

Essay

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# The death of the "lonesome cowboy"

**In 1954, the Phillip Morris subsidiary Marlboro hit a crisis. In the American cigarette market, there were only six brands of filter cigarettes at that time, which - in combination - only achieved a 10% share of the market. The reason was most likely an image problem: most American men perceived filter cigarettes as unmanly.**

The young agency of Leo Burnett, based in Chicago, was assigned with the task of the development of a new campaign, in order to find a way out of the dilemma. In a documentary from 1972, Burnett himself remembers the brainstorming session, where he asked the decisive question: "What is the most manly symbol you can imagine?" - and one of his copywriters answered - "A cowboy."

The hour of birth of the Marlboro Man marked the beginning of a brand ionisation, which was to last decades and was to become one of the most successful examples for the positioning of the same marketing message ("Brilliant copy idea" according to L. Burnett) across all media. The association with "cowboys", for years, became the vehicle that provided Marlboro with an image of freedom, independence and natural manliness.

The death of the famous Marlboro Man, Wayne McLaren, in 1992 marked the end of an era. Here, it is not even important that he had to die of lung cancer of all things. Rather, his death coincides with an invention, which was going to change the world of communication forever: The hour of birth of the World Wide Web and thus the utilisation of the Internet for the public.

## "Forget, shoot and forget"

Technical progress and the related decrease of entry barriers for non-computer experts over the following 10 years lead an American IT-magazine in 2003 to mention for a novel term for the first time: "Web 2.0".

This created unimagined possibilities thus far for interaction and collaboration between consumers. "Convergence Culture"<sup>1</sup> and "Participatory Culture"<sup>2</sup> are only two

of the many keywords to describe the new communication patterns. But what is it all about?

The production of user-generated content, meaning self-produced content by users, has been growing since the turn of the century at an unimaginable order of magnitude. Many platforms, such as You Tube, Wikipedia or Twitter are not only being mentioned by classical media, but even partially used as sources of information. The social network Facebook is proving that it is more than a playground for bored teens and young people in their twenties. The high user numbers in diverse age groups offer a broad reach for businesses and organisations. Through the spread of "Like" buttons outside of Facebook, or the Geo Tagging service of Facebook Places, the number of possible applications has been expanding steadily as has visibility outside of the own web page.

The time young people are spending daily in these networks is increasing and many of them would rather make do without TV than without Internet. But the changes in media use are not a phenomenon that is limited to young people: the highest growth rate in Internet connections in 2010 was observed in users over 60 years of age.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, it is indisputably true that the scattering losses in classical media are increasing and it is not possible anymore to reach the same number of potential users with comparable budgets as was the case still a few years ago. Also, users have become more critical towards the communication means of professional PR and marketing departments. In Germany, trust into any type of advertising is among the lowest levels world-wide, while the recommendations of like-minded people achieve the highest level of credibility.<sup>4</sup> These recommendations happen more and more online.

**"We are waking up and connecting with each other. We observe. But we will not wait."**<sup>5</sup> From the Cluetrain-Manifesto-

<sup>1</sup> Convergence culture: Where Old and New Media collide, Henry Jenkins, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture, Henry Jenkins, 2006

<sup>3</sup> ARD/ZDF Onlinestudien 1998-2008

<sup>4</sup> Word-of-Mouth the Most Powerful Selling Tool: Nielsen Global Survey, 2007

<sup>5</sup> Das Cluetrain Manifesto, Levine, Locke, Searls & Weinberger, 1999, <http://www.cluetrain.com/>

The so-called "Social Media Revolution", therefore, has led to a fundamental change in the role of the consumer, with an immediate effect on businesses. Contrary to classical added-value chains, where value is generated exclusively within the business, customers can now take over this role, as is the case with Ikea, for example.<sup>6</sup> As Vargo/Lusch postulate<sup>7</sup>, marketing is currently in a transition phase, which will still go a step further: away from the product-oriented view of the industrialisation era and towards a service-oriented perspective. 'Service' here, however, is not to be understood as service provision, but as a process to understand the application of special competencies for another unit or their benefit. The bilateral improvement of the situation for business and consumer is a new element and, hence, the interaction aspect, too, is gaining a totally new significance. What this means for businesses exactly is something that depends on diverse parameters and specific market environments. Generally, it can be said that all market-oriented business sectors are directly affected<sup>8</sup>. The new consumer role must be taken into consideration in market research, product development, sales, all types of communication and even in after-sales service. New requirements of self-image, knowledge, work content and work processes also touch on internal sectors, such as human resources and IT.

## Interaction becomes the added-value factor

Here, the idea of complementing the marketing mix and tool sets by some new approaches can become the starting point for gaining experience and taking some initial steps. For example, the involvement of social networks, such as Facebook, in order to reach (potential) users in a new environment, is a typical case of integrating new approaches into existing concepts. In most cases, however, classical principles of communication are retained and only an additional "channel" is opened to confront the consumers head-on with the messages. Yet, in social media, different rules and principles apply than is the case in classical off-line media. The success factors are not only attention and attractiveness anymore but this is all about relevance ("Content is king").

The task of marketing communication, therefore, no longer comprises the identification of target groups that are to be approached with cross-media messages but, rather, there is now a need to rethink and define Interest Groups for the brands. In order to initiate new participatory processes, interest groups must be offered relevant content and entertainment as part of one and the same package. As a final consequence, (digital) interaction becomes the added-value factor and the consumer participates, in a completely new form of involvement, as Co-Creator in this process.<sup>9</sup>

## We are facing the French Revolution of communication

To construct such a system, Prahalad identifies four blocks of interaction: Dialogue, approachability, risk-profit consideration and transparency. This concept comes close to some kind of French Revolution in communication. The new basis of communication, therefore, will comprise the following base principles: **Liberté** (to have the freedom to say no and to deny oneself communicatively but also the responsibility to absorb a proportion of the risk), **Egalité** (because we have to communicate with the consumer at eye level), and **Fraternité** (the connection between consumers becomes more and more important and, if they don't experience fair and transparent treatment, they might oppose the business).

Participatory Marketing initiates a process of change, which will be equipped with many feedback loops. It starts with wanting and searching for a dialogue with strangers. Target groups are approached with a 'Shoot and Forget' mentality. Interest Groups, however, are looking for dialogue with topics that are relevant to them. This requires a new strategic alignment and tactics designed to reach the hearts and heads of the consumers - especially those of the *digital natives*<sup>10</sup>, who are completely at home with the Internet and social media and regard it as natural part of their lives. The death of the Cowboy, thus, ironically rings in a new Wild West.

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<sup>6</sup> From Value Chain to Value Constellation: Designing Interactive Strategy, Normann & Ramirez, 1993

<sup>7</sup> The Service-Dominant Logic of Marketing: Dialog, Debate and Directions, Vargo and Lush, 2006

<sup>8</sup> Marketing 2.0: Wie Social Media Unternehmen verändern wird, Alexander Körner, 2010

<sup>9</sup> Co-Creation Experiences, Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004

<sup>10</sup> Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Marc Prensky, On the Horizon, 2001