaving their way in beneath consumer consciousness, building trust. In this way, they can disarm and pull her under their spell. Consider the geek in the films: he seems harmless and yet isn't he always the one who "understands her"? Isn't he always the one she ends up with?

To the ad-savvy, marketing-weary consumer, humility has never been more refreshing. Just be there for her, in the background of her every day and you'll become part of her life before she has even realized. In an atmosphere of ferocious competition and pervasive messaging the stealth marketer has a real opportunity to get his girl.

The perfect seduction

The consumer undoubtedly holds the power in our marketplace but, after a while, the proliferation of choice can indeed become a burden. Marketing is no longer just about share of voice, or GRPs, or even awareness – it is about relationships, the execution of a perfect seduction. Don't shout at her, listen to her, be her friend. Oh, and by the way, seven out of 10 women marry their best friend.

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