

ASK AWAY

Why is **Storytelling** so **Compelling** in **Marketing?**

Ask(?)Away is a **candid conversation** between two people published on a blog. This transcript includes comments from the readers and space for your notes. Our first guest in this format at *Conversation Agent* is Mark Goren of *Transmission Content + Creative*.

Valeria Maltoni: Storytelling is the backbone of our ability to remember and transmit information by compressing it into manageable chunks. We are able to edit the information we receive to suit our needs. We edit to make it **simple** and **concrete**. As we do that, we tend to recall and include the pieces of information that match our worldview and, by doing so, we rewrite some of what we hear to suit our thinking.

That's why marketing would be a nonstarter without storytelling. **Why is storytelling so compelling in marketing?**

Mark Goren: Exactly. Storytelling — and having a good brand story — is about helping people relate to a brand as it pertains to them. Like you say, “edit the information we receive to suit our needs.” I like that notion because it recognizes how important it is to allow people to connect to a story in their own way. A story is not preachy, it’s not top-down and corporate — it allows for interpretation and it can evolve.

If there’s one area where marketers can do better, it’s in recognizing that their efforts can evolve organically — and that not everything has to go according to a set-in-stone plan. Your take?

Valeria Maltoni: I think the best stories are those that inspire action. Remember when you were a child and saw a movie, then spent the rest of the day continuing the story in your environment and head? That to me is what organic means.

The original pre-packaged story is only the start of a conversation with the people who join in. The confusion begins when the company thinks they need to control every aspect of how its products and services are

viewed in the market from the get go.

Trust is built over time. As we talk about evolution and trust, I’m reminded that these are fluid concepts closer to our hearts than our minds. Is it a little bit of both? How do you fit measurement in the equation?

Mark Goren: Funny you should bring up the movie example, Valeria. I watched Rocky Balboa twice this weekend (a nice Philadelphia reference for you) and can’t get some of the scenes out of my head. The music, the images, the story. So your analogy is perfectly timed, very true — *and* we’re back to storytelling.

So how do we fit measurement into the equation? Interesting that you write, “trust is built over time” and then ask about measurement. If trust is built over time — and it is — then measuring the effectiveness of any marketing effort has to respect the time factor. In other words, you can’t put up a blog (for example) and ditch it after two months if it’s not achieving “stated objectives”. The onus is on the marketer to make the blog relevant to the target — and finding the right combination may take time.



What are your thoughts on measurement? And what about on tweaking vs. scrapping and starting again?



Bob Glaza asks a very good set of questions: *what is it we want to measure? Is it a concrete number like bottom line? Is it more elusive like customer loyalty? How about return visits?*

Matt Dickman chimes in with the idea of *a balancing act measurement. While some short term goals are easier to measure, the real marketers are looking more long term. How can/should we balance the two?*

Mark responses that the key is what you are measuring. And, as **Toby Bloomberg** wrote late last week: *“Good relationships should impact your bottom line.”* So let’s measure the variables that affect long-term relationships, the variables that reflect why and how people react, how they interact, learn from what we can see and adjust as we go along, he said.

Mark also quoted from **Greg Verdino**’s recent post on viral marketing: *“You need to produce lots of content, try different things, and get*

them into the marketplace for reaction. And you can’t get discouraged, at least not after one attempt.”

Steve Roesler joined the conversation by introducing the notion of time: *“Let’s face it: whenever we’re building trust through relationships, and then asking people to invest in what we’re doing, there is a timeline involved.”*

Mark responded that focusing on the long term is not attractive. Especially in the field of new media, it is crucial to track results along efforts. But if you’re thinking and worrying only about now, you won’t create much momentum to build on for tomorrow. Let’s find out how we do that.

► (Continued)

Valeria Maltoni: Measurement should be built into every activity in the form of feedback. Online you can use RSS feeds, hits to your site, links to downloads, etc. Offline you start with customer service and conversations in every situation where the organization touches customers. There is no need to complicate things.

Our gift campaign last year included my



business card with each package and cover note. I told our sales reps to tell their customers to contact me with any questions or comments about it. They did, we had great conversations and testimonials as a result. Too many marketers work behind the scenes. I truly believe that customer service is the new marketing.

Time is all you've got. No right combination, no sales. It's worth pursuing when you look at it that way. Tweak enough to know what changed and what feedback you have from it, test to find out what works in a way that you can isolate it. And also play with new environments. As an example, we created a self-contained mini site for one of our product lines because we could define the customer segment and their preferences extremely well. Then we built a couple of new elements into the mini site to keep things interesting. We measured the response at launch, through user feedback over time and through the elements we change. It works. Can you think of an example or two?

Mark Goren: I like that your measurement examples are small and easy to implement –

feeds, hits, downloads, etc. These are the stats that give you a live take on what's working and what doesn't. As is asking people to contact you directly. Talking to people, getting their first-person experiences and opinions is key to learning, and that's how you know what to tweak and adjust without going through a complete overhaul of your message and tactics. If customer service is about listening and responding well, than I completely agree — customer service is the new marketing. My TDBank experience can speak to that.

Coming from a traditional agency background, I've seen campaign measurements lead to poor decision making all too often. **Measuring things in this world means looking for reasons not to do something, to go safe.** Of course, when you're spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a print campaign, you want to know if it'll work. Problem is, it's a process geared to stifle experimentation and, of course, you can never know what's going to work or not. Sometimes you've just got to test, try, adjust, try, adjust, try, adjust, and try again – and always keep tweaking. And leave yourself the room to do so. I think that's a



big part of the problem with the traditional model.

So what do you think – is advertising as we know it dead?

Valeria Maltoni: That’s interesting; you say that measuring often means looking for proof that something is not working. So how do we switch to a more open process? Can we borrow the philosophy from positive psychology and devise ways to experiment for meaning? Which then begs the question, how do you measure meaning? I think it comes through impact.

Are people taking your ideas/products/services and using them? How are they using them? Can you evolve the conversation with them? Print can be a way to invite people to give you permission and engage with them. We did a campaign to invite people to integrate a new product into their mix and begin a dialogue on where it fit for them. Despite the increasing market pressure and competition, this long term strategy has paid off.

The traditional model is not working because practitioners often have a hard time using the

media in innovative ways.

Mark Goren: Allow me to tweak your last sentence, Valeria: The traditional model is not working because practitioners often have a hard time seeing the value of new media. I think advertisers have to ease themselves into accepting these new options, learn what they can do for their brands and then gradually put more and more money into new media. So they should, as you suggest, add a social component to their traditional efforts if they’re set on going the traditional route and then watch how things evolve and make the necessary adjustments.

I also think you pinpoint another key element to all this: patience. The importance of developing long-term thinking here is paramount (as we touched on earlier). Relationships aren’t built overnight.

How do you measure meaning? I think the answer is above. Try new things and wait to see how it pays off in relationships – and make sure you have the patience to find out.

Valeria Maltoni: Practitioners will not be able to sell the value (hate this word, it’s so...



marketers) of new media without some solid ROI in a corporate model. There is also the barrier that many marketing managers in organizations do not understand blogging or social media. They read about them -- now it seems everywhere -- but until you do it, you won't really know how it can apply.

And doing to understand is the only way to add a social media component to broader programs in many organizations.



Steve Roesler picked up on the “doing to understand” part. This would require someone in the corporate environment to take a risk by trying out something that is unproven. That’s a huge career-limiting opportunity.

(Valeria) To me doing in order to understand is innovation. When I selected the Client gift, I knew I would have less of a battle in selling the concept. And I didn’t do any selling of *that* concept. I sold my boss and a colleague to attend Seth’s seminar in December. Then I went ahead with the book for our customers.

(Steve) I agree that new media is a hands on, “let’s play with it until it works for us”

proposition. So if we were working with kids to get them to try something new, how would we get it into their hands?

Philippe Deltenre In my job, I hate to fill in monthly KPIs but it’s important for my hierarchy. Same story with the advertisers. Most of the advertisers I meet are eager to innovate and develop online strategies but they need a measurement tool to present the campaign ROI.

The best models are the net promoter score that measures brand favorability and an OMD econometric model determining and weighting the variables in sales — base, product mix, seasonality and media contribution.

But beyond existing models, the beauty and the curse of online is in the variety of measurement and reporting tools. It’s often a mess but it allows every advertiser to optimize permanently his actions. On TV you optimize based on GRPs and that’s it.

(Valeria) Methodology should precede outcome, or you can set yourself up to measure for the outcome you want in the first place.



(Mark) I talked about measurement with a client recently. The client was only interested in being able to have measurement built into the project. He didn't know what to measure, only that he wanted to measure something.

How can we work long-term measurement goals into the equation for the development of a career awareness site?

A few years from now, how could we know that someone who had become engaged in this site ended up a) exploring the possibility of joining the industry and b) did end up working in the industry?

Is there a way to know what the effects of an online initiative are offline? How would you measure this?

(Philippe) it's the same for any kind of advertising. You measure the sales and test the campaign efficiency with a panel.

(Mark) In this case, we are talking about how many people join an industry. How is one supposed to know that someone got a job at company X because of the site or because they were job hunting and happened to find

work there? Visiting the site may mean you've found information to find the right school to become certified (which could take some time) or it could mean that the visitor found a company that's looking for employees right then.

It would seem impossible to track how many were influenced by the site and ended up with a career in that industry.

(Valeria) that's where feedback comes in. How do you set up conversations to gather and give the right kind of feedback that can be used as breadcrumbs?

(Philippe) Especially if you consider the fact that a decision is often based on several factors – website, articles in the press, word of mouth... The website is an element in a chain.

To make a silly analogy: At my office, we have free drinks and free speculoos (Belgian biscuits). Does it have an impact on employee satisfaction? Probably, but I wouldn't be able to measure it.

(Valeria) Feedback is the best juice for relationships. Let me give you a specific



example. You come to this blog and join a conversation that gets you buzzing with ideas; you decide to include the blog in your blogroll. That is feedback and an important piece of information.

We get that type of feedback all the time in offline conversations with nonverbals, calls, offers to meet for coffee, etc. What we have online is technology. Yet at the end of the day, it's the people we care about.

(Mark) how can you track and monitor the effect that a visit to a site has on the visitors' future behavior? Is it even possible?

(Valeria) you provide opportunities for feedback on your site, social bookmarks already do some of that. Tracking and monitoring need to be customer and audience-based so that they are opt in vs. push through.

Tim McHale adds a voice on the business card in the customer gift. That follow-up you referred to is key.

Bringing in “storytelling” into this dialogue was critical to me and it makes me believe that by emphasizing “storytelling media” may get a wider net of people to understand what social

media is all about.

Are people telling a story every time they blog or respond to one? My first impression is that at a certain point storytelling ends and story-rationalizing ping pong begins. Doesn't the insertion of strong “justification” into a conversation stop the dialogue or potential sidetrack a story from being fully told? Also, is a story being told in a question?

(Mark) It depends how you define story. If you accept that a story can evolve, then you can think of a blog as justification for that story, but also as clarification, editing and rewriting that story.

I know that I believe certain things and that I have a strong opinion about many things I write on my blog. The beauty of it all is being able to have these conversations and allowing your story to evolve through the opinions, facts and conversations of/with others.

It's natural to want to justify what you're thinking – what's unnatural is to believe it to be wholeheartedly true. Good marketers are out here asking to be challenged – and not assuming that what they say is the gospel. ■

