



If you look a bit further into the future (but not too far) and you project the hassle media planners in the market have to mix reach and frequency in their good old offline media plan, then you sense already how big the disaster will be when all the media are digitised, interactive and as personalised as possible.

When more dollars move into that interactive and online space the media-discussion about HOW MUCH time, money and people (!) to invest in blogs, social networks, banners, email marketing (and there is more to come) will be at the centre of the mediaplanning business,. This discussion will even blow away the backward (but still going on) debate between TV and online.

When you honestly approach this problem and take into account the real consumer behaviour and insights to decide on where to invest, it gets a bit easier : it will be in those media used by the fanatic users who're willing to evangelize about your brand. They will probably become the most powerful marcom tool.

There are enough reasons to become a firm believer of that - if you aren't yet. The recent document of Booz | Allen | Hamilton is the latest prose highlighting this inevitable and positive evolution.

These hyperactive netizens are fanatic users/searchers of the web. They use the web to search the latest news about new products, new brands, new features, corporate news, review sites ... They are fanatic because "they want to know". Not only about cars, mobile phones, pc, travel but also about CPG's and FMCG's.

They're an important group because (1) they have many friends whom they frequently contact and among them they spread broadly what they know about brands. And (2) they are trusted\*: invited, listened to. We recently did some research on the Chinese market and there's not a shadow of a doubt that this phenomenon is clearly present in the Chinese market too. It's universal. It's human.\*

Brands that are seriously thinking about their future communication and about the role of digitisation should bear this in mind: "the more you give to these positively thinking and talkative clients, the more they will praise and recommend you among their peers". You should give them of course (1) a blog that smells "straight from the heart" and (2) you should also support them when they move (with your brand in their heart) into their private/public social network space.

Think extreme micro-marketing when you approach this new phenomenon. Support them like you sponsored (before the web even existed) those who would have asked your sponsorship for a small local event – the typical real world community event we all once organised. These local,

regional society builders are extremely valuable for a community. The same type of people are also operating within the growing online social networks. And they will ask your support sooner or later. Be generous with them. Help them, but also : ask them regularly about their performance. There will be winners and losers among them. Only the first can build a community. The 2<sup>nd</sup> fill their pockets with your money. The parallel with spilled sponsored money in the real world is crystal clear.

One element is crucial in this new way of doing marketing, one element that makes it such a powerful way to communicate: honesty, authenticity within the peer group. Honesty? A very human and very valuable characteristic brands and their agencies have lost. Real networks are networks of real people who know each other or want to know each other. Brands can help (mind the word “help”) to strengthen and inspire these existing or emerging communities. In communities people want to meet people. That’s why communities are so strong. A brand can be one rope to bind/bond the group together but to be a real community you need as many ropes as possible.

Recently I started in China an experiment with Duvel (one of the best Belgian beers). On Facebook I created a group called “Duvel in China”

This post was the intro to the group: *“Duvel is probably the best Belgian beer. If you live in Shanghai and join this group of Duvel lovers ( you needn't be Belgian of course) you can get a crate of 24 bottles delivered at your home. 450 rmb only! At the same time you get TWO (2) of the real Duvel glasses for free. Spread the good news and order now your spiritual food at this address: Vincent Smets <vincent.smets@duvelmoortgat.be>  
PS. If you're not living in Shanghai and really would like to have 24 bottles (or more) be delivered to you, write Vincent a nice mail. He will be happy to hear about you.”*

Soon after this 1<sup>st</sup> post that launched the group, I got a reaction of one of the group members. She wanted more. With her tip I suggested a new activity and posted it on the blog : *“Since Belgians think number 13th brings bad luck and since Duvel indeed means devil, let's turn these 2 negative poles into 1 big positive. It's pure magic. Therefore I suggest all the Facebook members gather that evening at a bar/cafe/restaurant where they serve Duvel. October 13th is on a Saturday. So that's a good start. If you know a good place where we can meet up, pls post it on this board. The members can vote ...  
PS. Note also that 2008 june 13th is on friday. That day the Duvel Facebook members will be very very lucky.”*

At that 1<sup>st</sup> Duvelnight in Cottons (a bar in Shanghai) we had 10 people and we drank all the Duvel the bar had stored. Everybody was happy. Including the bar-owner.

The week after I met some Duvel lovers in Beijing and they want to start the same type of event in BJ too.

And Duvel slowly becomes a sponsor of the event. What they can exactly do (and not do) they will have to figure out month after month, Duvel day after Duvel day. But I congratulate them already now since they support the idea and are willing to learn from it. This type of grassroots marketing with a very authentic flavor is certainly a sound direction for some brands. Duvel is one of them who can fully go for this strategy and open up Duvel days in more cities and get more people to all the devilish “13<sup>th</sup> of the month events”.

The only thing that worries me a bit - but not too much - with all these user generated phenomena is that for us - *the “creative idea middlemen” we are* - there is less and less room in this very specific field to earn a living with what we usually call “creativity”. Indeed, a honest blog is the one you write yourself. You don't outsource it to whatever agency. And winding your brand cautiously

within the fine fabric of a social network is also a DIY job for the brand owner himself ... and for millions of honest evangelists.

But if we however broaden “creativity” – and agencies should have done that a long time ago – then there’s a lot more than just a silver lining. Booz | Allen | Hamilton is also very clear about that: *“Marketing message distribution – timing, context and relevance – is becoming as important as creative execution”*

These social networks will be massive. Maybe 230 million persons will be participating in it globally by the end of the year. And maybe they will get \$ 1 billion advertising. A small portion only. Insiders even don’t think this sum will triple the next 5 years. It’s hopeful that Facebook has been valued at \$ 15 billion today, but a social network is not just a medium on which you can sell eyeballs to brands for lots of money.

\*Edelman recently published their "Fifth Annual Edelman Stakeholder Study". The bad news? It shows an average drop of 31 percent in trust ratings for the four institutions measured -- Media, NGOs, Business and Government. The good news for all of us who are active in interactive & digital? *"While trust in media as an institution overall has declined markedly, there has been a dramatic increase, of more than 150 percent, in the trust of web-based media. In fact, web-based media has overtaken television as the most trusted and believable media source of news and information in Mainland China. "Web-based media in its broadest definition is now firmly entrenched in China," says Mr. VanderMolen. "The government and business can no longer look to the web as an emerging channel used by a small percentage of the population. The web has gone mainstream and the access to information that it provides can only continue to grow in influence and impact."*