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Distribution and subscription enquiries

Michelle Blundell at michelleb@iodsa.co.za
or 011 643 8086

Membership enquiries

Amanda Bougardt at amandab@iodsa.co.za
or 011 643 8086

Marketing Beyond CRM

the cluetrain to getting cosier with your clients

By Ramon Thomas

Ramon Thomas is a member of the IoD and Managing Director of NETucation - Understanding Online Opportunities

"A powerful global conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. As a direct result, markets are getting smarter—and getting smarter faster than most companies." Cluetrain Manifesto¹

The term "cluetrain" stems from a quote, "The clue train stopped there four times a day for ten years and they never took delivery," from a veteran of a firm now free-falling out of the Fortune 500. The clues are embedded in the conversations people are having in more prolific ways than ever before on the web. And the question is – are you listening?

"Using tools like blogs and social networking websites, you can begin to monitor the online conversation that is taking place right under your nose."

Today it is much easier to listen to your clients and prospective clients than ever before. Thomas Friedman outlines three great eras of globalisation:

- Globalisation 1.0: 1492-1800 - a period where the world shrank from a size large to a size medium
- Globalisation 2.0: 1800-2000 - a time when multinationals were the dynamic force driving global integration
- Globalisation 3.0: began 2000 - characterised as a time when individuals have new-found power to collaborate and compete globally.

Given this, you can assume Globalisation 3.0 = Web 2.0/Social Media. And, using tools like blogs and social networking websites, you can begin to monitor the online conversation that is taking place right under your nose. The real beauty is that the listening can be automated by using RSS² technology to be notified whenever certain keywords of people, products, brands or company names are mentioned. You then have to respond or participate in those conversations.

You can also use services like Google Alerts³ to keep track of news stories, online discussion groups and blogs. There is a growing list of companies that have shot themselves in the foot by ignoring the conversation, like the Kryptonite⁴ lock fiasco from back in 2004. When online conversations are ignored, you run the risk of heated debates between bloggers and readers spilling over into the mainstream media. And the authority of

¹ <http://www.cluetrain.com/book/>

² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS_\(file_format\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS_(file_format))

³ <http://www.google.com/alerts>

⁴ <http://www.angledget.com/2004/09/14/kryptonite-evolution-2000-u-lock-hacked-by-a-bc-perv/>



bloggers versus mainstream media is growing every year according to the quarterly study, *The State of the Live Web*⁵, by Technorati, the leading blog monitoring service in the world. In South Africa, the most severe example of how damaging online conversation can be is in the widely reported case of the independent Democrats' (ID) Simon Grinrod being named on the "SA Male Prostitute" blog as an alleged client. Now, if the ID had been listening to the conversation by just placing Google Alerts on all its most important people's names, it would have found out about this – literally within minutes of the information being posted. On the flip side, you can also monitor your competition using these tools.

Enter the conversation

So, I propose a radical idea to corporate South Africa: set-up your own blog and allow your clients to come to you and post their feedback on a platform that you control. When you do this, you start to move beyond CRM because you have entered the conversation and begun to listen. There is an old Indian proverb, "Listen or thy tongue will keep thee deaf". While the number of South African companies employing this technology for marketing and public relations purposes is growing, the real value lies in the elusive obvious: customer relationships.

People complain about the service levels of the banks, the Post Office, Home Affairs and Telkom. And, when dealing with the biggest organisations, consumers may indeed feel helpless. Yet a growing number of online vigilantes is emerging. For example, the

Helikom⁶ website challenged the mighty Telkom to the point where Telkom has sued the owner. The publicity generated by this action has turned this website into a very popular advertising platform because of its new popularity. For Telkom, a better response would have been to engage with this person in an online dialogue, using its resources to counter all the objections or complaints raised by bringing customer testimonials and feedback to the front line to present a positive image of Telkom. But, no - the mighty needed to assert its power and show that it can stamp out a silly website. Think again!

As you gain access to the inner thoughts or true feelings of your clients you can begin to create products with their input. This is a revolutionary way of creating new products and services because you have in your clients a testing team - unpaid and eager to contribute to the creations they want to own and possess in the future. Fiat, the Italian motor manufacturing giant, has returned from the brink of bankruptcy by using social media to listen and take those suggestions and feedback to heart in the design of the new 500⁷ model.

Get their attention

So what do you do when you are not even sure if your boss will listen to you? Gather the research, study your competitors and look outside your industry for ideas on how you can leapfrog your competition. It's easier and easier to replicate and duplicate. So you have to continue to differentiate yourself. It's been said that attention, not time, has become the

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most valuable of resources for individuals. And certainly it is true for companies that clients, or prospective clients, who are paying attention, are the most valuable. And the easiest and simplest way is to allow them to participate in the creation of new products and services. The old top-down approach is something of the past. You can die a slow death - or you can begin to resurrect yourself, your company, your products and services. It all starts by being open and listening for the grasshopper⁸ at your feet. ■

⁵ <http://www.sify.com/alerts/archives/000403.htm>
⁶ <http://www.helikom.co.za>

⁷ <http://enitfrancart.com/blog/archives/265-Creating-the-new-Fiat-500.htm>

⁸ <http://www.nostalgicentral.com/tv/diana/fungu.htm>