

Marketing for next to nothing



Julian Saunders

argues that marketers started out by seeing the internet as a sales response medium, but now all marketing functions have migrated to the internet. So the real marketing investment is not in buying space and time but in the energy, culture and imagination of the company.

THE WORDS 'free' and 'open' are fundamental values that were built in to the DNA of the World Wide Web by its inventor Sir Tim Berners-Lee. Today we are all reaping the benefits. The web is enabled by the internet, whose architecture makes it (what John Naughton calls) 'the surprise generating machine'.

Bright ideas spread fast: it is a borderless realm. A student in Boston can create new software and within months it helps us to conduct relationships differently all over the world.

Web services now enable us to publish, show films, express opinions, brainstorm ideas, research and sell all for nothing, or very little cost.

Their creators have made these services free to win widespread usage in the expectation of 'monetizing' them from future advertising revenue. Where Google has led others followed.

The web and marketing

At first the web was seen as mainly a sales response medium – it still is today thanks to Google. But now all marketing functions have migrated to the web. Anyone who is responsible for the creation of brands and stewardship of reputations can be made or undone by it.

Social media, which we are only just beginning to understand, have supercharged the 'for free' revolution engendered by the web. They are relevant to marketing functions in the widest sense. You can listen to customers, spot trends, research ideas, correct false rumours, anticipate bad news, consult interested parties, identify weaknesses, build relationships, recruit staff, run collaborative teams, announce events, explain new products and services.

That list is no doubt incomplete. No wonder it is such a hot topic.

Who will benefit most?

It is not easy to predict, except to say that they will be many and varied and there will be surprises along the way. Top of the list:

1. Entrepreneurs without boundaries

Small businesses and entrepreneurs are in the vanguard of the 'for free' marketing revolution because they naturally look outside for resources. Designers and user-experience folk are making web services better and easier to use on an almost

weekly basis. Consider this short list of low-cost or free marketing activities.

- **Create an interesting website.** Decent-looking websites and/or profiles on social media sites can now be quickly made by using pre-formatted designs on easy-to-populate templates. Looking great is less important nowadays than having an interesting offer or story.
 - **Get higher up in the search rankings.** The rudiments of search engine optimisation are easily understood even if 'advanced SEO' is something of a dark art. The Joined Up Company hosts over 50 films on YouTube and links them to its site. Google rewards all those 'links' in the search rankings.
 - **Sell to global niche markets.** MySpace is now a showcase for all kinds of 'culturpreneurs', such as publishers, musicians, filmmakers and designers. Like Paul Griffiths. Aged just 20 he receives 500 friend requests a day and has sold over 10,000 of his Babycakes T-shirts globally. His mother and friends do the packing, dispatching and tracking.
 - **Enjoy positive word of mouth.** At the heart of social media is the experience of being rated by others (for quality of service, probity and the imaginativeness of your marketing). Good ratings breed popularity – if a video on YouTube is highly rated it will attract more viewers. It will be sent as a link to friends and/or posted as a link on social media sites. Anyone with a brilliant new product or service or offer can get off to a flying start by sampling it to interested individuals who will blog, review, rate and pass on the news through their networks.
 - **Outsource your NPd.** P&G has, under its Connect and Develop programme, but you can do it by just setting up a group on Ning. The web also offers a daily diet of ideas through RSS feeds, blogs and relevant newsletters.
 - **Need to check if your customers are truly satisfied?** A short personal email normally suffices to flush out any problems.
- Most of us, by now, will already be wise to this last example, as email is now second nature. It follows that, as we become more experienced in things like search and social media, opportunities will abound.

2. Big organisations can release the energy of their employees

Three years ago Microsoft decided to let its staff blog and even make critical remarks about their own company. It punctured the walls of the

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monolith to reveal an obvious truth – Microsoft is full of people who care and want to do the right thing.

Extroverts add sparkle and a human face to their company, like Mark Price, MD of Waitrose and self-styled 'chubby grocer', who declared that he would be a more streamlined shopkeeper in three months. He blogged about it, got thinner and stopped blogging – but surely there is another mission he could take on?

Big organisations need to recruit people who are tuned in to the possibilities of the internet and to create a culture in which they feel liberated to express themselves. The accountancy firm Deloitte is paying employees a bonus if they recruit staff by using their Facebook accounts – cheaper than a recruitment agency and a good way of building a company of like-minded souls.

3. Organisations with strong ethics

Organisations now have to pay more attention to stakeholders, who can be both highly local (what is my nearest Sainsbury's doing to support local groups?) and national (how is the company weaning us off plastic bags?). Social media fit the bill, as they are local, national and international. The scrutiny of social media also keeps companies honest and exposes the charlatans. They are therefore an emerging source of that most powerful form of advertising – the good opinion of others. Doing the right thing now has more rewards than burnishing your reputation in a 'glossy TV ad'.

4. The sales promotion industry

Imaginative promotions that people can participate in or pass on, can now do more than stimulate sales. They can also inject a sense of joy, flair and imagination into a brand.

For Air New Zealand's 'Grabaplane', all people had to do was fill an online plane-seating plan with 40 friends in order to the win use of the plane to fly anywhere in New Zealand. Social networks buzzed as young New Zealanders competed to win, and the media picked up on the excitement and covered it as a story. Films of four great examples

are posted here:

www.youtube/joinedupcompany.com

5. Brands with a strong point of view

These are often (but not always) challenger brands, which break the mold and champion a better way. All highly defined worldviews have a back-story including such classic elements as genesis, early opposition, tension, a damascene moment, drama, triumph, hubris and reinvention. Stories have always had a viral quality and the web accelerates their speed of transmission.

Successful challenger brands tend to have leaders who take easily to the free publicity opportunities of the web. Just search Michael O'Leary on YouTube. He's spoofed us all with the idea that he will charge you for using the toilets on Ryanair flights. Or has he?

The internet and our news-hungry media are now twins, joined at the hip, with the media being the needier twin as understaffed newsrooms feed off blogs and YouTube hits.

6. Bad people

As **John Naughton** has pointed out, there are nasty surprises lurking in the machine – like phishing, cyber crime, viruses and cyber terrorism. Pessimists and eschatologists will continue to find plenty of fuel for their perspective and predictions of doom.

7. Governments that are truly open

Open consultation in the making of policy (enabled by blogs and wikis) seeds and germinates groups of supporters and advocates who can be a force in its dissemination. Policy in which people have truly been consulted stands a better chance of acceptance.

8. Geeks

Even as I write this, some are dreaming of being the next Sergei Brin (Google) or Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook). Others are setting their sights a little lower and, for example, creating things like iPhone apps that mean they can give up the day job.

Return on ideas

Of course, ours is not really a 'for free' world, but one with dramatically lower barriers to entry. Investment is shifting to a different place, and arguably the right place – the idea and its design. Talent, imagination, invention and creativity are unbounded. Returns increasingly will go to those with the best ideas rather than just the biggest marketing investment. ☺

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