

Engagement: What's Next?

by Jeremy Garner & Mark Brown



The average UK citizen is bombarded with anything up to 5,000 advertising messages every day. Digital technology is fueling this growth and we expect this figure to rise exponentially. Now combine that number of messages with the ever increasing range of formats and environments available and we have a massively diverse, exciting, complex and fragmented brand eco-system.

The need to create engagement has never been so important for brands. But, because everyone's attention is being squeezed, generating the kind of quality time that builds relationships between people and brands is becoming more and more difficult.

Of course, the fundamentals of 'engagement' have not changed - the desire to understand others and to be understood, the desire to be entertained and the propensity to exercise one's curiosity.

These are the basic laws of engagement that create relationships all over the world.

So if the nature of engagement remains a constant, then what is changing? It must be the environment, the very context of engagement. And we believe that it is evolving very fast indeed.

The way things used to work – let's call it 'Old Engagement' – revolved around push-style messaging amongst a much more tightly packaged media landscape. In a controlled space you could shout loud and often

enough and you would be heard. And, if the insight and execution were right, loved.

But that was before something we at Weapon7 like to call Distraction Culture came along.

Now, in developed consumer economies more people have the technology and hardware they need to access more information, entertainment and culture than ever before. Immediately and in many cases simultaneously - wherever, whenever and however they want. This increasing availability vies for attention and focus. Therefore, finding the time and mind space to concentrate on one thing is becoming ever more difficult.

And, as we all know, this Distraction Culture is hellishly addictive. The thought of being disconnected from all those emails, texts, social media networks, search engines...many would be lying if they did not admit that switching off can be more than merely disconnecting, it's more akin to closing down your identity.

In fact, there are interesting parallels here between 'content grazing' (or media snacking, as it used to be called) and the fast food industry. It's the immediate gratification and ability to control the frequency that is habit forming. But, whereas with the fast food industry the effect it had on people was easy to see, the effects of Distraction Culture are harder to observe because they are psychological rather than physical.

People who live amongst Distraction Culture are addicted to their screens; they see them as a way of being connected to the world, something that they control; their value increasing as more people are available to connect to them; the classic 'Network Effect'. But what happens if we look at it the other way; that it is in fact the network that is in control of them, and the other millions of people who are connected? What would be the implications?

In fact, could distractible people be more creative? This is the question posed by Wired journalist Jonah Lehrer.

Citing a recent study by neuroscientists at Harvard and the University of Toronto which explored the benefits of latent inhibition (that is, the capacity to ignore stimuli that seem irrelevant), he asks: is staying focused really a good cognitive strategy? It isn't distraction per se that is the problem, he says, but the failure to curate our thoughts and filter the contents of working memory via relevancy.

It's all about searching for the 'smart voices', he argues, which allows us to formulate the right mix of data inside our heads.

This theory is backed up succinctly in one of the reactions to Lehner's article:

'...the future of media on the internet lies in curating. There's so much info out there, that it's the curators who are gonna be in demand. Let it all in. Then decide what you're gonna keep and share.'

Indeed, this approach has clear symmetries with a growing number of communications campaigns, especially those with a major social media component.

It's increasingly about curating content, knowing when not to get involved, as well as recognizing when to help steward the conversation, and giving the public the space and wherewithal to moderate themselves. That is true brand authenticity.

But allow us to examine the doomsday scenario for a moment. Does Distraction Culture, and the demands it puts on our cognitive processes and our time, inhibit our ability to learn at all?

Loren Frank, assistant professor in the department of physiology at the University of California, would seem to agree. 'Almost certainly, downtime lets the brain go over experiences it's had, solidify them and turn them into permanent long-term memories.'

He continues on to suggest that when the brain is constantly stimulated, the learning process is actually prevented. There is simply too much information to process to allow any learning to take place.

To add fuel to the fire of this theory, a study by the University of Michigan discovered that people learned significantly better after a walk amongst natural surroundings than after a walk in a dense, urban environment. This would seem to add credence to the possibility that processing a barrage of information can leave people mentally fatigued.

So where will all this take us in the long term? Will the ability for our brains to process information converge with technology at some point in the future, in order for cognitive efficiencies to take place?

A prominent neuroscientist, Gary Small, thinks that to be the case. He believes the future brain may actually be seamlessly connected with technology. Moreover, he suggests that the infinite possibilities of Google can actually stimulate larger areas of the brain to positive effect. The real issue, he believes, is how we are going to adapt to the technological advancements and improve our lives as a direct result. Amen to that.

So - again - surely the answer has to lie in curating?

If, eventually, we can ask a friend to meet in a certain

coffee shop merely by thinking it, then it stands to reason that we have already made the decision to filter out all the other distractions – and, indeed, all of the other options for possible meeting places – to focus on that particular location and objective?

Like any good quality control process, it's all about the filtering.

So back to the context of advertising: all said, the new Distraction Culture does present a huge opportunity. The rules of the game have changed; creating engagement demands an approach that combines informed thinking and dramatic, relevant execution that is as equally fast-moving as real-world culture. Then shouldn't agencies look to mirror in terms of structure or process the type of communications that resonate with a 2011 public?

When you think about it, agencies are metaphors for the kind of work they produce. Agencies that made old-style, siloed, compartmentalized campaigns, were old-style, siloed, compartmentalized companies operating in an old-style, siloed, compartmentalized media world. In the age of Distraction Culture, agencies must consist of teams of diverse people who can think about content and context; people who can think broadly and strategically as well as being nimble and responsive; people who can help join things up and make sense of this complex environment.

These people are flexible, able to think and act quickly, and are able to 'steward' on-brand communications for their clients that can really help unlock the potential of this always-on, multi-layered content grazing that their consumers are so addicted to.

This is New Engagement.

Ironically enough, to really get the most out of New Engagement we believe you have to look at the basics.

So, again, we are back full circle to the fundamentals of engagement that we listed earlier: the desire to understand others and to be understood, the desire to be entertained and the propensity to exercise your curiosity.

These qualities are programmed into us. The real issue is how technology is changing the context in which they operate and ultimately how this is affecting us.

So where will the evolving nature of New Engagement – and Distraction Culture – take us? Well, firstly we believe that 'switch off time' will become critical to industry and society as a whole. Sooner or later it will be recognized that the inability of people to focus on one thing for any length of time, due to the intensifying of Distraction Culture and content grazing, will pose the threat of doing real damage to productivity and social well-being.

There was a recent expedition, funded by the New York Times, which saw a group of neuroscientists, psychologists and brain experts take a five-day trip down a river in a remote part of Utah with the specific aim of escaping from connectivity. Their quest: to discuss what effect 'switch off time' would have on the human brain.

In fact, some theorists argue that technology and Distraction Culture are beginning to alter the way in which our brains physically operate; only time will yield the answers.

In a well-documented process, Jeff Vandermeer, a well-known American writer, editor and publisher, has taken pains to try and scale down the intensity of his writing routine and cut back on incoming distractions and the stress they can create.

His simplified schedule consists of writing in longhand in a coffee shop in the mornings for several hours, typing up in the afternoons, a walk after that, conversing with his wife over dinner, and then afterwards catching up on some email – and that's it. His day of work stops there.

Whereas in his old routine, he would spend a lot of time online, using Facebook for stress relief, reading a lot of blogs, and in being 'connected 24/7' in general.

And according to him, the more he kept to this old schedule, the more 'fragmented, stressed and generally unhappy' he became. In constantly juggling digital media channels – and the resulting information processing – Vandermeer had 'so many voices' in his head, and 'so many opinions, thoughts and ideas from other people', that he didn't feel he had any space to himself. Interestingly, he quips that he might as well have uploaded to the internet and existed there – the 'Attenuated State' in which many people increasingly exist.

Secondly, we believe that the communications industry will have a defining role to play in 'the speed of culture'. The ideas and techniques we explore whilst trying to unlock the potential of New Engagement may well find their way into mainstream culture. That is why the ability for creative, technical and planning to work together in tight-knit, nimble teams – who thrive on the chance to experiment – will be critical. There is competitive advantage in speed.

Lastly, looking even further ahead, we believe the acceleration of New Engagement will lead to a kind of 'middle culture', occupied somewhere between humanity and artificial intelligence. This middle culture where conversations between humans and AI really intermesh to the point of new languages being formed, is already being

driven by you – yep, you reading this article. How? With those sentences of strange, machine-like vernacular – or ‘Googlish’ – that you type constantly into Google when you are craving engagement once again. to call Distraction Culture came along.

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