

**O CUSTOMER, WHERE ART THOU?**

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## O CUSTOMER, WHERE ART THOU?

### *ABSTRACT*

*Today's consumers are marketing literate. They are acquainted with the tricks of the trade. They can deconstruct advertising campaigns in double-quick time and are fatigued by marketers' fake familiarity, bogus benevolence, pseudo concern, friendly firesales. Cognizant that consumers are cognizant of them, marketing executives have responded to this second-guessing game in four main ways – with irony, via nostalgia, through inclusion and by means of mediability. Taken together, these responses represent an alternative to the “modern” marketing concept of Drucker, Levitt and Kotler, one that is more appropriate to our postmodern, postironic, post-Enron epoch.*

The customer, they say, is always right wing – conservative, reactionary, stuck-in-the-mud. A cavalcade of initially disdained innovations, from frozen food, ATMs and the 747 to CNN, *Seinfeld* and the Sony Walkman, attests to consumers' incorrigible inertia (Christensen 1997). More than twenty years ago, for example, Hayes and Abernathy (1980) famously complained that customers envision their future needs in terms of existing products, processes, markets or prices. And many maintain they still do (e.g. Earls 2002; Hamel 2000; Jones 2000; Shorris 1994).

Companies too are chary of change, nowhere more so than in their attitude to consumers. Despite decades of denunciation by “forget the customer” ideologues (Brown 2001a; Martin 1995) and ample evidence that customer-orientation inhibits innovation (Dru 1996, 2002), managers' modus operandi remains as customer-led as ever. If anything, in fact, customer focus has *increased* through time, as the rhetoric of “satisfaction” has been replaced by “delight,” “rapture,” “enchantment” and analogous extrusions from the superlatives foundry (Kotler *et al* 2002; McKenna 2002; Peters *et al* 2003).

Corporate conservatism, of course, is no bad thing, especially in times of geo-political turmoil and socio-economic uncertainty. For every product or service breakthrough, furthermore, there is a brimming dumpster of broken dreams and DOA discards. Yet change is always with us, late and soon. The tectonic plates of buyer and seller are constantly shifting and many consumer seismologists maintain that a major realignment is currently underway (Firat and Dholakia 1998; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Solomon 2003). It remains to be seen where this adjustment will register on the “Dichter Scale” of consumer desire and corporate delivery (Shakar 2001), but it is always better to be prepared than be perplexed.

### **THE AXIS OF EQUAL**

According to prominent marketing geomorphologists (Grant 2000; Locke 2001; Mitchell 2001), three particularly significant fissures scar the contorted strata of contemporary consumer culture, fissures that have deepened significantly in the decades since Peter Drucker (1954) deposited the “modern,” customer-oriented marketing concept. The first of these pertains to the marketing concept itself. While the concept may have worked when customer-focus was a rarity – when customer care conferred competitive advantage – that happy state of affairs no longer obtains. Every organization is customer-led, or claims to be. Every corporation converses with consumers, be it *fortissimo* or *sotto voce*. Every mission statement promises to keep the customer, if not exactly smitten, as close to lovestruck as makes no difference. Every MBA-bandoleered marketing executive has read Kotler from cover to cover, can PEST, SWOT or P with the best of them, and, as the weapons of mass

market destruction have proliferated, finds it increasingly difficult to protect the company's territory, secure its customers, and destroy its suicidal, price-slashing competitors (Ridderstrale and Nordstrom 2000).

Alongside this customer-centric congruity, a second axis of equal is discernible. And that concerns product parity. As many commentators have pointed out, we live in a world of benchmarked Baldridgery, where all products, services, brands, experiences – whatever – are pretty much functionally equivalent and there is very little to choose between them in terms of performance (Drawbaugh 2001; Keller 2002; Ries and Ries 2002). Some offerings, admittedly, are better than others, but few are inadequate and most are interchangeable, branding notwithstanding. “There is no such thing as a substandard car nowadays,” says automobile monitoring organization J.D. Power (quoted in Earls 2002, p. 62). The same is true of colas, computers, cameras, chisels, chinos, cornflakes, coffee makers, credit cards, cell phones, compact disk players, CRM software suppliers, creativity-espousing consultants and so forth. It sometimes seems that more-of-the-same has mated with much-of-a-muchness and produced a litter of pale, if perfect, imitations. Stepford brands.

To be sure, identikit products and services are par for the course, as is selling them in a customer-centric, 4P's packaged, me-too manner. The real wrinkle in these seen-one-seen-em-all days is the so-called “sophisticated consumer” (Hogg 2003; Mitchell 2001; Piercy 2002). Conservative or not, infuriating or otherwise, today's consumers are very canny, very picky, very choosy, very savvy, very smart, especially when it comes to marketing. Indeed, the thing that most distinguishes contemporary consumers from those that witnessed the birth of the modern marketing concept, is

their vastly increased knowledge of marketers and the marketing system. We may know a lot more about customers, thanks to ever more sophisticated research methods, from focus groups to factor analysis, but they know an *awful* lot more about us.

For example, when Vance Packard published *The Hidden Persuaders* half a century ago, consumers were deeply shocked, and not a little intrigued, by the mendacious machinations of marketing types (Brown 2001b). Today, however, they are fully *au fait* with marketers' Machiavellian maneuvers. An estimated 50% of the US population has attended a marketing course of some kind. Television channels and radio stations are chock-a-block with programs and stories about marketing, consumption, shopper psychology and all the rest. Glossy magazines routinely appraise their readers of the rationale behind retail store design and the rebranding exercise *du jour*. Sunday newspaper supplements are replete with reflections on, and deconstructions of, breaking advertising campaigns, as well as industry gossip, impending pitches and account executive shenanigans. Hollywood movies regularly make use of advertising/marketing/retail store settings – *What Women Want*, *Crazy People*, *Clerks*, *High Fidelity*, *Scenes From a Mall*, *You've Got Mail*, *Working Girl*, *Soul Man*, *Pretty Woman*, *Jerry Maguire*, *The Good Girl*, *How to Get Ahead in Advertising* – and, in so doing, reveal the inner workings of the institutions concerned. These inner workings may well be overdramatized caricatures, but they nonetheless raise the general public's overall marketing consciousness (Rushkoff 1999).

What this all means is that today's consumers are wise to the wiles of marketers. They possess a "marketing reflex," an inbuilt early warning system that detects

incoming commercial messages – especially formulaic commercial messages – and automatically deletes them. “Consumers are like roaches,” claim advertising gurus Jonathan Bond and Richard Kirshenbaum (1998, p.92). “We spray them with marketing and for a time it works. Then inevitably they develop an immunity, a resistance.” This is particularly true of Generations X, Y and Z, those who suckled at the marketing teat from birth and speak Brandsperanto like a native. Innumerable empirical studies reveal that they are perfectly capable of examining, evaluating, expropriating and eviscerating marketing campaigns (O’Donohoe 1997, 2000; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Solomon 2003; Stevens *et al* 1999). They no longer read ads innocently, but look behind them, as it were, to see what the advertiser’s up to. They are conscious of the pitcher behind the pitch, the producer behind the product, the campaigner behind the campaign.

More pertinently perhaps, they are conscious of the marketing concept (Earls 2002). They know the customer is always right. They are aware that marketers are duty bound to do their bidding, in theory at least. They are cognizant that customer satisfaction and, ideally, loyalty are the drivers of corporate competitive advantage, the keys to the kingdom of Excellence, Added Value, World Class Performance or whatever the managerial metric of the moment happens to be. True, some suspect that marketers’ much-publicized concern about “sophisticated” customers is itself a devious attempt to part fools from their money in double-quick time (“you guys are much too smart for us simple marketing folk!”). But most know the marketing score, or think they do, and exploit their elevated position with impunity. Unlike the steadily dwindling Greatest Generation, who were in their prime when the modern marketing concept burst on the business scene, today’s consumers were reared on

advertising, brought up on branding and trademarked from birth. Whatever else they are remembered for, they are and always will be, Generation ®.

The marketing-savvy sensibilities of Generation ® are exemplified by the recent rash of anti-capitalist protests, which not only hold whole cities to ransom but unfailingly hoist marketers by their own promotional petard (Callinicos 2003; Hertz 2001; Klein 2000, 2002). Although it is easy to dismiss the battlers in Seattle, Turin, Quebec, Porto Alegre *et al* as a small group of muddle-headed malcontents, who wear Nike sneakers while throwing rocks at NikeTown, the reality is that they are dictating their antagonists' agendas. They are calling multinational organizations to account. They are using their strength as brand buyers to shape the policy of brand suppliers. They are targeting the most ostentatiously customer-oriented organizations, like Starbucks, because they know that such companies are required to respond to their concerns (Table 1). What's more, they are fully conversant in the corporate argot of NPD, USP, JIT, TQM, CRM, and the latter-day array of management ACRONYMS (Attempts to Capture Recommendations and Observations in Names You Memorize Successfully). As their snappy slogans and publicity stunts attest – “Trade Not Aid,” “People Before Profits,” “Another World is Possible,” “Buy Nothing Day” etc. – they use the tools and techniques of marketing to castigate the tool makers and technique developers (Lasn 1999).

## **MARKETING TO MARKETING-SAVVY CONSUMERS**

In these discombobulating circumstances, where consumers have seen it all, several times over, and are less than impressed by phoney friendship, ersatz obsequiousness,

or bogus claims to have the customer's best interest at heart, marketers are required to rethink their approach and reorient themselves to today's streetwise, mart-smart, ad-aware multitudes. They have done so in four main ways – *irony*, *nostalgia*, *inclusion* and *mediability* – which, taken together, suggest an alternative, “postmodern” model of marketing practice and philosophy.

### ***Irony: Only the Parodied Survive***

Formally defined as saying one thing while meaning the opposite, irony communicates through inversion (Childers and Hentzi 1995). It works best when both parties know how the other ticks and can see through a message's surface scorn to the solicitous subtext. It is ideally suited to a situation where marketers know about consumers, and consumers know about marketers, and marketers know consumers know about marketers, and consumers know marketers know consumers know about marketers, and... Although it constantly teeters on the brink of infinite regress, artfully employed irony enables marketers to second guess the second guessers, turn the tables on the table turners, and adapt their sales pitches to the sales pitch savvy.

Ironic marketing, to be sure, is not new. Bill Bernbach's classic 1960 ad for the VW Beetle – Lemon! – is generally considered the locus classicus of insult-the-product-make-the-sale playfulness (Frank 2000; Shakar 2001). But it has really come into its own in recent years, whether it be serial effrontery of the Energizer bunny, or the inspired positioning of Sketchers sneakers as anti-Nike knock-offs, or Madonna's obscene tirade that welcomes audiences to her premium-priced stage shows, or Diet Tango's disdainful declaration to wayward calorie-counters – “You need it because you're weak!” – or, indeed, the latter-day litany of extravagantly ironic brand names

like *I Can't believe It's Not Butter, Too Good to be True*, and, doubtless coming soon to a supermarket shelf near you, *I Can't Believe It's Too Good to Be True*.

Of late, however, the ironic imperative has expanded beyond disparaging the customer and slandering the product to mocking the marketing and caricaturing the commercials. Consider Joe Isuzu. When the phoney car dealer, who wowed American TV audiences in the 1980s, was revived for today's marketing-literate consumers, the ads didn't feature Joe's straight-to-camera pseudo sales pitches of the past. The commercials, rather, focused on Joe's attempts to sell his big budget advertising ideas to Isuzu's marketing VP and Chief Executive Officer. An extra layer of marketing, so to speak, had been added in the interim.

The fabled Budweiser frogs, furthermore, are not straightforward trade characters of anthropomorphic marketing tradition, akin to Tony the Tiger, Charlie the Tuna or Smokin' Joe Camel. To the contrary, they are amphibian thespians, pitch-perfect actors who have captured the Budweiser voice-over account, despite the protestations of ill-mannered iguanas like Louie. The marketing is the message.

In a similar vein, the iconoclastic Italian outfitter Diesel consistently sells itself by means of an anti-selling message. It takes marketing-savvy consumers as a given and seeks to subvert the norms, clichés and customer-centric sanctimoniousness of the marketing industry. So far so Sprite ('Image is Nothing'). But Diesel's denigration is not confined to hypocritical competitors. Duplicitous customers also get their commercial comeuppance. As the company's recent ads featuring brand-bedecked anti-capitalist protesters bear brilliant witness, marketing-savvy anti-marketers are

being used to market an anti-marketing marketing organization to marketing-savvy anti-marketers. Or something like that!

***Nostalgia: Don't Obliterate, Reactivate!***

Thirty years ago, Alvin Toffler predicted that the turn of the millennium would be a time of Future Shock, of ever faster, ever more furious change. In the event, it has turned out to be a time of Retro Shock, of revivals, of remakes, of replicas, of reruns, of re-releases (Brown *et al* 2003). A retro inferno rages and marketers are fanning the flames. All sorts of old-fashioned brands, such as Airstream (caravans), Brylcreem (pomade) and Charlie (cologne) have been adroitly revived and successfully relaunched. Ostensibly extinct trade characters, like Mr Whipple, Morris the Cat, and Ms Chiquita Banana, are cavorting on the supermarket shelves once more. Ancient commercials are being re-broadcast (Ovaltine, Alka-Seltzer); time-worn slogans are being resuscitated (Britney Spears sings "Come Alive" for Pepsi); and long-established products are being re-packaged in their original, eye-popping liveries (Necco wafers, Sun Maid raisins). Even automobiles and detergents, long the acme of marketing's new-and-improved, washes-whiter, we-have-the-technology worldview are getting in on the retrospective act, as the success of Chrysler's P.T. Cruiser and Color Protection Tide daily remind us.

Needless to say, there has been much debate about this latter-day yester-fest. It has been attributed to the inexorable aging of the Baby Boom generation, who are increasingly inclined to pine for the gone but not forgotten goods and services of their dear departed salad days. It is seen as a side-effect of 21<sup>st</sup> century life, the stresses, strains and sheer pace of which are accompanied by a countervailing yearning to chill

out, slow down, hang loose, and look back briefly on simpler, safer, seemingly somnambulant times. More prosaically perhaps, it has been ascribed to the inordinate costs of doing business. At a time when national product launches can run south of \$100 million, with no guarantee of success, reissuing an old product is considerably cheaper and much less risky than starting from scratch. In such circumstances, it is no surprise that many companies are frantically sifting through their Growth Share archives in the hope that yesterday's question marks may turn into tomorrow's stars (Brown 2001b).

There's more to nostalgia, however, than scraping the bottom of the old brand barrel. In today's cynical, skeptical, so-sue-me society, nostalgia is a surreptitious way of slipping under consumers' anti-marketing radar. Nostalgic marketing campaigns not only carry customers back to the past, but to an idealized past that has been expunged of today's bad bits – drugs, pollution, terrorism, malfeasance and, not least, marketing. Nostalgic appeals succeed because they evoke an era before marketing was everywhere, before advertising was ubiquitous, before the call of the telesalesperson echoed across the land, before everything was completely, crassly, contemptibly commercialized. This marketing-free epoch never actually existed, admittedly. But when present-day sales pitches are refracted through the perfect, purifying prism of the past, even today's most jaded consumers can find themselves transported to the uxorious embrace of yesteryear, transfixed in the amber of other days (Harris 2000; Leadbeater 2002).

Nostalgia, in short, softens the hard sell. It is surely no coincidence that sectors traditionally associated with fast-talking, close-the-deal, watch-your-wallet flim-flam,

such as real estate, financial services, and automobiles, have been swift to mount the retromarketing bandwagon. Realtors routinely boast of their illustrious heritage; financial service providers consistently claim to have been serving the community for generations; and auto manufacturers increasingly take their cue from a faux-golden age of motoring, when traffic congestion was unheard of, gas prices were inconsequential, and an arboretum of billboards (for automobiles) didn't block the beautiful view.

***Inclusion: You Hawking to Me?***

Embrace-the-enemy is a well-established means of neutralizing opponents, or disarming them at least. In a situation where wary consumers call the marketing shots, recruiting them as corporate reservists makes a great deal of sense. It is better, is it not, to have people inside the promotional tent, peeping out, than outside peeping in, so to speak. Conscripting the consumer, indeed, is one of the most striking marketing trends of recent years (Dignam 2002). Granted, this deputization process is usually presented as a new and improved approach to customer care. It comes complete with loyalty cards, membership privileges, 1-800 hotlines, bells-and-whistles websites, virtual sales representatives, periodically convened consumer panels, do-it-yourself customization systems, and hubba-hubba-hubba homecomings – three days of peace, music, and brand bonding – but inclusion is a brilliantly effective means of rounding up an unpaid posse of product proselytizers. Proselytizers, moreover, whose word-of-mouth pronouncements are much more powerful, much more believable, much more credible than paid forms of corporate communication, be they mail shots or media spots.

Now, it almost goes without saying that Harley-Davidson is the alpha and omega of inclusive marketing. The fact that Milwaukee's finest can successfully sell a Hog-scented deodorant speaks volumes about its value adding acumen, if not the personal hygiene of Sturgis-bound brandfans (Hill and Rifkin 1999; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Harley, however, is just one among many astute consumer incorporators. Absolut, Apple, *Star Wars*, Saturn, Versace, Virgin, Disney, Danone, Red Bull, Chicago Bulls, Linux, Levi's, Nokia, Nike and numerous others are masters of inveigling, inculcation and insidious indoctrination.

The apotheosis of customer inclusion is the so-called cult brand (Kozinets 2001). Epitomized by Hello Kitty and Manhattan's Hudson Hotel, these are products or services that consumer cognoscenti elevate beyond the commercial sphere to the realm of the numinous, the indescribable, the sublime. Agnostics, admittedly, are bemused by the thought of someone so in love with their Mazda Miata that they married it. Yes, *married* it (see Wells 2001). From a marketing perspective, nevertheless, promising to love, honor, and obey the brand is just about as good as it gets.

Interestingly, one of the keys to inculcating cult-like devotion among consumers is denial (Brown 2001a). The less available products are, the more precious they become and, as psychological studies of everything from romantic attachments to frat-house initiation ceremonies consistently demonstrate (Cialdini 2001), people only properly appreciate the things they struggle to obtain. In this regard, the waiting lists, limited editions, and one-of-a-kinds that characterize the luxury goods trade – Hermès handbags, Jimmy Choo stilettos, Philippe Patek watches – clearly demonstrate that,

when it comes to “cultivating” consumers, less is often more (Dru 2002). Indeed, withholding inclusion is almost as important as inclusion itself, insofar as those excluded, or on the tantalizing cusp of “membership,” are often the most enthusiastic, least critical, always on product advocates.

***Mediability: It's the Spin, Stupid!***

Product advocates are a very powerful force, provided they're properly directed. Accordingly, much executive time and energy has been devoted to mobilizing the sofa-surfing multitudes and turning them into mean, lean marketing machines. All manner of stealth, buzz, and viral training manuals are now available and, while it would be incorrect to contend that this chatter strategy is marketing's top secret weapon, the planet of guerrilla marketers is surely not far distant (Godin 1999; Levinson 2001; Rosen 2000; Gladwell 2000).

Welcome and necessary though it is, getting people talking about a product or service is insufficient these days, where even talk is questioned and sequestered. The talking about must also be talked about. And that means the media. PR has long been the poor relation of marketing, something that people who don't really understand marketing understand marketing to be. Of late, however, PR has risen to the top of the marketing mix (e.g. Reis and Reis 2002; Zyman 2002), primarily because a front-page picture is worth a thousand words of advertising copy. Not only is it much cheaper than paid forms of communication but, if carefully channeled, PR can turn a modest marketing spend into a mega-budget media monster.

In the summer of 2002, for example, Sony Ericsson hit a media home run for the paltry sum of \$5 million (Ayres 2002; Vranica 2002). Developed by Fathom Communications, part of the Omnicom group, this exemplary example of stealthy stimulation involved sixty actors posing as awe-struck tourists. They were positioned outside leading American landmarks, such as the Empire State Building, and inside exclusive hotels, bars and nightclubs. When the moment was deemed ripe, Fathom's fake tourists approached innocent bystanders and asked them to take their picture. When the innocents agreed, as most of us would, they were handed the latest hi-tech gizmo from the R&D wizards at Sony Ericsson, a combination cell phone and digital camera. When the innocents expressed their admiration for this cutting-edge contribution to the telecommunications revolution, as most of us would, the benefits of the new product were enthusiastically extolled. A snip at \$400. Coming soon to a Circuit City near you. Tell all your innocent friends.

Much to Fathom Communications' delight, the campaign caused an outrage. As the actors were instructed to remain silent about their connection to the manufacturers, unless directly asked, Sony Ericsson's stunt attracted much anti-marketing ire and not a little media coverage. Incensed consumer groups, most notably Ralph Nader's Commercial Alert, attacked the egregious organization behind the dodge. Rival marketers, affronted by the slur on the profession's good name, denounced it as "reprehensible and desperate" (Ayres 2002, p.23). New Yorkers, protective of the city's tourist-friendly image, were reputed to be shocked and dismayed by the depths to which Fathom Communications' had sunk (though if you believe that...). Sony Ericsson, meanwhile, remained happily unrepentant and laughingly counted their column inches all the way to the buzz bank.

Be that as it may, the thing to note about Sony's cellphone fandango is that the controversy centered on the marketing of the product, not the product itself. The buzz was about the buzzing, not the buzzed. It follows that we are not dealing with PR in a conventional sense. It is, rather, a postmodern form of PR, insofar as the centerpiece of the PR strategy is the PR strategy. Mediability, arguably, is a better word for this process, where the ultimate aim is to get marketing-savvy consumers talking about the savvy marketing campaign and the marketing-savvy talking about talked about by marketing-savvy media. These days, it's not enough to have excellent marketing, since everyone else does too, the excellent marketing must be excellently marketed as well.

### **MINI-MARKETING**

Marketing to marketing-savvy consumers, then, involves *Mediability*, *Inclusion*, *Nostalgia*, and *Irony*. MINI, for short. Acronyms, admittedly, are an appalling academic affectation, almost as abject as alliterations, aphorisms and analogous *aide memoires*. Nevertheless, if ever an acronym encapsulated the essence of contemporary marketing, then surely it is MINI. Mini-marketing, as the moniker implies, is characterized by an unembellished ethos, unornamented outlook, and unpretentious approach, somewhat similar to the low-key, no-nonsense, straight-shooting, charisma-free corporate stance spelt out by Jim Collins (2001) in *Good to Great*. It is not about being simply the best, but about being the best, simply. It acknowledges that marketers sell stuff, they don't save the world. It rejects the boastful, bombastic, be-all-and-end-all mindset that permeated marketing during the

Drucker decades. Contrary to what Levitt, Keith, Kotler, McKenna and many more magniloquent marketers maintain, the marketing concept isn't "everything," or "the delivery of a standard of living," or "a Copernican revolution in thinking" or, as some still seem to think, "the solution for a small planet." Such self-aggrandizement may have been necessary when marketing was struggling for acceptance in the executive suite, but that is no longer the case. Everyone can recite the marketing concept, customers included. Customers especially!

Today's customers, indeed, are cognizant that underneath all the servile, solicitous, sanctimonious, socially responsible rhetoric, marketing is ultimately about moving the merchandise. Today's consumers are aware that, in reality, the customer is always right...until such times as business is business. Today's customers are singularly unimpressed by the tricks of the marketing trade, since they know the sanctimonious score. Today's customers appreciate how the promotional game is played and, in a curious way, they prefer the honesty of upfront, forthright, show-me-the-money sales pitches. Good old-fashioned selling doesn't insult their marketing-savvy intelligence, whereas customer-coddling clap-trap from the I-will-always-love-you school of relationship marketing – what Zuboff and Maxmin (2003, p.11) rightly call "manipulative pseudo-intimacy" – is treated with the post-Enron, post-Seattle, post-pensions-fraud, post-excess-executive-compensation contempt it deserves:

For all the talk about how companies are accountable to their consumers, our consumer experience is very different...Requesting a Sky dish if your home is not absolutely standard is to descend into a world better described by Kafka, ending up with being invoiced for an installation that never took place and with subsequent threats of being sued for not paying for a service you never had. To wait in the telephone queue for an Odeon ticket on your mobile and then to lose the signal when you have climbed up from the 12-minute to two-minute position is the ultimate in twenty-first century consumer frustration.

And so it goes on. Being a consumer is an uphill and frequently unpleasant struggle.

(Hutton 2003, p.30)

Mini-marketing is not only less vainglorious than its mega-marketing predecessor, but it is also more authentic. As many authorities have pointed out, authenticity is the watchword of contemporary consumer culture (e.g. Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Lewis 2000). Real food, pure water, fresh air, natural cosmetics, organic farming, traditional remedies, genuine antiques, additive-free snacks, unspoilt holiday resorts, hand-built furniture, hand-made suits, hand-thrown ceramics, hand-crafted collectibles and hand-picked hand-me-downs are the order of the day. Reality TV is all the rage, as *Jerry Springer*, *The Osbournes*, and *Temptation Island* attest. Real movies, using handheld cameras, improvised performances and Dogme dogma, are relieving the tiresome diet of special effects-led blockbusters. Real rock 'n' roll, based on bass, drums and lead or played on scratchy vinyl albums by three-chord thrashers, is making a comeback. Real art is being championed by the Stuckists, an international movement opposed to conceptual artists' reliance on shallow gimmickry, while advocating a return to painting, sketching, engraving, palates, brushes, berets, smocks and all the rest. Reality has even intruded into the otherworldly world of self-help philosophies, as evinced by the dramatic success of "tough love"-disbursing, "authentic self"-espousing, Dr Phil McGraw (Juarez and Figueroa 2002).

A similar reality-led revolt is discernible in marketing. Real brands, those made from natural ingredients or blessed with an illustrious heritage, are especially highly regarded (Kellogg's, Budweiser, Volkswagen etc.). Real market research – research that involves ethnographic in-dwelling with real consumers as they go about their

daily lives – is the method of the moment. Real product testimonials, from real people (or at least real actors playing real people) are increasingly evident, as Apple’s \$50 million “Switch” campaign illustrates. Real television commercials, those that announce “it does exactly what it says on the tin” come as something of a relief after the late-twentieth-century orgy of baffling blipverts, look-at-me jump-cuts and creatives-at-work self-indulgence (Bracewell 2002). Indeed, when the undisputed heavyweight champion of marketing reverts to a by-line that emphasizes its naturalness and relevance – “Coca-Cola...Real” – then it is fair to conclude that authenticity’s time has come.

The ultimate question, however, concerns the marketing concept itself. What is authentic marketing? What does real marketing really mean? What does marketing stand for in our sated, seen-it-all society? Is it the happy-clappy, touchy-feely, missing-you-already commercial credo championed by the customer-coddling contingent? Or is it about MINI marketing (Table 2), a plain yet playful acknowledgement that marketing is about selling stuff, no more, no less, no-nonsense, no megalomania? True, some traditionalists may be aghast at this ostensible regression to hard-sell hucksterism. However, in today’s mart-smart society, the warm-and-fuzzy school of thought is totally discredited. Acknowledging marketing’s fast buck-making motives is more honest, more authentic, more believable than pretending to really, really, *really* care for customers. In our postmodern, post-ironic, post-Worldcom world, consumers can at least trust the fact that they can’t trust marketers. Trust me.

### Table 1: The Baffle in Seattle

The central paradox of today's anti-marketing protests is that the post-Seattle coalition has taken marketers at their word. Marketing has sold the creed of customer orientation so well – *too* well – that consumers now expect to be listened to. For decades, marketing managers have maintained that customer satisfaction comes first, that customers can do no wrong, that the customer's will be done. However, by portraying themselves as customer-centric organizations, and having reneged on the deal (by rapacious acts of environmental despoliation, employee exploitation or whatever), marketers have created a customer-oriented cross for their own backs. So much so, that even the most customer-oriented organizations are feeling the post-Seattle heat. They are feeling it *because* they are more customer-oriented than most. Today's anti-marketing riots are a *consequence* of customer-centricity, not a call for more customer-centricity.

Take Starbucks. From its earliest incarnation as Il Giornale, through the first coffee bars in Seattle, to the 5,200 outlets it operates in 23 countries today, Starbucks has remained completely, totally, absolutely, unapologetically customer centric. Its mission statement aims to “develop enthusiastically satisfied customers all of the time.” Note, not just satisfied, but *enthusiastically satisfied*. Not just now and then, but *all of the time*. As customer-oriented organizations go, Starbucks is as customer-oriented as they come.

Yet, for all its consumer-first fanaticism, Starbucks is in the eye of the anti-marketing storm. In the Seattle riots of November 1999, its outlets were singled out for special attention by the demolition men and women, as they have been ever since. Such is the attention lavished on Starbucks by the No Logo contingent that it is now part of the particularly pernicious triumvirate, alongside McDonald's and Nike, that today's anti-capitalists love to hate. Some of this detestation is due to the organization's high profile, which makes it an obvious target. Some of it is ease of access, since it's easier to trash a nearby Starbucks than trek to the nearest Nestlé factory. Some of it is down to Starbucks' positioning as a hip 'n' happenin', third-world lovin' corporation, a stance that practically invites people to critically examine the reality behind the rhetoric.

The hostility, however, is also related to the company's completely, totally, absolutely, unapologetically customer-oriented marketing philosophy. Protesters target Starbucks because they *know* it claims to be especially attentive to customers, because it aims to “develop enthusiastically satisfied customers all of the time,” because it listens to the voice of the consumer and will respond to customer demands, no matter how inelegantly expressed. As Ronnie Cummins, director of the US Organic Consumers Association, openly confesses about his contra-Starbucks campaign, “we target them because they're the only big coffee company in the world that pretends to be socially responsible...It's better to start with them. Kraft is never going to do anything. When you're the grassroots with limited resources, you have to pick your targets carefully.”

The marketing moral is that if you live by customer-orientation, you die by customer orientation.

Source: Brown (2003)

## Table 2: Mini MINI Marketing

If there's no publicity like free publicity, then BMW must be mighty pleased with Madonna. In "American Life," the iconic singer's # 1 single from the eponymous # 1 album, Ms Ciccone favorably namechecks the Mini Cooper, BMW's brilliant reinvention of the 1960's design classic. As celebrity endorsements go, Madonna's unsolicited hymn to the Mini is manna from marketing heaven.

BMW, to be sure, don't need Madonna's songs of praise. The car is doing pretty well on its own. Launched in late 2001, worldwide sales of the Mini Cooper have exceeded all expectations (125,000 in 2002, 25% above target). So much so, that extra workers and shifts have been added at the Cowley, Oxford, plant in order to keep up with the rapidly burgeoning demand.

Now available in fifty countries, the Mini Cooper's greatest, and most unexpected, "result" has been in the United States, where the first year's shipment sold out in less than three months, the distributors openly admit that "we can't get enough of them," and the brand easily beat all comers to the 2002 Car of the Year Award. Its triumph, indeed, is all the sweeter, since the model was greeted with widespread disdain when it was first displayed at the 2000 Detroit Motor Show and when research demonstrated that the market for the marque was miniscule. Only 2% of Americans had heard of it.

The Mini Cooper's US coup is partly due to BMW build quality, partly due to its racy performance and excellent roadholding, partly due to the magnificently appointed interior and partly due to the car's nothing if not distinctive design. However, the Mini's victory is also due to MINI marketing. The Mini, indeed, is MINI writ large.

*Mediability:* The Mini's American marketing campaign has been a masterpiece of marketing marketing. Traditional vehicle advertising vehicles, such as television and print, have been eschewed in favor of product placement. But not in a traditional sense. The cars have been "placed," seemingly at random, in the grandstands of high-profile sporting events. Better yet, they have been "placed" on top of gigantic SUVs (Sports Utility Vehicles) and taken on much-publicized piggy-back rides around selected American cities. When coupled with creative magazine inserts (like dress-your-Mini fridge magnet and the *Mini Book of Motoring*), the inevitable upshot is that the marketing of the Mini has been much talked about and the marketing of the marketing much talked about. They're even talking about an American remake of *The Italian Job*, featuring the new model Minis.

*Inclusion:* There's nothing like a little intrigue to build a cult following and the Mini's teaser campaign – cryptic billboards showing only the signature two-tone color scheme and a one-word slogan, "Motoring" – has helped imbue the brand with a semi-samizdat character. Limited availability has also added to the insidious attraction (it's only sold through 56 US dealerships), as have the stories of enthusiasts openly cheering the arrival of delivery flatbeds and camping outside showrooms for test drives and order forms. Consumer solidarity has been further reinforced by the availability of limited edition, Union Jack-effect paintjobs, which tap into the post-September 11, pre-Gulf War II recrudescence of the Special Relationship. Patriotism

is the epitome of inclusion, after all, and purchasing a (foreign) Mini is seen (by some Americans) as a patriotic act, paradoxical though this seems.

*Nostalgia:* It almost goes without saying that BMW's Mini is an exemplary example of nostalgic branding. Forty years after it first hit the streets, the new Mini recaptures the spirit, the insouciance, the racy look of the old. Design features, such as the scooped headlights, recessed door handles, chunky wheels and boxy aesthetic, echo the 1961 original, whilst remaining incontestably up to date. More pertinently perhaps, the actual selling of the car contains echoes of bygone marketing campaigns. Publicity stunts are the oldest arrow in the marketer's well-equipped quiver. Consumer camp outs accompanied the revival of the *Star Wars* franchise. The much-discussed Mini "centerfold" in *Playboy*, as well as the blockbuster billboard in Times Square, have previously been employed to brilliant promotional effect by Absolut, the obvious model for the Mini's MINI marketing. History may not repeat itself, but marketing definitely does.

*Irony:* The advertising echoes don't end with wry allusions to Absolut. Mini's American adventure also evokes the single most famous exhibition of ironic marketing, Bill Bernbach's 1960's campaign for the VW Beetle. Just as the Bug positioned itself as a tongue-in-cheek antithesis of Detroit's obsession with gas guzzling, chrome-clad monsters, so too the Mini Cooper is a self-appointed, nose-thumbing alternative to today's gas gulping, road-hogging behemoths. "The SUV backlash starts here," states the home page of the Mini's American website, thereby announcing the brand's bold, ballsy, boisterous ambitions. Irony, in fact, is the common thread of the car's parodic post-colonialism. Thus the *Playboy* "centerfold" incorporates the obligatory questionnaire (Weight: 2678 lbs; Turn-ons: Hairpins, S-bends, etc), the Times Square billboard "spills over" on to adjacent billboards belonging to competing brands (which were in on the joke), and even freebie-based celebrity endorsement has been adroitly inverted. The celebrities have to buy their own Minis, Madonna among them!

Sources: Birch and Lister (2002), Buckley (2002), Harvey (2001, 2002).

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