Brand UX

BY HUGH BOYLE

TRACYLOCKE

I t's the Sunday after Christmas and I'm enjoying a train journey from York to London through the snowy English countryside. On my way through York station this morning, I bought a newspaper — the UK's *Sunday Observer* to be precise — and two things struck me when I did, one thought triggering the other...

Firstly, since moving to the States in late 2013, I have really missed the English Sunday papers — not just my familiarity with the writing and the diversity of the content, but the *routine* and the behaviours that accompany them... from an early morning walk to the newsagent, to a post-Sunday-lunch editorial 'deep-dive' in my favourite armchair.

Next thought up however, was the slightly less fanciful realisation that it is actually several months since I've bought a newspaper at all, as despite much personal resistance and a career specializing in digital — both in pure-play digital and shopper marketing agencies — technology has finally won the day. In this case: *Sunday*.

After a quick read of the sports headlines, I head straight for the 'Discovery' pages (the *Observer's* weekly summary of all things technology, science and nature) where with New Year's Eve looming, the events of 2014 are in review. I am immediately drawn to columnist John Naughton's article and its rather challenging headline: 'The Internet Has Come of Age — For Better or Worse.'

Despite this being the first occasion in 20 when the year has turned without my having the word 'digital' in my job title (since joining TracyLocke as CEO in November 2014), I read on with interest. At once, my musings on no longer buying physical newspapers, my recent change in job title and my view on shopper marketing's sustained shortcomings in *truly* integrating all things digital, are on a collision course.

In his column, Naughton reminds us of how in 1999, the then-CEO of Intel, Andy Grove, was pilloried for claiming that "in five years' time, companies that aren't Internet companies won't be companies at all" — an observation that rings sadly familiar a decade-and-a-half on, should you spend your time in and around shopper marketing.

WE ARE ALL DIGITAL NOW

The reality is that digital technology is set to continue impacting upon shopper marketing more than any other marketing discipline for foreseeably the next three years, yet the quality, relevance, usability and resulting commercial success of the digital output in this space is often inadequate.

I believe there to be several contributing factors as to why this is the case that need addressing industry-wide and immediately.

Firstly, and for reasons inexplicable to me, far too many in our industry have failed to take personal responsibility for becoming anything close to digitally savvy. It is no longer acceptable to blithely dismiss this mandatory requirement with, an "I'm not digital." For me, I hear instead, "I'm no longer relevant."

Having spent more than ten years in 'chief digital officer' roles, I've seen this problem first-hand and have become expert in recognizing the de-facto opening gambits of non-digital colleagues clearly under pressure to get with the program (if not the *programmers*).

My first example is the good old, "Ah, Hugh, just the man — you'll know the answer to this." Such a statement will typically be followed by the sort of senselessly vague enquiry that you'll find generally drives digital people crazy. My personal favourite being the timeless classic, "So... does augmented reality really work?"

Approaching digital colleagues with questions like this, almost two decades since (in Internet form) digital exploded as a mainstream medium, is in equal measure embarrassing and disrespectful. Digital colleagues, just like any other, need to know when,

Accountability for the brand experience is everyone's responsibility.

how, where, for whom, in which retail channel and so on, and anything short of providing this information seems to me to be rather like asking a media planner, "Does advertising really work?"

Another is the infuriating request for the ubiquitous panacea that is the *mobile deck* ("Hey, Hugh, can you send me your latest deck on mobile?") In such situations, I always wonder whether my colleagues imagine me as some sort of digital Dumbledore who might immediately retire to Hogwarts library, climb up an old step ladder, find said spiral bound tome on a high shelf, blow the dust off its acetate cover and return to hand it over with a, "Here it is…this should do the trick." This is an impossibly broad request when mobile technology, and the very notion of 'mobility' as a behavioral concept when applied to shopper marketing, is arguably the most important area to be truly expert in at this time.

What concerns me most about such an alarming absence of even the most basic digital knowledge is that the required information is out there in vast quantities, easy to find and accessible enough to read, watch or listen to, and learn something from. It is here where taking personal, professional responsibility to grow and diversify has to come into play, and I genuinely question whether it has.

BEYOND BAND-AIDS

Imagine if your doctor only practiced the medicine he or she was taught at school, never researching, learning or adopting new surgical techniques or using innovative new drugs. My bet is that you'd change doctors pretty quickly. I believe the same fate will befall those who fail to significantly evolve as digital becomes a fundamental facet of every path-to-purchase.

The second big factor in this problem is two-fold, and it relates to what marketers are currently doing to solve their digital outages. The first is the assumption that salvation will be found in simply hiring more 'digital' people, most notably those shiny new 'chief digital officers' brought in (often from the digital, not the shopper-marketing industry) without clarity of brief or direction and expected to work instant miracles.

I feel so sorry for these guys (and don't forget, I was one) as they're introduced with a fanfare and a 'look what we got for you' twinkle in the eye. Really?

Let's ask ourselves what they can actually achieve if the wider canvas is barren of sufficient digital appetite and capability, regardless of their own deep specialism. This is in every sense the proverbial Band-Aid when the more pressing solution is not simply the addition of more digital people, but to ensure your people are *more digital.*

Of course, I am the last person to under-value genuine digital specialists and the need for them, but bringing such people in at the wrong time and into an ill-equipped environment is only setting them up to fail. The size of the chasm beneath them can only be reduced by ensuring all staff has been mandatorily trained on all things digital shopper from the basics upwards, and by applying ultimatum-weight pressure on senior management to smarten up. Beyond this, if the people doing your hiring are the same people with inadequate digital shopper knowledge, then how on earth can you expect to change your fortunes with new talent, when the old talent doesn't know what it's looking for?

It would be remiss and unfair of me not to acknowledge that there are some brand owners genuinely making excellent strides in this space through the setting up of digital centers of excellence, thorough digital staff development regimes and suchlike. Some retailers of note are also genuinely innovating with technology partners. But the stark reality unfortunately remains that these are the exception and not the rule within our industry at-large. Even in these cases, however, it remains very important that the good work done be utilized fully and cascaded successfully throughout the entire organization, such that the forward momentum and any competitive advantage potentially generated is maximized.

Shopper agencies try to solve for this in a different way, most often through the introduction of a 'digital partner' — a 'sister' company increasingly rolled out to win pitches, or reassure clients that they have extensive digital resource, via the formation of some sort of 'super-team.' Again, this is a flawed solution straight out of the first-aid box that will not work beyond the short-term.

The reason for this also lies in the agency's responsibility and accountability to its clients. Digital agencies have their own creative, planning

and account service teams, so head count and cost duplication is absolutely inevitable. It is my firm belief that clients should not and will not pay for both shopper creatives and digital creatives, for shopper planners and digital planners and so on—not least of all at a time when digital must be seamlessly assimilated into any shopper-marketing and brand-activation program. Agencies at their best should be accurate mirrors of consumer life, so deployment of makeshift digital departments where consumers have long since had digital 'departments' in their lives can only be a counter-intuitive, retrograde solution.

Further to this, two of the most important elements of any project are those of costs and timing of deliverables. Experience tells us that despite the best intentions in the world, and however well managed at the center, handing over full responsibility for digital thinking, design and building to a partner is fraught with danger in these respects, even if the clear and present statement of digital capability shortfall implicit in this is bearable.

A New Creative Breed

The final problematic factor that I want to look at lies in creative. Many of my earlier observations are more easily attributed to senior staff, however I believe that to fix creative is to sow the seeds of a complete transition.

Ultimately, though, delivering this will require a new breed of creatives fit for purpose in these exciting times for our industry. I believe that a huge amount can be gained and learned by hiring a greater percentage of recent graduates, as for this generation the very notion of 'digital' is an outmoded concept because it is so implicitly integrated into their own lives. However, this must not be done to the exclusion of those existing creatives so skilled and expert over many years in this unique discipline; it is simply that the old must now embrace the new.

I hope that this will finally put to rest what can only be referred to as the 'Blippar Factor' (perhaps formerly known as the 'QR Code Factor'!), where a slide on using Blippar is thrown into every plan, just as a few years ago a QR code was shoehorned onto every shelf-strip mock-up. This is an embodiment of huge naiveté in the space. When used well, with insight and as 'baked-in' to an idea, technologies like Blippar can be game changers. However, deployed as a poorly conceived 'nod' to emerging digital shopper behaviors, they serve only to throw the baby out with the bath water and perpetuate the problem.

Digital also offers many new challenges to traditional shopper creatives both in terms of user-experience (UX) and new channels. I believe that all shopper-marketing creative departments must have a dedicated UX specialist on the books. In old digital parlance, the 'UX' team was the group responsible for that crucial component of 'journey,' or in other words, how a user most fluidly moves through a digital environment and the content or features therein.

I know a creative director who refers to this as 'the Z axis': a third axis (in addition to the fixed axes of X and Y) of movement and navigation, and I believe getting it right to be an art form. I wonder, then, if applying such 'UX' principles, to the combined physical *and* digital components of the shopper-marketing journey might just be the 'holy grail' required to gain creative credibility comparable to those other marketing and advertising disciplines previously in the ascendency?

What this will deliver to shoppers, without question, is sustained consistency across all channels, stretching much farther upstream than those last few feet before the shelf, and embracing mobile, social and ecommerce touchpoints and engagement opportunities along the way—brand 'UX' if you like. Herein, as far as I'm concerned, lies the very future of our industry.

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I started this piece by writing about my most recent and final surrender to digital technology being the newspaper. Let me conclude by telling you that this was simply my own personal 'Alamo,' my own last-stand with a traditional medium. The truth is, you'll find my smartphone is loaded with every shopper-relevant app or utility I can find.

Only by living as a connected, digitally-enabled shopper, can I claim to be a genuine 21st century shopper-marketing professional, happily being held accountable for creating the best possible shopping experiences, and make my own contribution to ensuring that this transformational moment for our once under-regarded discipline is truly seized. ■
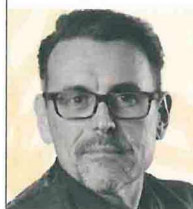
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