

**Marketing Messages****MARY CHARLESON*****The machiavellian Mad Men have left the building***

For years Madison Avenue advertising executives considered consumers as targets. Watch one episode of Mad Men, and there can be little doubt as to the arrogant Machiavellian approach of that time to marketing. Although we've come a long way since the 1960's, marketers rolled through the 70s, 80s and 90s seemingly unaware that there could ever be anyone in control of the message other than them. To this day, marketing students are still taught about marketing and segmentation as though it was something that could be precisely found and influenced.

But in the new world order of the internet and social media, consumers are no longer the prey. They are the predators. The roll of control has shifted. In many cases, schools and business leaders are struggling to catch up. How should we now redefine the way we teach marketing? More importantly, how do we advise our clients or implement changes in our own business to respond to this new reality?

In the new marketplace, "A company or brand is not what it says it is, but WHAT IT DOES." These wise words, spoke by Bruce Philp, keynote speaker at the recent BCAMA Vision Marketing Conference, are on the mark for today's consumer reality. I bought a copy of his book, Consumer Republic at the conference. It is the first time I've read a marketing book that has allowed me to reconcile the oft conflicting personal interests of marketing and consumerism for business gain, and a deeply held left leaning value of the need for social justice in society.

Ultimately Philp believes that branded consumerism is about empowerment. He makes a pretty compelling case that consumers throughout time have been in control of brands, and that by having the ability to influence others online through social media today, we are simply returning to the way it always was throughout history. He thinks the heady days of the last 30 years featuring command and control precision targeting of the advertising world were simply an aberration where business falsely came to believe they held the power. He just might be right.

The marketplace today is a forum. Into that forum we place our brands. But rather than running a limited time advertising campaign to position a product or boost sales, we are actually running an election campaign that never ends. In short, today we need to be a brand or business worth voting for. And that is where things go much deeper, since it then becomes grounded in values, beliefs and behaviours over time.

There's a reason why Toyota was able to sustain their brand appeal, despite accelerator issues and customer complaints. It's because they had years of positive equity in the bank. Likewise, regardless of any recent efforts by Air Canada to gain customer favour, they have years of poor customer services stories in their bank. Customer service is now inextricably linked to marketing. Marketing is now a listening job, not a telling job. And brands are simply narratives for your company's story, as told by your customers.

How then will they tell your story? Will it be compelling and tied to your company values and the memorable behaviour of your employees? And more importantly, in the end are you a brand worth voting for?

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Mary Charleson, is a marketing strategist, speaker, and consultant. Her book Five-Minute Marketing is available through www.amazon.com. She writes monthly and can be reached at mary@charleson.ca