The Interactive Agency

– A Creature of the Past?

Twenty years ago, the media landscape was vibrating with the buzz generated by a brand new type of communications service provider: the interactive agency. In the wake of the dotcom crash, however, things quickly changed and it would now seem that the integrated marketing- and IT services once offered by the interactive agency have been assimilated by and split up between the ad agency and the IT-consultancy. So, is the interactive agency thereby out for the count, or is it still a viable business? Is there still a need for it?

1. The Interactive Agency: a Conduit Between Marketing and IT

As a web designer and developer, I much too often start working with a client, meeting with either the marketing side or the IT side of a corporation (depending on the nature of the assignment), and eventually stumble upon the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in the board room that no-one wants to talk about. There is a rift that goes straight down the middle of the organization: Marketing and IT just won't talk to each other! They often see each other as completely unrelated even though they often serve as opposite sides of the same coin. Sometimes they even outright sabotage each other's work, in what amounts to a petty turf war over budgets, or the ears of the board of directors.

This is in itself not a mystery - IT and marketing people come from completely different worlds and don't speak the same language. IT people deal in logic and talk about usability, functionality and the distribution of information. Marketing people, on the other hand, are purveyors of emotion and talk about impact, communication and the purpose of persuasion.

I submit that the interactive agency is the cure for this communicative ailment, simply because web agencies straddle the divide between IT and marketing.

On one hand, web agencies are savvy to how networked computers form the nervous system of a modern corporation. They realize what information technology can bring in terms of opening up communication channels, both within and and outside a company. They understand how pro-curement-, inventory-, logistics- and sales processes relate to business system platforms. They know how to make data work for you and how to make data in any form a shared and moldable commodity across the organization, ensuring that it can be properly capitalized upon.

On the other hand, web agencies also understand user experience and how to make it adhere to strategic brand directives. They can translate core values into interactive principles and help maximize both the impact and retained emotional and intellectual substance of a marketing campaign. They can integrate a multitude of media types and help marketing transcend the limitations of one single channel. They know how to make marketing more precise, talking one-to-one instead of blindly broadcasting to an unknown, unspecified mass audience. And, most importantly, they know how to let interactivity take your marketing from mere communication to actual transaction, involving IT on the commerce end, producing measurable results that go straight into the bottom line.

In fact, one-on-one customer interaction should really be considered critical for all types of businesses, in order to create new opportunities, and capitalize on them. Appropriately, where traditional marketing usually takes the form of a monologue, web-based interactivity creates a dialogue between sender and recipient. This closes the gap between communication and actual transaction, creating clear return on marketing investments. Interactivity also paves the way for increased brand awareness and customer loyalty and lays a foundation for strong, sustainable long-term customer relations. This way, interactivity can help marketing achieve concrete sales effects that are clearly visible on the bottom line.

And this is where marketing and IT need some help. On their own, their budgets are often spent one-dimensionally on somewhat lopsided, more or less self-serving efforts, where true ROI is but a distant goal.

2. Marketing: the Lure of the Pitch

After the dotcom sector went belly-up in the late 90s, web agencies lost their footing and allowed the ad agencies to catch up in the digital domain. The result was a very significant paradigm shift in the way digital channels are handled, both in terms of strategic relevance, budgeting and execution. Suddenly, for good or bad, all websites and online services were treated as part of a general marketing toolbox, even though the craftsmen involved clearly didn't yet quite know how to handle those tools.

Essentially, many ad agencies are still lacking the proper methodical foundation to integrate their brand-oriented services with what is at least to some degree a technical, user-driven channel. There is no clear concept in the marketing world what interactivity means in communicative terms. The client-server paradigm does not translate directly to broadcasting. Front-end technology cannot be seen as an extension of advertising, no more than back-end technology is analogous to fulfillment services. And online social networking cannot, and should not, be treated as a marketing free-for-all.

Nowhere is this lack of understanding more apparent than in the case of The Pitch.

When agencies go fishing for website assignments, you often see them baiting the hook with a spiffy-looking free pitch: an early stab at a design that was never actually commissioned. This

reveals a highly superficial attitude towards website development and is in reality nothing but a ruse; a poorly concealed sales-gimmick that poses as the real deal.

You would think most prospective clients would see through this ploy and pass up what incredulously purports to be a free lunch. Sadly, however, many fish are hooked by the lure of a supposedly finished product, and are reeled in thinking it's going to be a budget friendly deal, since so much work appears to be done already. But in the end, these projects almost unequivocally flounder, and end up being thrown back into the proverbial lake.

NO METHOD TO THE MADNESS

Pitches have been a common element in almost all forms of marketing since the ad men on Madison Avenue actually wore ties. But when it comes to websites, expecting a design pitch to solve real communication problems is nothing short of wishful thinking.

Just like an architect would never begin designing a house by choosing fabrics and wallpapers, a webdesigner should not be allowed to form visual preferences prematurely. The visual appearance of a website is quite simply not what makes it tick.

That is not to say that the look-and-feel of a website isn't important – quite the contrary. Websites are windows to the rest of the world and are as such increasingly important extensions of corporate brands and visual identities. But until you know exactly where you want to place your windows, whom you want to have peek inside and exactly where you want to direct their eyes, it would be pointless to plan for which window treatments to use.

In the case of the uncommissioned pitch, there is typically no method and no analysis - only the somewhat random playing with styles. A pitch is by its very definition a sales process deprived of substance: an attempt to conjure up the semblance of communi-cative coherence or meaning, where no foundation for either has been established. This is simply because the pitch was never intended to be a solution to anything. The pitch is a sales tool and as such only aims to please, or else it will fail its purpose.

Thus, setting an ad agency loose on its own, starved of information and direction, to throw colors, décors, fonts and layouts at the proverbial wall to see what sticks, is not the right way to start.

DESIGNING INTERACTIVITY

Apple's CEO and evangelist Steve Jobs cleverly, and perhaps inadvertently, expressed the nature of interactive design like this:

"Most people make the mistake of thinking design is what it looks like. People think it's this veneer – that the designers are handed this box and told, 'Make it look good!' That's not what we think design is. It's not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works."

Design in this respect is quite unlike art. It exists to serve a purpose and does not float suspended inside a bubble, free of obligations and ties to the outer world.

The perhaps most prominent role graphic design has to fulfil when it comes to website development is the enabling of interaction. If it can be said to be the programmer's task to create the technical framework and functionality, then it is the designer who is responsible for creating clarity, cohesion and, ultimately, usability. In this context, the graphic designer functions not only as a communicator but, more importantly, more like an industrial designer. And this is clearly not a discipline that quite fits into the modus operandi of an ad agency.

The steps on the stairway to a perfect website represent multitudes of questions - some of them communicative and some of them technical in nature. For whom does the site exist; which emotional and intellectual response is desired? Is the purpose of the website to stimulate some form of behaviour? If so, how is this behaviour channeled into concrete action? In what way, shape or form should the user's interaction be allowed to surface, and how is this interaction to be encouraged and resolved? Is the site meant to be used often or rarely? How can the site be kept topical and updated? Will the site accumulate any form of user generated data, and how is this to be processed and evaluated, once gathered? These are all questions that affect web development on a very fundamental level.

Until these questions have been asked and adequately answered, you can safely assume that any visual product prematurely presented will be nothing but fluff.

When presented with a polished but uncommissioned design pitch, what you really should be asking yourself this: is the pitch in itself a sign that the pitching agency is truly the best and most adequate producer available to develop your website? Or is it simply proof that you've just met the most desperate one?

3. IT: the Antithesis to Branding?

If, on the other hand, your website development project starts with a visit to an IT-consultancy, you may unwittingly find yourself putting the cart before the horse with one fundamentally flawed assumption: "If you build it, they will come".

IT-consultancies are experts at telling you how to build, how to host and how to manage your website, but are rarely very pro-active when it comes to actually getting people to visit it. If there is ever a thought devoted to driving traffic to a website, it can most commonly be summed up in three words: Search engine optimization. Which essentially means the consultants propose to make your website easier to find through common search engines. This decidedly passive approach is usually where the communicative outreach of an IT-consultancy ends.

HOMOGENIZATION NEGATES BRAND BUILDING

Instead, the next major step in the process for an IT-consultancy is typically dealing with the management of content, meaning they want to build you a system to help keep your website updated. This is another example of backwards thinking, providing you with the tools to create

and distribute content, before helping you determine what content would actually be worth distributing, and how this could possibly further your business goals.

At this point, it must be understood that IT is not a tool for strategic brand building, particularly if we as an example examine the governing principles of content manage-ment systems (CMS). In fact, the process of CMS development and implementation is fundamentally very often on a direct collision course with strategic branding goals.

Whether intentional or not, the mechanics of most content management systems are by necessity geared towards convenience, simplicity and standardization. A CMS does not in itself encourage a brand-oriented outlook, where the aim would be to find a viable brand position and set yourself apart from the competition. Instead, a CMS acts as a proverbial meat grinder which molds all communicative content in the same generic form. A CMS, by proxy of the principle of least resistance, rewards adherence to pre-defined, generic design directives. And reversely, by being a standardized tool of templates, it does not facilitate out-of-the-box thinking or the pursuit of the communicatively unique.

A CMS is essentially just an administrative tool; a technical facilitator that has no in-herent value in marketing terms. It does not refine or process whatever communicative raw material goes in and, sadly, there is usually no compensation for any lack of brand awareness or guidance in this process. It places administrative people in a precarious broadcasting position, where quite commonly insufficient attention is given to company core values and brand image. Consequently, the corporate identity that is being projected through the prism of a CMS is very often vague and uncoordinated at best, or distorted and outright inappropriate at worst. The end result is a diluted brand, as well as a waste of marketing money and opportunity.

KNOWLEDGE CANNOT REPLACE INTEREST

Finally, a word about the difference between understanding and motivation.

IT-consultants are fond of flaunting a term called usability. This is essentially a method for testing and analyzing human-computer interaction, where it is assessed whether the user is being given the right tools and the right information to adequately assimilate the content. This method often takes center stage when IT consultants are left in charge. But while it is certainly useful from a pedagogical perspective, structuring a website so that the user merely understands how to use it is simply not sufficient. If the user does not want to use a website, the empirical knowledge of how to use it is largely inconse-quential. Therefore, the content must also be packaged in a way that the user is emotionally motivated to partake of it.

A recent survey conducted by Carleton University in Ottawa determined that users form their impressions of a website and its visual appeal/clarity/usability within the first 20th of a second of visiting it. Even more surprisingly, these first impressions colored the entire experience of the site, whether or not the whole site actually turned out to match that initial perception. Furthermore, the conclusion of the survey was that this first im-pression was "unlikely to involve cognition" – meaning it is largely an emotional response.

Understanding without motivation usually provides unsatisfactory results. The reverse combination, however, is not necessarily equally flawed. There are plenty of examples in human-computer interaction where the user's cognitive understanding is initially very low, but where he or she is emotionally motivated to explore, discover and eventually attain insight. I am talking of course of computer games, a salient example of how interactivity actually works.

4. The fusion of marketing and information technology

It is clear that the logical mechanics of IT and the emotional workings of marketing are worlds apart, and that both are suffering because of it. The left brain and the right brain simply cannot work independently.

The solution to the described lack of integration and synergy between these two disciplines is to be found within the fundamental core principles of the interactive agency: the fusion of marketing and information technology.

So don't count out the interactive agency, it's not dead yet. In fact, you may find it is needed more than ever before.

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