

Why advertising needs to get with the times

The creative possibilities that today's technology presents are a gift to brands when used in the right way. However, where it should be an enabler, technology is being abused by brands to deliver a bad service to consumers, forcing them to turn to ad blockers to escape intrusive communications. **Rob Bennett** of **rehab** explores why this is and how brands can overcome it

Brands today are wreaking havoc – and they might not even realise it. Brands are all up on their soapbox, much to the disdain of the crowd. Where once their audience was enraptured, today people scurry past with their ears covered.

The problem is that brands act as if – perhaps even believe – they are entitled to the attention of consumers. This sort of arrogance might have gained the desired cut-through 20 years ago, when TV, radio and billboards ruled the roost, but in an age where most of our attention is spent on a device in our pocket, it just doesn't fly. It's intrusive, one-dimensional and is really turning consumers off.

The internet and digital technology brought about a big change in how brands communicate with consumers. The data and creative possibilities that technology presents are a gift to brands when used in the right way.

However, the reality is, it's not being used in a way that gives the consumer what they want. This means that as much as brands wax lyrical about being 'customer-first', advertising being 'conversational' and relationships 'direct', this objective is not achieved industry-wide.

The fact that the use of ad blockers is more prevalent than ever (with mobile ad blocking growing by 108 million and desktop ad blocking by 34 million devices between December 2015 and December 2016) is a clear demonstration that brands are utterly missing the mark. It's time to explore why this is, and how brands can overcome it.

We've all been there, haunted by an out-of-date ad relating to a product that you searched for or, even worse, bought weeks ago. When personalisation is the order of the day, who is responsible for this garbage? Even some of the world's best-known brands are guilty as charged.

When you dive into consumer perceptions of advertising, digital comes off far worse than traditional, and people are hell bent on trying their hardest to make sure they don't have to put up with it. Being savvy with technology means even more can be blanked out. The use of VPNs, email unsubscribe and ad blockers is most prevalent in the younger generations. Where it should be an enabler, technology is being abused by brands to deliver a bad service to consumers.

This mounting irritation with invasive online ads and brand communications means that consumers are taking control of the sort of advertising they choose to see – if any at all. It's no wonder that consumers are becoming agitated. However, their disdain goes beyond pop-ups. Ads in podcasts and sidebars all rile consumers. This indicates that even though brands have greater technological resource than ever before to deliver relevant and creative messaging, they're still missing the mark.

Media companies are selling 'personal targeting' as a great benefit of programmatic,

but this simply results in generic gender and age stereotyping which most of the time just feels rude. Last week, a friend of mine was embarrassed when she tried to show her boss something on her computer, only to be hounded by a pregnancy test ad (because she'd either been profiled, cookie'd or searched for one at some point). It's inappropriate and, quite frankly, outrageous.

So many brands are stuck communicating in a primitive and brash way, despite being in the midst of a new technological revolution. This is partly as a result of exciting technologies, such as chatbots and artificial intelligence (AI), being drastically misused. While they understand that they should be using them, most brands are not even coming close to fulfilling the potential to deliver truly personalised, one-on-one communication that enhances people's lives, instead of interrupting them. And although we're in a transitional period, by and large, they're not learning relevant lessons from the broader landscape.

This demonstrates that brands are blindly following the tyrannical advice of the media buyers. Pestering and aggressive, they're playing a short-termist numbers game that is giving consumers a clunky and disruptive experience, when that marketing budget could, and should, be adding real value to their day-to-day lives. There is a real problem, and their current short-sighted, even lacklustre, approach to dynamic technology just shows that they don't really understand it, or how to get the best out of it.

Take app usage. It's an expensive investment to build and market, and even then, there is no guarantee people will keep using them. If you're not in the top 10 apps, it's highly likely you'll be left gathering dust, especially when seven of the top 10 apps people use on a daily basis are owned by Facebook and Google. It's vital to properly consider whether the technology is a good investment for your company, and the value it can add, regardless of the current digital status quo.

We're still very much in the experimental stage of chatbot development. This test-and-learn period is vital for identifying and establishing functions that are genuinely useful and enhance consumers' lives. By nature, their newness means that no one is an expert except the people making them and, even then, translating this into brand marketing success is a challenge. However, there are a number of things they could be doing to help get a greater return on their investment.

Figuring out how to overcome these challenges starts with looking at the way advertising is changing the way people are consuming content. Not only have consumer expectations of brands evolved – 64% of people now think brands should be available 24/7 and 75% are willing to exchange personal information for a heightened brand experience – but ad-heavy websites are stopping people from sharing links, favouring sharing screenshots via messaging instead, so they don't spam their friends with unwanted ads. The cry for change couldn't be louder.

To keep up with accelerating frustrations with advertising, brands need to rethink their presumption of their right to interrupt. Their current approach is clearly not effective and is not giving consumers what they now desire and demand from a brand relationship.

Examining app usage is a good way to analyse consumer habits and preferences that can then be applied to marketing and the use of creative technology. Going beyond entertainment and gimmicks, the favoured apps are all the ones that help get stuff done. Monzo and Citymapper are shining examples. Yes, they've always been service-based, but considering their success in contrast to the apps that lie dormant on home screens, unused for weeks, they highlight how brands need to be approaching technology. They've got to start adding value.

Brands need to look at the relationships they are trying to cultivate and understand that they are far more complex than one-way communications from days gone by. At rehab, we describe this as moving from Alpha to Beta. Alpha identifies the old-fashioned approach that borders on harassment, aggressively badgering consumers, invading their personal space and pressuring them to listen to what they have to say. Beta, in contrast, describes new, valuable services that are creative and empowering of both brands

and their customers. The hegemony of the Alpha brand is over, and those that continue shouting at consumers will see a negative impact on their bottom line. Businesses will achieve better solutions by understanding and creatively harnessing the potential of technology. This means moving away from advertising, instead focusing on creating services that provide a genuine value exchange for brand and consumers while conveying strong messaging.

In 2016, we worked with Pernod Ricard on a personalised in-Facebook cocktail coach to help consumers solve the problem of

trend. Brands need to look at this shift and understand how they can take advantage of it to bring real value to consumers. It's the only way they are going to generate cut-through in a world where consumers want to talk, not just listen – the advantage being that once they're engaged in a dialogue, they'll be more open to hearing what brands have to say.

There will always be a latest 'must-have' piece of technology that brands are keen to incorporate into their strategies. But is using said tech going to give their consumers what they want? AI, Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, in addition to ideas that are still just



making new, imaginative tipples during the festive period when they didn't know where to start. Success wasn't just measured by the phenomenal 28% conversion rate, but also by the way we helped them achieve it, namely by looking at what consumers wanted and working back from there. Strong sales and convivial celebrations all round.

The possibilities don't stop with chatbots either. Some 88% of smartphone users are already considering Voice, meaning it'll soon be a normal way to have one-on-one conversations with brands. The stratospheric growth of cloud-based 'intelligent' home speakers like Amazon's Alexa and Google Home is only serving to accelerate this

a twinkle in the eye of developers, all present great opportunities when used in the right context by the right brands. But brands need to ensure that when addressing their marketing strategy, they simmer down the advertising, stop shouting and, instead, start listening to the needs and desires of their customers, responding with a sensitive use of dynamic technology. Not only will this help ensure their messages get through, but they will also build stronger, two-way relationships that last for years to come.

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