



What's **Next** 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 second guest in this format at *Conversation Agent* is Ryan Karpeles of *Living Light Bulbs*.

Valeria Maltoni: Blogs may make you famous to your customer community. When you share insights on what you have learned and information about your industry experience, you may gain readers who will in turn spread the word about your business. So why doesn't every company have a blog that should have one? In your post on *What's Next?* you ask a series of questions. I think one that everyone would consider the million dollar questions is -- **What happens when every company has a blog?**

Many content publishers and people who live this environment as an opportunity think that that is the correct direction. Is it? And secondly, what then?

Ryan Karpeles: First of all, simply *having* a blog is not the point. **The point is to always be listening.** Always. Interaction is paramount. We all know that one-way messaging is essentially dead, but it's hard to talk ourselves out of that mentality and actually practice what we preach. Having a blog is one way to walk that walk. It's a means to an end. The strategy is what counts. Since the strategy is to listen, the tool is a blog. It's not the only tool, but it's a pretty darn good one. At least for now.

Just to be clear, we're assuming that these blogs are actually providing value in the first place. They're not just placeholders waiting for people to visit and praise your company for having a dialog. If the dialog is worthless and hardly any value is added, what's the point in having a blog? Not every company should have a blog. But if they're not getting enough feedback, or failing to connect with customers,

a blog might certainly be a step in the right direction.

So what happens when every company that needs to have a blog has one?

The bar will have already been raised much higher. By that time, blogs (or something of similar value) will be almost mandatory. They'll be an integral part of the marketing mix for companies all over the world. So what will we do then? We'll have to keep finding ways to get closer to the consumer, and keep wow-ing them on a frequent (but unpredictable) basis. The CEO of Pepsi will invite customers over for a home-cooked meal at his house (and they'll get to request the menu). The Customer Relationship Director for Reebok will take some clients to a baseball game and buy them all drinks. The CMO of United Airlines will give a customer an all-expenses-paid family vacation to anywhere (of their choosing) on the planet. **And none of it will be done to drive profit.** It will be done because it's the right thing to do. It's good business and it's good living.



But hey, if no one does anything like this, we'll all be golden! If our competitors keep slipping, and fail to provide value, our jobs will be incredibly easy. Once again, blogs are just tools. They're like ears. And the more ears your company has, the more you'll be able to provide for your customers. Not what you want. Not what you want them to want. But what they want.

In the end, it all comes down to relationships. If you can develop meaningful, rewarding relationships with your customers (heck, let's just call them people) you'll be in great shape. I don't think it's a bad thing if every company has a blog. In fact, it's probably an amazing thing. But blogs are just one element of relationship building. They're a great starting point. In the future, companies will have to expand upon that starting point and continue to deliver value in every way possible.

The question then becomes, **Where does that value come from?** Internal sources or external?

Valeria, how do you see the balance of “**providing**

value” playing out in the future? In other words, how much control can a company really give up? Can it rely on its consumers to create significant value or must it look inwards for most of the innovation?

As marketers, we need to act, innovate, and advance towards the creation of a future. *“We can't wait on the bench and ponder the outcome of the game. We have to be proactively involved in changing it.”*



Greg Krauska: I believe that innovation is nearly always an externally-focused pursuit. Even if innovation is intended to improve an internal process, there is some “customer” affected. Few firms are able to jump to a new curve by focusing inward.

I agree with you, Ryan, that firms and individuals must act, experiment, iterate. That includes the way they engage with customers, knowing that some customers are eager to jump into the discussion, while others are happy to watch and listen.



And **Toby Bloomberg** contributed that *one of the important aspects of social media is providing customers (and other stakeholders) with the opportunity to engage in an authentic people-to-people dialogue. More often than not, blogs don't pull in a lot of comments. That does not mean customers do not find the information valuable or that they don't get a sense of the "people who are the company."*

I concur with **Ryan** when he says that *listening itself is an active form of engagement. People have to actually seek out the discussion. So while it's tempting to think of the "talkers" as the only participants, it would be a mistake to draw the line there. Can we get feedback from listeners?*

Joe Raash: And what of all this VOC (voice of customer) data collection? Without action, customers may quit sharing their views.

Yet we don't want to let customers run our companies. Many customers are looking for the *Right Now* product, not necessarily the Right Product. We need to balance the immediacy of customer needs with marketing what they don't know they want yet.

(**Greg**) Ryan, to get feedback from the listeners, give them some good reason for them to invest the time or change behavior. To Joe's point about "action," keep inviting people to the conversation and then tell stories that illustrate how getting involved made a difference. For example, Valeria takes the time to ask a question in nearly every one of her posts and then responds to each and every comment. That demonstrates how she values every contribution to the conversation.

What if a software company told their user group members that their blog discussions not only provided x new ideas for the next version, but that the discussion around the suggestions made the input that much more meaningful for the design engineers and the marketing team.

Bottom line: lots of experiments and lots of stories!

(**Ryan**) I think a lot of it, like you said, is just being honest, open, and telling stories. People like interacting with people. The more human you can be, and the more you can reach out,



the more people will want to join.

If they know their ideas will make a difference in their own lives (because the company listens and implements them), they'll have every reason to chip in.

(Valeria) there is a very narrow window of opportunity to get our attention. It is possible to do. I wonder if it is by affiliate and soft sell (e.g., product review, recommendation from someone, etc.) mostly.

Conversations are an art. The secret is to remember where you left off and flow with it once people are ready to come back to you. How many use this skill in their sales process? I'm not talking about CRM, I'm talking about actually recalling someone's preference, ideas, stories, and building on those.

Maybe that is where the **perception of value comes in along with the tension between company control and external innovation...**

▶ (continued)

Valeria Maltoni: I'm almost embarrassed to use the term 'value'. In the end, the value is in the eye of the beholder, we really have no business overusing the term on our end. Which probably gets us in the direction of your other question, "how much control can a company really give up?"

If we focus on the concept that **our product**, no matter what we sell, **is a relationship**, then it is easier to see how control is not really part of the equation. It's not in the cards. However, we can talk about guidance, expertise, and counsel. Those are much better terms to define what should happen on the organization side of the dialogue.

In that case, there was no control to hold onto in the first place. In the give and take of this relationship, the exchange, what the organization provides is experience and structure -- processes are good if they serve the people they were created (ideally) to support. So now you have people + systems on one side of the relationship. Better if passionately committed to the business they conduct.



Next to them, both looking at the issues, the problems that need to be solved, by the organization in question or a better-suited one, are the customers. In shifting our focus to the relationship being the product, we became more aware of exactly where the organization fits. And that would put everyone in listening mode, wouldn't it?

When the long term relationship is more important than the short term financial gain, then blogs are great tools to share knowledge, learn about each other, and assist in the decision-making process. Talking things through, so to speak. This then begs the question: how do you make money so you can be there when customers are ready to fit you into their buying model? What do you do in the meantime?

I know that everyone is under a lot of pressure to prove it works in the short term, even if the proof is going to be long term. How do you support growth? How do you pay your bills?

Ryan Karpeles: For the most part, business is driven by ideas. In the past, these ideas

came from the company alone. For the last decade, however, the tables have been rapidly turning. Ideas no longer have to come from the inside. The floodgates are open, and you simply have to be ready for the rush. Your customers will give you insights. You'll have your own insights. Ideas are everywhere. The cost of trying out new products and services is incredibly lower than it ever has been. The risk might be greater (because everyone will hear if you bomb), but it's easier to get back on the horse. In other words, if you fail once, you're (usually) not down and out.

The key is to think of innovation as a continuous, overlapping process. In a sense, you almost need to have multiple R&D teams. While one product is being designed, another one is already being tested, and another is finalized and in the hands of the consumers. Most companies tend to wait for big ideas and do nothing in the meantime. This is backwards. It's okay to milk some products for all their worth, **but you have to constantly be innovating while you're milking.** You can't do one or the other. You have to do both simultaneously.



When you listen to customers on your blog, they'll give you ideas to try out. But you can't just sit around and wait for them to do that. Basically, when they're ready to fit you into their buying model, they'll let you know. But sometimes you have to present them with something in the first place before they realize they're ready. You can't *only* be listening and reacting. You have to take some action on your own. Customers are a part of the creation process, but they're not the sole drivers.

In addition, I think one of the biggest things we often overlook in this discussion is the caliber of employees who seek out ideas from within an organization. Some people are wired to look for new insights. These are the people you want. They'll go out of their way to search the deepest, darkest corners and come back with something juicy. Don't underestimate the power of your own people. Marketing is all about conversations. And while a good conversationalist is usually a good listener, they also do some talking as well.

Essentially, don't be idle. Don't be afraid to take action. The biggest problems you'll face

will be when you get comfortable. Look at the RAZR from Motorola. That company figured it out. Slim was in. But it was only in for a short period of time. Motorola got a little lazy and it cost them. Don't get lazy. Stay on your toes, look for ideas everywhere, and never stop trying things out. There is no meantime. It's a continuous process that requires effort, devotion and a passionate desire to provide the best possible offering to your people.

So while you're building all those relationships, you're still being proactive in terms of innovation. Often times we try to separate the two, but I don't think we have to. They go hand in hand. Relationships develop around products. Products develop around relationships. When you do it right, it's a beautiful thing :)



Cam Beck: One thing I'll add is that the short-term thinking that seems to plague business decisions is based on valid fears. Marketing companies don't always get to interact directly with the decision-makers, and



even when they do, they still must contend with the same fears, just with fewer layers of translation. It's important that we understand that so that we can best address it.

When it's not our dollar footing the bill, it's easy to forget just how far out on a limb we are asking our clients to go. We need to know our stuff.

(Ryan) Right on, Cam. A lot of “perfect world” thinking sounds great (and most likely works) but it may not be feasible.

I think the next major push in business will be to find cost-effective ways of achieving that “perfect world.”

(Valeria) I do understand those mechanisms as I've lived them as an insider. Over the years, I partnered with marketing companies and agencies to present those concepts to executive teams. Aside from working on the business plans and most of the communications briefs, I see my role as helping address all objections and present in a language that carries the power of profit

potential.

On the other hand, what is the cost of missed opportunities? Another way of presenting the information is to slice the percentage of market desired and potential compared to spending. And then being rigorous about measurement and proof.


