



## Chapter 7

### *Shift to a conversational marketing mind-set*

If conversational marketing is one of the most effective ways for customers to get to know our companies and to understand our value, what's stopping us from adopting this marketing approach? Two things: One is our mind-set about the purpose of marketing. The other is that some people in our organizations may not believe that conversational marketing makes good business sense. This chapter discusses:

- \* Five business reasons to change: customers, word-of-mouth marketing, product sameness, reputation, and the integrated marketing stalemate
- \* Seven ways to deprogram from a command-and-control mind-set: undergo the company/competitor immersion treatment, delete the adjectives, ask new questions, think rapport-like versus report-like, view marketing as the voice of the customer, think of marketing as teaching, and empower customers like employees
- \* The benefit of losing control

## Five business reasons to change to conversational marketing

Admitting that we can't control the message or the channels in which people talk about our companies and products is unsettling. It poses the question: What exactly is marketing's role?

Rather than message developer and distributor, marketing can play a more valuable role in bringing customers' points of view back into the company to help influence products and services that *they* want to buy.

Why change now? The most important reason is that customers want a different type of relationship with companies. They're less interested in companies that promote to them, and more interested in companies that take an interest in them and what *they* want to know and understand. And then, of course, you need to develop product and service experiences that customers want. In a Yankelovich study, 54 percent of customers say they avoid being exposed to marketing, and 56 percent avoid buying products that overwhelm them with marketing.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, customers don't want relationships to be "managed." Customers stay loyal when they feel emotionally connected to a company. (And, of course, when their experience with the product or service is excellent.) The best way to connect is to talk with customers about what's on *their* minds—and provide perspective and other relevant insights. It makes perfect sense: being "other-oriented" helps build relationships.

Customers rule. That's the big reason to change.

There are four other good business reasons to change marketing practices as well.

1. **Word-of-mouth marketing.** Customers have been providing one another with information and advice for ages. Through

blogs, e-mail, and online communities, people now share recommendations—good and bad—not just with ten or twenty people, but with thousands. And as the trust research mentioned in Chapter 1 shows, people trust other people more than they trust companies.

As a result of this communications tsunami, companies have begun paying close attention to how they can use word-of-mouth to achieve their marketing objectives.

Much of the word-of-mouth marketing talk has been about products. Some experts, like Ed Keller, who wrote *The Influentials*, say that you need a cool product to create buzz. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) defines word-of-mouth marketing as “giving people a reason to talk about your products and services, and making it easier for that conversation to take place.”<sup>2</sup>

Although a good product—think iPod, or an innovative business strategy such as eBay—will always get people talking, we can still gain value from word-of-mouth marketing even if our company isn’t particularly cool or innovative. People want to—and do—talk about more than just products. They like talking about possibilities. They like sharing war stories and lessons learned. So, even if our products aren’t cool, we can still harness the power of word-of-mouth marketing by talking about our beliefs, by sharing our point of view.

If an important goal of marketing is to deepen relationships and trust, talking with customers about ideas that matter to them is the way to do just that. Customer-to-company conversations are word-of-mouth marketing on steroids.

**2. Product “sameness.”** Marketing and sales execs constantly grapple with how to differentiate products that are vastly similar to one another. Although search engine optimization, mobile marketing, and other new channels may amplify a product’s

message, they won't set it apart. If you really want to differentiate, have something to talk about that is relevant and valuable, something that connects with people on both an emotional and a rational level.

Comments such as, "They're the smartest and best people to do business with," or "I really trust that company," are reasons people choose one vendor over another. You can foster those perceptions—inexpensively and effectively—through conversational marketing. Conversations help customers get to know you—and you them.

**3. *Corporate and brand reputation.*** Although having a good name is important to companies large and small, many executives are uncertain of what communications techniques will improve their companies' reputation.

One way is to talk about what the company believes in, particularly those beliefs or perspectives that are especially relevant to your customers—and perhaps unconventional or rarely talked about.

**4. *The integrated marketing stalemate.*** The debate about just how to make sure that the advertising, public relations, branding, interactive marketing, and sales silos are in synch continues as the concept of integrated marketing wanes. The advertising left hand doesn't know what the public relations right hand is doing, say some. Sales thinks marketing doesn't understand the real business issues and doesn't give it what it needs to sell. Marketing thinks sales reps are lazy, and if they just read what was sent to them there would be no problem.

Having conversational themes and points of view that everyone in a company can talk about—through multiple tactical channels and techniques—helps break the stalemate. Internal politics are hard to deal with. But with interesting conversational

themes, everyone can stay in their silos and do their thing, while solving the “integrated” problem.

### **Seven ways to deprogram from a command-and-control attitude**

Have you ever walked away from a sales meeting and felt like you were working for a cult? The *rah-rah* about the latest extraordinary product. The motivational speeches about how we can kill the competition. The applause for the new pricing and promotional programs that will reduce sales obstacles. The video set to a great music soundtrack with the last visual frame dissolving to “Now more than ever. The future is ours!”

OK, I may be slightly exaggerating, but if you’ve been in business for more than a few years, or if you read “Dilbert,” you know the feeling.

We get so involved with our own companies—and so fixed on the competition—that it’s hard to pull back and get a clear perspective of how we’re relating with people on the outside. We pay more and more attention to our company’s and direct competitors’ plans and less and less to what our customers really want.

It’s hard to step back and see the big picture while you’re in the trenches, but here are seven ways to deprogram from the all-about-us command-and-control mentality. (Or, as the cult deprogrammers like to say, here’s how to do exit counseling.)

#### ***1. Undergo the company/competitor immersion treatment***

The purpose of this exercise is to show command-and-control traditionalists, especially those who aren’t convinced of the need to change marketing practices, just how boring and unin-

spiring so much conventional all-about-the product-and-us marketing is.

Gather up the sales collateral, press releases, sales presentations, and Web site copy from the company and from the three top competitors and assign the naysayer to do nothing but study these materials for two days. At the end of the second day, ask the person to do the following simple exercise:

- \* In one simple sentence, how would you say each company is different?
- \* How would you start a conversation about each of the companies while having coffee with the CEO of an important sales prospect?

Almost always the naysayer realizes that the companies lack points of view worth talking about, and that conventional corporate-speak says nothing more than more of the same. The materials neither help people understand anything new nor inspire them to want to learn more.

After two days, most people are deprogrammed and ready to change. They usually say, “Don’t ever make me have to read that drivel again. It was torturous.”

Deprogramming people so they think from the customer’s point of view instead of the company’s is akin to something the late Margaret Singer, a psychology professor at University of California-Berkeley and an expert in cult mind control, once said about religious cult deprogramming, “Getting into the cult consists of the cult recruiter getting the new initiate to *stop* the thought processes, to think only in cult terms and concepts, to give them a narrow frame of thought. The deprogramming process is more a *freeing up* of the person to once again use their mind and to reflect and think and reason and trust their

own experience.”<sup>3</sup> Free up your mind so that you can connect with the mind-sets of your customers.

## **2. Delete the adjectives**

Another small deprogramming technique is to put a moratorium on the use of adjectives in marketing and sales communications. This isn't a writing exercise. Rather, it's a way to force people to explain what they mean in a more plainspoken and direct way. It gets them to explain instead of proclaim and to teach versus preach.

If the sales presentation starts with, “We have the most vibrant, vital, industry-leading products,” but it is now left with, “We have products,” the marketer is forced to explain the value of the company in a new way. Instead of using adjectives to describe your product, open with a description of your company's beliefs.

## **3. Ask new questions**

Often when sales slump or campaigns produce sluggish results, we tend to ask, “What can we do?” Instead, ask questions that help better understand why customers are not interested. When Eric Utne, founder of the *Utne Reader*, used this one question, it evoked meaningful three-hour discussions: “What have you been thinking and obsessing about lately?”<sup>4</sup>

By understanding what customers are thinking and obsessing about, it's easier to contribute to the conversation.

## **4. Think rapport-like vs. report-like**

Deborah Tannen, Georgetown University linguistics professor and author of the best-selling books *You Just Don't Understand* and *Talking 9 to 5*, believes that men are more comfortable with report-like talking, and women with rapport-like conversations. Report-like talking reinforces a command-and-control attitude, while rapport-like fosters relationships.

“For most women,” says Tannen in *You Just Don’t Understand*, “the language of conversations is a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships. For most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status. . . . From childhood, men learn to use talking as a way to get and keep attention.”<sup>5</sup>

So if creating and deepening relationships is a marketing objective, marketing communications should focus more on establishing rapport, and less on reporting data. That means:

- \* Asking more questions versus giving more statements
- \* Being other focused versus exclusively me/us focused
- \* Creating understanding versus attracting attention

##### **5. View marketing as a voice of “customer service,” not production**

Former high-tech CEO Lou Piazza believes that executives should think of marketing as a service, helping external audiences *and* internal staff. This service mind-set means:

- \* Internally, bringing customers’ views back *into* the company; advising product development, communications, and customer service on how to develop approaches that will improve the customers’ experience with the company.
- \* Helping external influencers such as journalists or analysts understand the market issues and competitive environment, not just those of your company. Note: This is a meaning-making technique that involves first providing context and then talking about how the company’s strategy is relevant within that context.

“Typical marketing starts from inside the company and then tries to reach across sales and to the customer. That’s why so many

marketers are pushing the company's messages against a brick wall," Piazza explains. "I think the much more effective marketing approach is starting from the customer and sales perspective and reaching *into* the company. Because the given isn't the company. The given is the customers."

In other words, a more valuable role for marketers is to communicate customers' needs to people inside the company so that they know what to do differently to provide value to customers and to increase sales.

"I would like marketing to be the voice of the customer," says Piazza. "Tell me what I need to do differently in my product development. Tell me what I need to do differently in my marketing communications activities. Tell me what I need to do differently with product partnerships to provide a more compelling solution for the customer."<sup>6</sup>

This type of marketing service doesn't cost anything, really; it involves listening to customers and bringing their insights back into the company. And it takes place on many platforms—in meetings and Webinars, in online customer communities and forums.

Marketing has traditionally been more like a manufacturing operation, producing advertisements, Web sites, brochures, campaigns, and press releases. Reframed as a service, however, marketing gains even more value through the processes of listening, advising, explaining, and teaching.

The concept of friendliness is a key to marketing as a service.

Friendly people and companies listen because they're really interested in what people have to say. They make it easy for people to chat with them. They share what they're hearing about new ideas, what's happening that may be helpful. They like to talk about what they're learning. They don't lecture or promote but converse in the best sense of the word (the word *converse* comes from the Latin *conversare*—"to turn" or "dance together").

They ask questions—and make it easy for others to do the same in a welcoming kind of way. Think about Southwest or Virgin Atlantic versus airlines with a reputation for being unfriendly. Think about a warm and friendly Whole Foods versus a dingy, overlit convenience store.

A helpful exercise is to rewrite the marketing organization's mission, borrowing from missions of actual customer service organizations. Here are some actual customer service organizations' missions that could easily be applied to marketing:

- \* Customers should be valued as people and shown courteous and concerned attention to their needs.
- \* We will provide services “for” and not “to” our customers.
- \* The customer deserves value.
- \* Customers deserve honest communication.
- \* The service process should make sense.

What might it mean to reframe marketing as a customer service function? Here are behaviors associated with delivering customer service from the Office of Human Services at University of California, Berkeley. Most of these behaviors could be applied to how marketers think about their roles.

### **Care and Respect**

- Demonstrate a willingness to help.
- Listen for customer's knowledge and emotional place.
- Try to understand customer's point of view.

### **Integrity**

- Response should be genuine, not phony.
- Explain reality.
- If you can't do something right away, say so.

### **Accuracy and Thoroughness**

- Make it your responsibility to be the knowledge expert.
- Be sure that all information you give out is accurate and complete.
- Summarize discussion to ensure mutual understanding.
- Identify the real issue and what service is really needed.
- Use clear, simple language that is easily understood (avoid jargon).

### **Harmony and Unity**

- Use good listening skills; do not interrupt.
- Be sensitive to emotional reactions.
- Be flexible; don't make assumptions.
- Communicate with a constructive mind.
- Follow through on actions.

### **Teamwork**

- Encourage participation by everyone.
- Be open to ideas different from your own, regardless of the source.
- Use a variety of methods to solicit input.
- Look for opportunities to pull in other units to get differing perspectives.

## **6. *Think of marketing as teaching: Lessons from educational reformer Dennis Littky***

Another way to shift from the command-and-control mind-set is to approach marketing as teaching.

Like teaching, the goal of marketing is not to assert conclusions, but to engage people in a dialogue that leads them to their own conclusions. Teaching and marketing are other-focused. Take, for instance, noted educational reformer Dennis

Littky, cofounder of the Met Schools for inner-city high school students.

In speaking to executives at a conference on business innovation,<sup>7</sup> Littky explained that when he and his colleague Elliot Washor started the first Met School in Providence in 1996, he did not ask, “How can we fix what’s wrong with high schools?” Nor did he ask, “How do we fix schools?” Instead, he asked, “Why don’t kids like school—and how can we fix *that*?” He talked with students and asked them what would make a difference to them.

Similarly, if we as marketers want to understand how to provide more value, we need to spend less time trying to fine-tune our tactics and more time listening to customers.

Littky found that most kids think school is boring, boring, boring—the same thing consumers say about many marketing programs. They hated sitting in classes and being lectured at all day. That’s why they were dropping out. So, the Met eliminated required classes, tests, and grades. Today, instead of a traditional curriculum, each Met student works with an adviser to put together an individualized curriculum based on his or her interests.

The Met’s attendance and graduation rates hover near 94 percent—among the best in the state; the school has a 100 percent college acceptance rate, including to top-rated schools such as Brown University and the University of Chicago. Many Met students are the first in their families to go to college. That’s not bad for a school whose student body is generally poor—65 percent qualify for federal meal subsidies—and is heavily weighted toward minorities, with 42 percent of the student body Hispanic and 31 percent African-American.

The Met involves students in education, giving kids a say in how to make school decidedly not boring.

Giving customers a say, like the Met does with students, is an especially valuable marketing approach.

### **7. Empower customers like employees**

Diane Hessian, CEO of Communispace and coauthor of *Customer Centered Growth*, told me she believes that marketers can learn how to engage customers from two of the hottest words in business in the past twenty years: *leadership* and *empowerment*.

Management research shows empowered employees deliver better results than employees who feel uninvolved or disengaged. The same “involvement concept,” said Hessian, applies to companies’ relationships with customers.

Hessian says the following four principles apply to both employee involvement and customer involvement:<sup>8</sup>

**1. Authenticity.** You can’t fake it. Your company has to want to involve and listen to customers. “Companies must be prepared not just to *listen* to what customers are saying but to *act* on what they hear,” said Hessian.

**2. Ongoing two-way conversation.** Developing trusted relationships requires conversation; it can’t be done by one-way communications dissemination. “The quality of the conversation signals to employees and customers that they are truly engaged and involved,” notes Hessian. “How many people will speak their minds and get involved if they feel their ideas are going nowhere? Or if no one responds to their suggestions? Not many.”

**3. Boundaries need to be clear and mutually accepted.** Involvement doesn’t mean that leaders or marketers don’t lead. You can’t act on all the recommendations from employees or

customers. It's important, advises Hessian, to establish ground rules and boundaries for the engagement process. "Once companies understand that engagement requires conversation—and that these conversations have to be authentic and sincere—then they need to look at how mutual expectations are established between the company and its customers. There needs to be a structure to the dialogue and engagement. Who will participate? How is participation facilitated? What, if any, restrictions are placed on the conversations? Such expectations will likely change over time, as the company and its customers get more comfortable with the process."

**4. *Involving people is not a short-term tactic.*** Jack Welch observed that one of the surest ways to destroy any employee involvement initiative was to give up on it too quickly. The same applies to involving customers. "Engaging customers is not something you do once in a while, it needs to be a continuous process built into your organizational DNA," according to Hessian. "People today expect to be more involved, and they are skeptical and suspicious. They watch the leader's every move, waiting for a sign that the involvement isn't genuine or their opinions don't really count. So, expect engagement to be a journey, not a one-shot event."

### **The upside of losing control**

In the world of marketing, control is no longer possible. And that's good news for marketers, because now we can redefine a more valuable role for ourselves. That role is talking *with* customers—about what *they* want. In doing so, we're better able to:

- \* Bring customer ideas *into* the company, which helps research and development (R&D) develop the type of products customers really want. As high-tech CEO Lou Piazza explains, “The given is the customer. Not the company. Marketing is only there to accelerate sales.”<sup>9</sup>
- \* Improve customer satisfaction because we’re delivering products customers have told us they want and we’ve developed the relationships that make customers feel confident in choosing us.
- \* Shorten decision cycles because we’re focused more on helping customers understand and less on promoting to them.
- \* Find shared points of view that different marketing functions can incorporate into their programs. Although our program tactics may differ, our overall vision can be the same.
- \* Create more innovative, creative organizations. Dr. Alan Stewart, who has studied the attributes of “conversing companies,”<sup>10</sup> says that in such an environment people:
  - Interact with curiosity, rather than telling in mind
  - Build ideas together, with enthusiasm
  - “Talk up” issues, rather than trying to score points or to persuade
  - Harness the collective intelligence of the group
  - Notice and honor the emotional underpinnings of others’ and of our own responses
  - Recognize that right and wrong, winning and losing are irrelevant
  - Welcome diversity of opinion as a wellspring of creativity
  - Sustain openness to creativity

- Appreciate the value of alliances based on interdependency
- Enlarge their vision
- Recognize and acknowledge blind spots in their own perspectives without losing face

Chapter 8 explains how to bring conversational marketing to life through programs, people, and new skills.