

Marketing

Managing Marketing In The Era Of Empowered Customers

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Your old-style, top-down, brand-managing ways of running the marketing department aren't going to work much longer.

You're going to have to train your people about what's important to you, and then you're going to have to trust them. Here's why.

Your voice--the marketer's voice--is going to be drowned out. At Forrester Research, we surveyed people to find out how often they talk about products and services in social networks, in blogs, in discussion forums, and on review pages. We asked them how many followers they have and estimated how many people are reading what they write. We then project this out to the whole online population using a tool we call Peer Influence Analysis.

Peer influence analysis shows that American consumers generate 500 billion impressions on one another regarding products and services every year. That's a big number, so let's put that in perspective. That's 2,841 impressions per online consumer per year that they're making on each other.

You, on the other hand, are buying online advertising and generating just a shade under 2 trillion impressions, according to Nielsen Online (that was for the 12 months ending in September 2009). So you're delivering four online impressions for every one people make on each other.

Which ones do you think they believe?

You can't fight this army of individuals with a top-down effort. Luckily, the same technologies that are empowering your customers are also empowering your employees. The theme of our new book *Empowered* is this: Only empowered employees can operate at the speed of empowered customers. For marketers, this boils down to a key question: Are you allowing your staff to come up with solutions that will improve your word of mouth?

At Ford, social media head Scott Monty wanted to help evangelize the new Fiesta. So he helped recruit a hundred socially connected people to drive one around for a few months. Collectively, their YouTube videos racked up 7 million views, and 4 million people saw their tweets. More importantly, 100,000 consumers who saw this activity signed up to get more information, and 4,000 people signed up to buy the car ... and all this was months before it was even available.

If the Scott Monty at your company asked, would you let him set up a word-of-mouth program like this?

The director of corporate communications for the NHL, Mike DiLorenzo, was approached by a local Long Island woman named Dani Muccio who was setting up "tweetups" where local hockey fans could get together and share their love for the sport. She was using the Twitter hashtag "#NHLTweetup." Mike made the choice to let Dani use the NHL store in midtown Manhattan and lined up McDonald's to provide food and Bud Light to supply beer. According to *USA Today*, the tweeting from the party made a big impression on the attendees' combined 21,336 followers. Dani still runs nhltweetup.com as a labor of love, and now Mike manages social media for the NHL.

Do you support your fans and buy them beer, or are you trying to get them to stop abusing your logo and misquoting your slogans? When someone on your staff wants to spend money to help them, do you promote him or tell him to go back to his day job?

Genzyme is a pharmaceutical company. It makes a product that can help with knee pain: Synvisc-One is an artificial lubricant, injected right into the knee joint. It helped my father keep playing tennis at age 77. Christine Waite, associate director of consumer marketing, had done surveys showing that 80% of Synvisc-One customers were ready to recommend the product. So she worked with a company called HealthTalker to find people who had had the treatment and were willing to talk about it. They registered online, got educated on how to talk about the treatment, and got little brochures to hand out to others. The 450 participants in the HealthTalker program generated 1,500 conversations in the first three months.

Do you shut down new ideas because your industry is regulated? Or do you work with creative thinkers who want to use technology to connect with customers and help them find ways to succeed within your regulatory framework?

Treating your customers as a potential marketing channel takes a new way of thinking. It means embracing "half-baked ideas," as Best Buy CMO Barry Judge puts it--finding marketing innovation, supporting it, and helping to roll it out.

If you're ready to embrace this force for your brand, here's what to do: First, get your brand ideals ingrained in your most innovative employees. Encourage them. See what they come up with. Support them. Clear a path for them and find them resources. When they make mistakes, pick them up and get them innovating again.

Only empowered employees can operate at the speed of empowered customers. They're ready to generate your next great marketing idea--if you let them.

Josh Bernoff is senior vice president of Idea Development at Forrester Research and the co-author of Empowered: Unleash your Employees, Energize your Customers, and Transform your Company (Harvard Business Review Press, 2010).