

‘We are living in an increasingly competitive environment. The focus of competition is attention’



The race for attention in a Distracted Economy

By Vanessa Bluen, managing director of The Consultant Powerhouse

WITH THE SPEED and scale of the world’s love affair with connectivity and iEverything — iPods, iTunes, iPhones — technology is so intimately woven into our lives. What does this mean for the way we need to connect to our audiences? How do you get people to tune into you and your message and tune out of the competitive noise; the distractions that come with the ‘smarter’ way of living?

I was sitting in a conference the other day and decided to conduct some informal research on delegates’ response behaviours. I observed that at the beginning of a speaker’s talk, the audience appeared fully-focused. As soon

as a speaker meandered into the territory of the slightly-less-relevant, the delegates descended into email response and status update distraction. Similarly, when the speaker, who tended towards self-impressed wordiness, presented an overly complex sentiment without engaging his audience adequately, the delegates took to googling the sentiment, often never to return to the arduous business of attention-paying.

We are living in an increasingly competitive environment. The focus of competition is attention. Whereas before, the greatest source of competition for attention was a

neighbouring zealous whisperer, — now, speakers, brands, products and people must compete with the universe of offerings from smartphones.

This technology is also affecting the way we think and the way we respond. The information overload and the plethora of portable forums to obtain this information means that we think in soundbites. Our thinking is more dynamic, more fluid, more volatile, more distracted. People are changing their minds faster than they’re changing their internet tabs.

The challenge becomes one of how to do business in this environment of the anarchical mind.

ENSURING RETENTION

Conventional wisdom suggests that the best option is to join the fray. Use social media as a business tool, market on Facebook, ensure that your CEO has a Twitter feed wittily and insightfully

updated daily by a team of enthused support staff.

This is of course, essential. However, this joining of the fray can only ensure you an opened tab on Google Chrome. It does not guarantee you competitiveness in the race for attention. It does not ensure retention. All it guarantees is a cursory glance on the part of interested consumers between status updates.

What will make you stand apart is a focus on relevance. As consumers of information in a market of excessive supply, we don’t want to waste our time on anything that is not essential. We also have gotten used to hearing our own voices as we exploit social media as a platform to opine. As such, we want your business to listen to us. And to make us feel that we are making a contribution. More than ever, the need for self-affirmation of consumers becomes a critical competitive edge for businesses.

Essentially then, information itself loses its value. What matters is how consumers engage with the information. And this applies to more than just online communication.

In a challenge to the dominant logic of the information age, what people want is human contact. However convenient online forums are for information garnering, the place of human interaction is increasingly relevant. In fact, human interaction is what sets you apart from your pure techno competitors.

In an October 2010 article in the *Harvard Business Review*, Larry Kramer argues astutely: “You can’t let social media dominate communication because you can’t control it. So take back the control. Yes, I agree that you need some hi-tech interfaces to have a hi-reach, however, it needs to be delivered in a high touch way.”

So, while your competitors are focusing on an increasingly comprehensive online strategy, it’s also valuable to focus on ‘high touch’. And adapt this high touch to the elusive and dynamic thinking patterns of consumers. Make your clients feel a valuable part of the process, listen to them, ask them more than you tell them, listen to what they say, be sharp, be savvy and most of all, be relevant.

