



## Chapter 8

### *Building a “talk” culture*

**M**arketers are always tweaking their organizations, trying to figure out whether the right people are in the right roles. The last time the Marketing Leadership Council polled its members about organizational structure, two thirds of the marketers said they were dissatisfied with how they were structured. Now along comes conversational marketing with points of view, podcasts, customer communities, and word-of-mouth marketing to further complicate questions about what a marketing organization should look like.

“If you don’t help people understand how to institutionalize ‘talk’ into their organizations, companies aren’t going to change all that much,” Walter Carl, associate communications professor at Northeastern University, advised me over dinner at the close of the first International Word-of-Mouth Conference in Hamburg, Germany. “Marketers can’t just hire a new agency and think that they’re done. They have to change internally too.”

This chapter offers ideas about:

- \* How to rethink the marketing organization, morphing traditional roles into eight functions to succeed in conversational marketing: insights, conversational strategy, two-way involvement programs, executive communications, public relations, sales communications, advertising, and technology.
- \* The responsibilities and skills needed for these eight functions, as well as how to evolve traditional marketing positions, from public relations and research to sales communications and advertising, for these new functions.

**Rethink the marketing function:  
What are the right questions?**

Once, the pertinent questions were: Should we be centralized or decentralized? Horizontally focused or industry focused? Product focused or customer focused? (That one always kills me; isn't marketing implicitly suppose to be customer focused?)

Those are “what” questions. Today, it may be better to start from “how” questions when thinking about the marketing organization's design.

- \* How are we going to create more ways for customers to talk directly with us—and us with them?
- \* How do customers want to learn about what's new?
- \* How are we going to stay connected to what people are talking about on blogs, boards, and communities?
- \* How can we be more effective at meaning-making?
- \* How can we help people in our company learn how to communicate in new conversational ways?
- \* How do we use new metrics to analyze what is and isn't working?

## Eight important functions for conversational marketing

One way to incorporate these “how” questions and to institutionalize conversations into the culture is to consider the value of the following eight marketing functions:

1. **Insights (a.k.a. “really listening”)**—identifying customer habits, market trends, and competitive insights through quantitative research and secondary techniques such as listening to customers, looking at online communities, and reading blogs. *Evolves from traditional market research and competitive intelligence.*

2. **Conversation strategy**—developing points of view, sound bites, questions, stories, and metaphors to be used in marketing, sales, and corporate communications. *Evolves from branding, messaging, account planning, and corporate communications.*

3. **Two-way involvement programs**—creating customer salons, online customer communities, word-of-mouth marketing, blogs, and Webinars. *Evolves from digital marketing, events, and guerrilla marketing.*

4. **Executive communications**—helping executives adopt conversational ideas, styles, and techniques. Some leaders need coaching to move from command-and-control to involve-and-listen. *Evolves from messaging, speech writing, media, and presentation training.*

5. **Public relations**—engaging *with* important influencers and using beliefs to engage them in new conversations. *Puts*

*different emphasis on traditional public relations, more two-way conversations as part of influencer outreach, media relations; adds “talkable” point of view ideas to basics.*

**6. Sales communications**—incorporating insights and conversational ideas for sales reps to use with customers; gathering stories from customers and sales reps and feeding them back into the organization. *Evolves from messaging, sales support, marketing communications; more about two-way communications and conversation ideas than producing materials and PowerPoint decks.*

**7. Advertising**—creating advertising approaches that engage and activate people. *Changes emphasis; advertising isn’t just the ad; advertising triggers involvement or word of mouth.*

**8. Technology**—shaping strategy, product development, creative programs, and processes by innovatively using technology. *Technology evolves from support function to strategic asset for marketing.*

### **Insights: Seeing new possibilities**

One of the worst things anyone can say to a CEO is, “You’re out of touch with your customers.” Being out of touch with customers implies that the executive isn’t running the business correctly. How can a company provide value to customers if it doesn’t really know the customers?

Yet, in our data-driven world, we sometimes confuse research (a process) with insights (an outcome). Data report on what is. Insights are glimpses at what might be, based on the data and on

## New Functions, New Competencies

<b>Function</b>	<b>Traditional Role</b>	<b>New Competencies</b>
Insights	Market research Competitive intelligence	Conversation monitoring and analysis Community facilitation and involvement Trend and idea spotting Macro conceptual analysis Ethnography Interviewing and observation expertise (Learning vs. questioning)
Conversation strategy	Branding Messaging Corporate communications/ PR creative account planning	Point-of-view development Linguistic skills Storytelling expertise Conversational writing skills Coaching skills
Two-way involvement programs	Digital marketing/interactive marketing Events	Listening Digital communications skills Broadcast “talk show” skills Participatory event planning skills
Executive communications	Messaging Speech writing Media and speech training	Storytelling expertise Writing to be said Advisory and coaching skills
Public relations	Messaging Media relations Writing Influencer outreach	Two-way involvement approaches Broadcasting skills Relationship building, influence Storytelling expertise Conversational writing skills Faster response, more proactive
Sales communications	Messaging Developing sales support materials	Field sales experience Liaison with insights Creating new ways to involve customers, prospects in conversations
Advertising	Creative Production Media buying	Creating short films vs. “ads” Creative ways to involve customers in brand experience
Technology	Measurement analytics Web skills Production and execution technology skills	Marketing chief information officer, helping to shape marketing strategy, operations, program execution

listening to the market in new ways, observing new patterns, and understanding the implications of those patterns to business strategy.

“You’re out of touch with your customers” usually occurs because of too much reporting data and not enough actionable insights to shape strategy.

The late management guru Peter Drucker wrote a great deal about the importance of going outside a company and its existing customers, as that data “tells us only about the current business. They inform and direct tactics.”

“For strategy, we need organized information about the environment,” Drucker wrote in *On the Profession of Management*. “Strategy has to be based on information about markets, customers and noncustomers; about technology in one’s own industry and others; about worldwide finance; and about the changing world economy.”<sup>1</sup>

Many customer insights organizations are run by market-research professionals, some of whom have the competencies to take on the challenge while others do not. Those who don’t must expand from a process mentality to an outcome mentality. They need to become observers of emerging macro patterns *and* business strategists who can recommend how new insights can be used to shape growth strategies. They have to be adept not only at researching hypotheses but at developing new hypotheses. Internal insights groups are valuable because they help organizations identify and act on new possibilities ahead of the competition.

I’ve heard people suggest that the insights director should report to the CEO or strategic planning director rather than the CMO, because CMOs are too often wrapped up in tactics. I’d suggest that CMOs delegate more tactical responsibilities and not miss the opportunity to own insights.

Here’s an overview of the functions in an insights group:

- ♦ *Uses scientific quantitative targeting and positioning research* methods to determine the financially optimal target for the product, preemptive positioning, and financially optimal channels.

- ♦ *Manages traditional secondary research* including competitive intelligence and focus groups; analyzes customer service activity patterns and manages customer and prospect analytics.

- ♦ *Uses blog and digital news aggregation/analysis to discover and monitor* what people are saying about products, trends, and issues relevant to the company. This function should also be responsible for synthesizing and regularly sharing digital conversation roundups with employees, sales, partners, and other people connected to the organization. The greater the organization’s grasp of marketing conversations, the better it will be at contributing to those conversations in ways that help achieve its business objectives.

- ♦ *Manages online customer communities.* This means making sure that the community activity and discussions are meaningful to customers and the company. Tactically, it includes sharing ideas with customers and asking for ideas, responding to questions and comments, showing customers how the company is using their ideas, and listening to what and how customers are talking to other customers to better understand customer attitudes, beliefs, and styles. In *Communities Dominate Brands*, authors Tomi Ahonen and Alan Moore make the case that “for the rest of this decade at least, the power of communities will continue to grow . . . there will be a vast difference between the most astute organizations

that will adjust to the new community-based marketing environment and those that ignore the change.”<sup>2</sup>

Last, insights groups also do the type of work done by the account-planning function at many advertising agencies, as well as the more pragmatic elements of ethnography and behavioral sociology. They are keen observers who detect how customers want to be more emotionally involved with our companies, products, and services.

### **Conversation strategy: Finding points of view and conversational approaches**

Many companies want to be more conversational, but quickly run out of ideas.

“Okay. I wrote three blogs, *now* what do I talk about?” an executive recently asked me.

The problem wasn’t style or willingness, but the executive didn’t really have anything interesting to say. When people get stuck and start groping for something to talk about, it’s often a signal that they, or their companies, know less about their customers or industry than they thought. That’s one reason for a conversation strategy capability.

The role of the conversation strategy function is three-fold. One is to develop points of view that connect to and support the business, marketing, and sales strategies. The second role is helping people talk about the point of view. This can mean creating new metaphors, finding supporting stories, crafting sound bites, researching supporting data, and developing questions that provoke thinking around the organization’s beliefs. The third role is teaching the following six practices to people in the organization, particularly senior executives, business

unit leaders, sales reps, public relations managers, and marketing colleagues:

1. How to communicate more conversationally
2. How to have conversations in a sales meeting versus giving a polished presentation
3. How to participate in digital conversations
4. How to listen—really listen
5. How to keep an ear to the ground for stories, language, and metaphors
6. How to flip the communications mind-set from, “I want to tell you all about our company” to “We’re seeing three trends emerge that could be very good or very bad in the industry”

Traditionally, branding and corporate communications have been responsible for elements of conversational strategy, such as value propositions and messaging. However, many of the branding and advertising firms seem to be struggling more than the communications professionals to flip to a conversational approach. Branding experts’ natural instinct is to define what the brand should represent to customers from the company’s perspective.

It is worth remembering that a brand is what customers think it is, not necessarily what the company says it is. And customers are taking an active role in defining what they think the brand should be. “Marketers offer brand ideas to the market, but those ideas don’t truly become brands until they are accepted, adopted, and made over afresh as part of the lives of those who use them,” explained Harvard Business School professor John Deighton. “Brand meanings and associations arise as a kind of found consensus between what the marketer wants and what the consumer has use for.”<sup>3</sup>

The competencies of communications professionals—people who work regularly with the media and with industry analysts—may be most transferable to the conversation strategy areas. Still, many communications experts need to communicate more conversationally and get off the corporate-speak bandwagon. They must learn to go beyond promoting and messaging to help people understand.

Danish organic grocer Aarstiderne is one of just a few companies to have a conversation department, which came about when marketing and customer service merged into one organization. Here's a blog posting from Annette Hartvig Larsen explaining why the company established a conversation department and how it works.

Hi:

We have one . . . a Conversations Department. And it didn't start on a nice planned background. We had all read the *Cluetrain Manifesto*, and were much inspired by it, but also saw it not working out as planned at all.

Our customer service was exactly as old-fashioned as the rest of them and not really having conversations with anybody, but struggling to keep the inbox (3,000 e-mails a week) down. And we were still a start-up—only 4 years old!! So we went back to some of the “methods” we never thought we would have to use in our “soft” business of delivering organic vegetables to the doorsteps of 30,000 Danish households a week. We changed the whole staff of 10 people and moved it from the province to Copenhagen.

Why?

- to hire a staff of actors, students, academics, guides, chefs, etc. (eager to communicate and learn about people and food and to match the customers who are mostly from the city)
  - to be able to do short term contracts—only 2 years, then you move on within, or to the next company (no “burnouts” thank you.)
  - to start from scratch by de-learning all the bad-corporate habits and introducing the cluetrain-be-yourself-courage (or maybe we hired people who didn’t have them?)
  - to start up an uncensored forum on the Web site and know that there were people able to answer everything (that one was tough, everybody “hears” everything on a forum!)
  - to get closer to our goal of being a transparent company (should be nothing to hide in vegetables and farming?! we ran an Open Space on transparency and one on conversations, including all 100 employees).
- Did it work? So far we think so! The Conversations Department is a fun and tough place to work, everybody’s engaged, conscious and very responsible (that’s often the result of giving freedom.. ;-)), inbox is kept empty and the customers have access to us, meet a human voice and get an honest answer (uh, it hurts some times).

Bottom line for us I guess is: Hire people who really want to do conversations, insist on it when you sooner or later are tempted

to compromise . . . and yes management must be in on it, it's part of a culture they have to lead!

And this task will never be done and we're constantly challenged by customers and by ourselves. It's sort of a hard-fun-thing doing business this way, but we certainly don't want to go back and it probably keeps us in the right colour of water. :-)

Long story—hope it's useful to someone.

Best; Annette, managing director of Aarstiderne (the seasons)

<http://www.aarstiderne.com>

### **Two-way involvement programs: Creating conversation channels**

The purpose of managing two-way involvement programs is to create channels for conversations, such as blogs, customer communities, town hall meetings, podcasts, customer salons, conferences, and Webinars.

Want to show that products and services are “world-class, vital, revolutionary, and transformational?” Make the top product developers, or the R&D chief, the CEO, or your best customer available for live call-in sessions where interested customers and prospects can “Ask the Experts.” Give away advice, offer help, and address customers’ biggest concerns. They’ll appreciate you for it. Then record each session and offer them as podcasts or as re-broadcast programs from the company’s Web site.

Want to be known as a thought leader on a particular topic? Write a blog providing advice, ideas, and observations. And respond personally to people who post talk-back comments.

Go a step further and create debate teams around an industry topic. Have the teams face off at the next big industry conference and let the audience keep score. This type of involvement is much more interesting than the usual forty-minute presentation followed by a lame question-and-answer session.

Want to make sure the next new product doesn't bomb? (An astounding 80 percent of new products fail, according to *New Product News*.) Go to the online customer community and talk about product ideas with customers, asking them for advice and input. A consumer products company recently asked its customer community about a new product concept the internal marketing folks thought was a home run. The community's reaction, “We'd rather eat glass than use that product.” Millions saved—as well as a few people's jobs.

Want to help noncompetitive customers learn from and help one another? (This also helps you see what's really on their minds.) Organize regional customer gatherings to discuss industry trends and problems; think of it as an informal, intimate salon rather than a “present at you” conference. This isn't a new idea but one that, done right, is appealing and useful to both contributors and the company.

Back in 1727, Benjamin Franklin organized this type of group and it lasted for forty years, later becoming known as the American Philosophical Club. Franklin's Junto, as it was initially called, brought together practical men of different backgrounds who were willing to help one another and the community. Genuine interest in ideas was the heart of the Friday night discussions. All members had to contribute and all were discouraged from talking “overmuch.”

Digital marketing professionals and specialized digital marketing agencies are most quickly evolving into marketing involvement managers. Most participate in their own Web conversations through blogging and message boards, and as mem-

bers of various communities. So they understand both the value of involvement and how it works.

Important competencies mirror those of Franklin and his Junta friends, including conversational communications skills, interviewing skills, intellectual curiosity, creativity, and a genuine passion about networked communications trends and possibilities.

Watch for radio and television producers and on-air talent to move into the corporate world as marketers develop more podcasts, Webinars, and other talk-show-like formats. These professionals know what makes a good story, how to conduct interviews that spark dialogue, and how to get people interested in participating in the conversation. They also know how to:

- \* Write for the ear, and, in the case of television veterans, use visuals to engage people in the story
- \* Work fast, quickly responding to changes and feedback
- \* Focus on success in telling the story in ways people will understand rather than worrying needlessly on perfecting the words, the headline, the visuals, or the narration

**Executive communications: Coaching for clarity, understanding, and conversations**

Executives' influence on employees, customers, investors, and partners is formidable. When they talk, people listen and make judgments about the company.

If CEO talk is muddled, people may assume that the company's strategy is unclear, that the speaker doesn't really care about the audience, or perhaps that the CEO isn't an especially effective leader. Coaching executives to be effective conversa-

tionalists—not speech givers or message deliverers—is hugely important because of these judgments.

In reporting how CEOs' meandering, unintelligible conversations during analyst calls affect stock prices, Landon Thomas of the *New York Times* wrote, "More than ever, investors are holding chief executives accountable for their ability to articulate a clear and compelling vision. . . . A garbled sentence or a muddled articulation of a corporate strategy can not only mar the public profile of a chief executive but also prompt a run on the stock."<sup>4</sup> And it can diminish customer confidence and trust.

Executives' remarks during analyst calls, conference speeches, and sales meetings are increasingly being recorded so that a wider audience can access the remarks after the event. As a result, executives' conversational skills are especially important. They don't need to be Churchillian orators or charismatic characters like Richard Branson or Herb Kelleher, but they do need to be able to convey ideas in clear, interesting, and genuine ways.

Whether the executive communications function should be in marketing or whether it should report directly to the CEO is up for debate. What is not in question is that executive communications needs to be tightly connected with insights and conversational strategy. Those market insights, points of view, and stories are exactly what an executive needs to know to be a more effective conversationalist.

For example, when Chuck Schwab was preparing for a media briefing tour, he went to the Schwab community of high net worth investors and asked them for *their* opinions about the investing climate.

Executive communications' role as adviser and coach to executives is more important than the role of ghostwriter and

speechwriter. Executive communications professionals need to work closely with the conversation strategist to shape platform ideas that the executives believe in and like to talk about. They also provide the supporting facts, stories, and sound bites that the CEOs can build into their thinking and conversations.

Executive communications directors must be respected by the executives with whom they work. Otherwise, the executives won't listen to them or heed their advice. The most effective executive communications professionals:

- \* Understand business, the company, and the market
- \* Know how to synthesize complex information into concise, clear conversational ideas
- \* Understand how to coach executives to find a style that is comfortable and genuine, that informs and inspires
- \* Are intelligent, self-confident, direct, well-read, and know how to push without being pushy

CEOs are more likely to adopt a conversational style when they:

- \* Talk about ideas and points of view about which they are passionate (this is why I recommend involving them in point-of-view brainstorming workshops)
- \* Have a chance to talk about points of view during informal conversations with trusted members of their executive teams, getting comfortable with the ideas and taking ownership before going “public”
- \* Have relevant metaphors, examples, and stories that they can tap into—the more the better
- \* Focus conversations around no more than three points of view

- \* Are comfortable *not* using business and industry jargon, just plain-speak

Remind the CEO that the purpose of communicating with any group is to help foster understanding, not to preach, tell, sell, or lecture. After an analyst meeting or customer speech, the critique is simply, “Did the executive help people understand that idea? What worked in creating understanding—and what didn’t?”

Executives spend up to 80 percent of their day talking, according to research from the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College. “Estimates from research conducted at the Tuck School suggest that relative to total work time, the time spent communicating [with constituencies] by CEOs is between 50 and 80 percent, on average, across all CEOs at the Fortune 500 companies.”<sup>5</sup>

Many CEOs are natural conversationalists. Most need more insights, ideas, metaphors, and stories to draw from. That’s the role of executive communications.

### **Public relations: Right skills, wrong box?**

The role of public relations is either going to expand greatly in this conversational marketing world, or it’s going to disappear. It certainly won’t stay the same.

Although the concept of public relations is “relating to publics,” the function has largely turned into a one-way press release and publicity factory. There’s a whole lot of “messaging” for the media, but not much creativity in generating new conversational communications approaches.

Around 1996, when the Web was taking off, I predicted that

public relations would be the profession to lead online communications. After all, the Web wasn't meant to be an online brochure or a Flash advertisement. Who better to manage this new media than public relations professionals? As it turned out, I was wrong.

Public relations mostly stayed in its box, while advertising, direct-response, and new media types took ownership of the Web. Web communications was viewed as a marketing function, not a public relations function because the view was that PR people are just the publicity people.

PR is at another crossroads today as conversational communications channels such as podcasts and blogs come online. The fundamental communications skills of public relations people are especially relevant, but these professionals need to climb out of their media relations and employee communications boxes if they want to expand their roles and their value to the organization. Using technology to automate conventional practices—automatic mailings, publicity monitoring, and competitor quote pickup—won't increase the value of the function. The greater goal is building understanding and relationships.

So far, overall these professionals have been laggards in new digital channels and new digital communications techniques such as digital storytelling or blogging. And, if reading press releases is any evidence, they're some of the worst corporate-speak offenders. (Do real people ever actually say what is in press release quotes?)

Also surprising is that a new cadre of word-of-mouth marketing specialists are taking on word-of-mouth communications, which traditionally had its roots in public relations.

Public relations executives and organizations should consider

the following items to become more relevant and add greater value:

- \* Look at the profession through a new lens, redefining its purpose as helping all the company’s “publics” better understand its purpose, positions, and value.
- \* Hire broadcast journalists to help find stories, tell stories, and help you learn how to write to be said, not write to be read.
- \* Start a peer-to-peer media relations approach. If a CEO thinks that *Forbes* should be interested in the company, why not have the CEO directly contact a reporter and talk about the idea?
- \* Learn from Nancy Reagan: Just say no. Public relations people need to push back on internal folks, like product management directors or sales directors who want them to “get press” for ideas that aren’t press-worthy. Instead, suggest alternative ways to help the right people, such as customers or reviewers, learn about the products. You know what reporters are interested in; you are not failing if you refuse to push a bad idea on someone who doesn’t want it.
- \* Become story gatherers versus case study writers: take on the responsibility for finding and telling interesting customer stories. The stories shouldn’t be conventional case study exhortations about all the benefits the customer realized from using your product, but rather slices of what happened that were especially surprising, unconventional, or rewarding.
- \* Get to know the people who influence your customers, and build relationships with them. Some may be journalists and writers; others are likely to be consultants, analysts, association executives, academics in your field, and large companies that affect industry practices.

- \* Take back word-of-mouth marketing.
- \* Hang out with the insights people.

### **Sales communications: Beyond product collateral and PowerPoint decks**

Dave, a top-performing sales rep of a large global consulting firm, told me that he constantly scans articles, clips out interesting stories, and sends them via overnight mail to prospects with a \$10 bill and a note that basically says, “Thought you’d be interested in this. Can we meet next week for coffee to talk more about what it might mean to your business?” (The \$10 is for the coffee.)

Dave makes six figures as a sales executive. So why is he monitoring news in order to have something to talk about with prospects? Imagine the thousands of Daves doing the same sort of monitoring every day. Should Dave be doing this? Or should sales support? The answer is somebody needs to own it because sales reps are always looking for new ideas to talk about with prospects. If sales reps don’t get ideas from marketing or sales support, they use their own time to find the ideas. They know they need something interesting to talk about to get a meeting with a prospect.

Sales executives of a large software company told me that customers want to talk about new trends and insights in their vertical industries, but most of the information they get from marketing is about new product features and benefits—nothing that gives them a reason to meet with a client to talk about new ideas.

Sales representatives are crying out for fresh new things to talk about.

The role of sales communications is to work with the conversational strategy to:

- \* Provide the points of view, stories, and anecdotes to sales reps
- \* Coach sales executives on how to engage customers in conversations around the points of view
- \* Learn what is and isn't working in sales and how sales communications can help improve the sales process
- \* Continue to provide valuable competitive intelligence, product, pricing, and service information
- \* Listen closely to sales reps and customers for interesting views, stories, and language that can be shared with others in the company

The role of adviser and coach is particularly important. Most sales-oriented organizations still think that the primary job of sales support is talking about the product and company, instead of helping sales reps find ways to engage in conversations that build relationships and help them better understand the prospects' real issues.

For example, EMC, the \$8.2 billion storage systems company, recently posted a job opening on Monster.com for a senior-level principal marketing program manager to work as a liaison between product marketing and field sales. Some of the criteria recognize the need for two-way conversations, while others show how rooted companies are in pushing their product messages. Here are some excerpts from the posting. Note that the second bullet is the old, rather unrealistic push approach, while the third begins to recognize the need for conversations beyond product:

- \* "Responsibilities: advisory-level member of the team within Field Marketing that focus on Products and Services or Core Messages for Enterprise, Commercial, and/or partners"

- \* “Create, develop, version, and integrate EMC product and core messages and content for customers, partners, and internal audiences worldwide”
- \* “Initiate strategy discussions with customers and go beyond knowledge transfer to influence/change customer perspectives and buying criteria”
- \* “Develop sales positioning for field use in one-on-one discussions with customers, to take them from zero to compelling in minutes”

Most sales reps, particularly those selling complex products or services, know that you can't build understanding from zero to compelling in a few minutes. Deals happen based on many conversations about the customer's needs, how the company's products can address those needs, and about beliefs that help the prospect feel confident in the company's ability to provide more value than its competitors.

The best competence for someone running sales communications is field sales experience. It's difficult for marketing people who have never sold to understand the relationship-building process in selling, the types of information and ideas needed to support different selling situations, and different phases of the deal development relationship.

The other important competences include:

♦ *The ability to analyze emerging trends, insights, and company strategies*—and to know what it means to customers; this includes framing the information within the customer's context and showing what's most relevant to them.

♦ *Strong oral and communications skills.* Straight talk, plain-speak communications skills include the ability to listen, synthe-

size complex information, and communicate it clearly without overly simplifying it. The best sales communications professional doesn’t have a PowerPoint addiction; he or she helps sales reps talk about ideas.

♦ *The willingness to get dirty.* By this, I mean the willingness to go out on sales calls and talk—really talk—to customers.

### **Advertising: Talk about creative**

The best advertising engages and activates us to do something more—pass the ad around to friends because it’s so fresh and funny; click on links to learn more; tack a print ad to our bulletin board so it stays fresh in our mind.

Not long ago, a friend e-mailed me a link to the new Honda Civic ad where a chorus sings and hums the sounds of the new Civic—zooming down the highway, opening the sunroof, driving over cobblestones, screeching around a tight corner—as the video shows the car in action. Every few seconds the camera pans to the people in the chorus “singing” the car sounds. Very cool.

So cool that in one week alone almost one million people went to the Honda site to watch the Civic “choir” ad. That’s right. One week, almost a million people, and it was virtually free media for Honda. Why? Because the folks who created the ad found a visually and aurally compelling way to involve consumers. More important, unlike so many of the car ads running on television today, this one highlighted the automobile’s features: speed, reliable shocks, great handling. The Civic choir ad represented a great balance between substance and style.

Similarly, Sony released its Bravia commercial over the Web

and millions clicked to watch the small movie capturing the sight of 250,000 multicolored super balls bouncing down the streets of San Francisco, set against the beautiful soundtrack of José González's song "Heartbeat."

Advertising isn't dead, but it's evolving from yakking at us to involving us. We don't want to be interrupted by it, but if the content is engaging, we will choose to watch it, maybe even send it to others.

We'll choose to see ads through many more channels than television or print, most notably online, on our mobile phones, or on our portable music devices. But the advertising has to help us in some way—inform us about something we want to know. For example, a text message stating that cashmere sweaters at Saks are going on sale tomorrow. Or, it should entertain us, like the Bravia and Civic ads.

Advertising will need more creative short filmmakers; copywriters who can capture an idea that is succinct enough for the smallest mobile phone screen; product designers who know how to turn the product into the ad (think creative packaging); and creative conceptualists who understand how to involve people in the advertising experience. The creative has to be so good that people choose to be involved.

**Technology: Elevating the marketing  
chief information officer**

Marketing has evolved into a new trinity: strategy, conversations, and technology. That's why every marketing organization needs its own chief information officer.

Technology has created the channels for direct dialogue between consumers and companies, allowing us to connect and con-

verse with customers and prospects all over the world. Technology has automated marketing functions, customer search, and information-gathering approaches, behavioral and search-specific advertising techniques, and research and insight-monitoring techniques. Technology has opened up a new world of collaborative, participatory ways to learn, market, and buy. And there are many more changes coming.

The chief information officer needs a seat at the table to help shape strategy; creative, conversational approaches; analytics; process streamlining; and idea development.

In addition to a strategic technology leader, marketing organizations need technologists who have the skills to produce programs in cost-effective ways, who know how to use technology to pinpoint the information preference and behavioral patterns of target customers and who can tap into the many, many emerging digital channels.

**Rituals: New ways of working to build conversations into the organizational culture**

Here are a few approaches that can help people begin to build conversational marketing practices into the organization’s everyday operations.

***1. Require digital stories at annual or quarterly planning meetings and as part of new product plans***

Rather than PowerPoint presentations, use digital stories to kick off new product introductions, sales campaigns, or change programs. Require small teams of two to three people to produce a two-minute digital story (with voiceover, images, and a soundtrack) about why they think a new product, program, or

acquisition is especially valuable or relevant. The storytelling format forces people to tell, not show. Rather than present a bunch of data, a good storyteller finds what's most relevant among all the benefits, writes down what she'll say, uses images to help convey ideas, speaks in the first person using everyday plain-speak, and taps into genuine beliefs. Discussions about different teams' stories, as well as their points of view, will help all team members more fully understand the value of the new product, the program, or the plan. Also, the digital stories themselves lay a foundation for communications and advertising programs.

## ***2. Rethink your hiring and orientation processes***

Start changing job descriptions, interviewing approaches, and hiring processes to find talent that understands conversational marketing *and* has conversational marketing competencies. Create new interviewing guides to probe candidates' conversational marketing skills. Some qualities to look for include the following:

- \* Intellectual curiosity, interested in ideas and people beyond those in the company or industry; involved with and understands new conversational channels, like social networks
- \* Voracious readers and observers
- \* Ability to cut to the core of an issue or situation and diagnose causes of the problem
- \* Creative thinking; ability to develop pragmatic ways to solve problems
- \* Outstanding oral and written communications skills, including listening skills
- \* Perspective and an ability to focus on what matters most to achieving the right outcomes; focusing on success versus perfection; knowing when to cut losing initiatives

- \* Confidence and self-esteem
- \* Fearlessness
- \* Collaborative approach to work: open to other people’s ideas, prefers to work with a galaxy of talented people rather than being the star
- \* A sense of humor and playfulness; we all still have the minds of our five-year-old selves
- \* Ability to stay above the fray to see the big picture and emerging patterns; an astute observer, if you will

“One of the reasons many people fail to fully appreciate what’s changing is that they’re down at the ground level, lost in a thicket of confusing, conflicting data,” says Gary Hamel, founder of Strategos and visiting professor of strategic and international management at the London Business School. “You have to make time to step back and ask yourself, ‘What’s the big story that cuts across all these little facts?’”<sup>6</sup>

One way to probe a candidate’s conversational marketing competencies is to ask him to come to one of the interviews prepared to talk about his point of view on marketing or the company’s industry. This helps to assess the candidate’s knowledge—and his interest in the job because of the homework he’ll need to do. And the conversation about his point of view will provide insights into how well he thinks, listens, and asks questions. It also helps to see how comfortable he is during conversations. Is he open to other people’s views—or does he adamantly defend his perspective and remain closed to their opinions?

For orientation, share stories and lore about the company, explain the thinking behind the company’s point of view, set up orientation programs where new marketing people immediately meet with sales reps, customers, and all the “other” audiences that are so important to a marketing person’s success.

### 3. *Walk the talk*

At every monthly or quarterly planning meeting, make sure the agenda reflects new conversational marketing practices, such as:

- \* What are we hearing from customers?
- \* What are the three most surprising insights from our customer communities?
- \* What new topic is the market beginning to talk about and why?
- \* How can we talk about our point of view in new ways this quarter?
- \* What should we add to our Nine Block Conversation Planner this quarter?
- \* What are the most interesting new patterns we're seeing?
- \* How are the new stories we've been hearing relevant to our ongoing conversations with customers?

Recognize and reward people who are trying new approaches—listening, involving customers, using straight talk, finding interesting new points of view, and uncovering new stories.

Swap out people who can't make the adjustment. Show that to succeed in the organization, you must be willing to learn and adapt to the right new skills.

### 4. *Bring in more outside talent*

The fastest way to force organizational change is to bring in outside talent specialized in these new conversational marketing approaches. This external talent will help you adopt new practices more quickly, help train your internal people, and introduce new energy and passion.

### 5. *Use your training budget to develop conversational marketing skills*

Use your training budget to create a conversational marketing boot-camp program for everyone in the marketing or-

ganization. Some training programs to consider include the following:

- \* Uncovering and using points of view
- \* Digital storytelling
- \* New “write to speak” writing skills
- \* Online customer community management and facilitation
- \* How to listen, really listen
- \* Cultivating conversations as a core marketing process
- \* Creating online salons
- \* How to see emerging marketing patterns using techniques like situational awareness mapping, consumer-generated media analysis, and customer data analytics

Conversational marketing isn’t a revolution, it’s an evolution. Many existing marketing skills and practices are quite relevant. Most marketing roles need to be changed approximately 45 degrees, eliminating some practices, adding others. All need to be viewed through the lens of the customer: What do customers want to know and how do *they* want to be involved with your company? If you invite customers in and open up the dialogue, they will show you what needs to be done. (Or not.)

Last, rather than asking, “What should we be doing?” or “What is the right organizational structure?” focus on how to do things in new ways. Marketing’s role is to find new ways to better understand customers and to help customers understand our companies in ways that are interesting to them.