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Want to Engage Consumers in a Digital World? Don't Think Digital, Think Human

People crave connection, self-expression, and exploration. Today's winning companies are tapping into these basic human needs, both online and offline.

With access to virtually anything anytime, consumers have the power in their fingertips to move through large numbers of offers and pick the one that is "just right" for them there and then. Businesses and brands are watching in awe, using words like "disruption" and "challenging times" to describe their new reality— one that is changing fast and giving the word "competition" a whole new meaning. In this context, the quest for consumer engagement is becoming the holy grail of business. Whether they try to protect store traffic or increase the time consumers spend on their websites, everyone is seeking to engage: more people, more time, more often.

To achieve that, businesses must first understand why consumers are so "hooked" on digital technology in the first place. This shift hasn't happened just because consumers have great technology at an affordable price or because they jumped on the technology bandwagon to make things a little easier or a little more interesting. This is something much deeper than affordability, accessibility, or simplicity: It's really about a few basic human needs.

Simply put, digital technologies have caught fire because they address three core human needs: the need for **connection** with other humans, the need for **self-expression**, and the need for **exploration**. Wrapped up in the seductive ribbon of convenience, there has never been a better formula for consumer engagement. Understanding the human side of the digital revolution will be a key success factor for businesses trying to compete in a digital world.

Let's Explore...

The human need for connection

Our need to connect with other humans is as important to our well-being as food and shelter. We are social beings, and we thrive on our connection with others. But in our global village where time is scarce and where migration separates friends and family, it has become increasingly difficult to find quality time for those we care about most. Communication applications and social networks such as Facebook address our very basic need to be connected with other people, to be part of a community, team, or family. Grandparents show off grandchildren, a young couple gets engaged, a baby is born, a prom dress is bought, friends get together, and someone dies. Facebook today is like "Kodak Moments" of the past—

a capture of life fragments that can be shared with those we love, at an unthinkable speed and with the gratification of "likes."

The human need for self-expression

We all have our opinions about world events or the latest TV show but never before have we been able to broadcast these opinions so widely, and to people we don't even know. Digital technology allows us to express ourselves and to be heard. Twitter, Facebook, and other social networks not only enable us to express our views, but also give voice to the voiceless—abused girls in a remote part of the world, or oppressed citizens raising their voices against dictatorial regimes.

Customer review platforms allow everyone to give feedback, whether it's about the spa service they got, the restaurant they visited, or the book they just read. Who would have thought that so many people would take the time to review these things in detail? But they do! And by doing so, power shifts to the consumer.

Another aspect of self-expression is provided by platforms such as Pinterest, Tumblr, and Instagram that allow everyone to be a photographer, a designer, or a curator of "moments" or "favorite things." And as in the famous song, people do feel better when they are connected to their favorite things—and they keep coming back for more.

The human need for exploration

Curiosity is a key behavioral driver. It has propelled some humans to the moon and others to the star constellation of gossip-column celebrity. We are curious beings. Whether you are curious about the Kardashians or the latest advancements in stem cell research, it's all out there for you to explore. Every day there are close to six billion Google searches and about 10 million Wikipedia visits. Every week, five to seven TED talks are published; this January, TED announced its one-billionth view. The success of countless number of sites devoted to in-depth knowledge on topics from art to medicine is a testimony to our innate curiosity.

So What Does It All Mean?

There is no doubt that consumer engagement is a top-of-mind topic for business leaders and that the common approach of "let's meet the customers where they are" has grown outdated. Just having a website, a Facebook page, or a Twitter feed is not sufficient. True consumer engagement takes much more. To engage consumers, businesses have to think differently—they have to look in the mirror and ask how well they address these three core human needs. Some companies can serve as good examples of how this is done online and offline.

Burberry, the luxury fashion house, has over the past few years transformed itself into one of fashion's most dynamic brands. One key element of its success was the understanding that communities can spur a brand to new heights and are the basis for loyalty and advocacy. Burberry created an online community that today has 17 million Facebook fans and counting. It is a place where the brand brings together its current and future customers and allows them to be connected with each other and with the brand. Burberry has also tapped into self-expression with "The Art of the Trench," which allows customers to express their individual styles through posts on Instagram or Pinterest. This initiative had 20 million unique visitors on various platforms in its first three years.

Another example is **Nike,** which not long ago was famous for its TV ads featuring the biggest sports stars. Today it has become a leader in building digital connections with its customers. Its Nike+ running app reached 18 million users in August last year, allowing everyday and weekend athletes to track their runs and share their results online. And its NIKEiD allows customers to design their own Nike gear, tapping into consumers' desire for self-expression. These steps have pulled Nike customers closer to the brand than ever before.

The concept works not only in the online world but also in the brick-and-mortar realm, where retailers, food services, and others are seeking to engage consumers and protect traffic. One interesting example is **Samsung**'s popup showroom in New York's SoHo neighborhood, which had been intended to be a short-term holiday store, yet remained open well into the spring. Why? "Because our customers love it," one store associate told me.

This Samsung store showcased the company's technology as well as its ability to engage consumers and address the three basic human needs. There was a central coffee counter where customers sit together and order coffee using Samsung's latest tablets. There was a design studio where customers design their own bags, take photographs, or print medallions on 3D printers. There was a play area for children, and a large number of devices to explore, from tablets to phones to multifunctional watches.

Several brands have tapped into the self-expression need, using co-creation to create deeper engagement. Online clothing seller **ModCloth** lets its thousands of social media followers choose what the store will sell, and invention company **Quirky** has grown quickly by helping inventors get ideas off the ground and then selling them on its website or in the physical stores of retail partners. Quirky has not only addressed the need for self-expression and creativity but has built one of the most engaged online communities.

These examples not only demonstrate how powerful the notion of addressing human needs is, but also indicate how the role companies play in their industry or society is changing. It is no longer just about selling products and services. Going forward, leading companies will play multiple roles that transcend the transaction:

1. The community builder. Whether online or offline, the notion of community has always done miracles for businesses. From the cozy environment of a Starbucks café and the communal table at Le Pain Quotidien to the online communities of Burberry and Nike+, rallying consumers around a common interest, idea, or value gives them reasons to come back, engage, and advocate for a brand. Good community builders are good entertainers; like every gracious host they know when to be at the center and when to step back and let their guests take center stage.

2. The conversationalist. To drive self-expression, one must first be willing to have a conversation, be open to feedback, and take risks. Having a Facebook page means allowing consumer sentiment, positive or negative, to be there in the open. The idea of "brand control" is slowly becoming obsolete, but as brands "lose control" they "gain engagement." Good conversationalists are provocative, encourage openness, and ignite creativity that ultimately enriches the community and the brand.

3. The educator. To satisfy consumers' curiosity and need for exploration, companies are increasingly assuming the roles of educator and storyteller. From teaching consumers about their brand and its history to offering "how-to" videos for cosmetics or recipes for food and drinks, companies are seeking to develop new and interesting content to bring consumers back to their stores or websites.

So there you have it—three core human needs driving consumer engagement and informing three new roles for companies and brands. In many ways it is quite simple. After all, even in a fast-changing sophisticated world, we are all still looking for the same things we've always wanted—the feeling of community, the ability to express ourselves, and the freedom to explore.

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