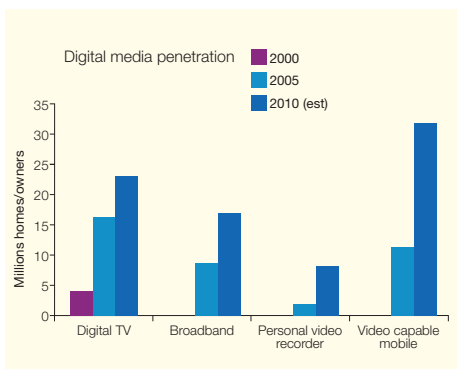


Brands in the digital age

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It is tempting for any era to see itself as the one in which change has been most rapid. In the UK, the Romans transformed travel by building roads, Caxton's printing press led to the more rapid distribution of thoughts and ideas and John Logie Baird's invention of TV eventually allowed millions of us to enjoy entertainment simultaneously. All were great signifiers of change, but all were developments that took time to build, become established and ultimately almost ubiquitous. We are currently in an era where new technology is invented, distributed and adopted in unbelievably short time spans. Consumer appetite for such products remains significant and companies and brands are desperately trying to at least keep up to speed with the effects of such rapid change. The trends are clear in digital media – ownership is rising, and rising fast.



Source: Enders Analysis/Ofcom/PHD Media Ltd

The rapid advent of the digital age has meant one thing above all others – more content (i.e. information and entertainment) is accessible by more people through more devices than at any time in history. Therefore it is crucial that brand communications are able to cut through this mass of supply efficiently and effectively. The explosion of content identified above comes primarily from two sources – professional producers and communities of consumers. A strategy is needed to deal with each.

1. Professionally produced content – on TV, in movies, on websites, via e-mail, on mobiles. Laws are changing to allow traditional media the greater freedoms enjoyed by newer media (keep an eye out for the updated European Television Without Frontiers legislation). Brands need to develop a strategy that has a central idea that can be played out in every circumstance from a one-line e-mail to a 24-hour-a-day TV channel. Compelling individual content is required as consumers become increasingly accustomed to pulling information to them, not having it pushed at them in an interruptive fashion. Brands will have to integrate themselves within content instead of hovering at the edges. A brand's communication needs to be interactive, to have the ability to give more appropriate (and maybe more entertaining) information as and when necessary.

2. Personally produced content. Your brand is out there now – go to Google's blog service and type in your company or brand name and you will be shocked. How brands react to this will be vital in the future. The power of the PC is formidable and with simple pieces of kit consumers can take a brand and do what they like with it – recommend it, denigrate it, change it, cut it, edit it, ridicule it, embrace it and then have their views and opinions distributed unbelievably quickly. The importance of a clear strategy to deal with blogs cannot be overstated.

Once in these environments, brands need to have something to say. Ask yourself, if your product didn't exist, would your brand's values still be relevant? On a positive front, the opportunities are great as consumers are grouping into smaller communities of interest. This is great news for brands which can deliver greater personalisation and/or relevance of message without having to use proxy research methods to attempt to minimise audience wastage.

So what should brand owners do? Well it largely depends of course on the brand and the sector. Digital media in itself doesn't make

a brand sexier, faster, better value or more loveable. However, companies can begin to affect opinions, thoughts and emotions through engaging the consumer. So now the aim for brand communications should be to deliver: right values, right place, right time, right price, right message *and* be interesting, entertaining and interactive. Here are some rules for how a brand can engage with consumers (as identified by John Grant¹ and others):

- **Assist** – make the brand, category and related categories easily available to view, experience and purchase
- **Enable** – make it easier to achieve a goal
- **Reward** – make the relationship with the brand worthwhile
- **Inform** – let the best customers know first
- **Entice** – communicate in the right language through genuine specialists
- **Embrace** – engage in a genuine dialogue: if product X or service Y isn't as good as it should be then sort it out publicly. That's a lot cheaper than buying back a 'lost' customer.

Digital media allows the consumer to become a powerful vector for a brand. Of course this has always been the case through what is recognised as the most powerful form of marketing – word-of-mouth. Now for word-of-mouth read word-of-keyboard, for where individuals used to be able to influence a handful of friends and family members, they can now reach thousands of a brand's best prospects on a daily basis.

It will be perfectly feasible to manage a brand without acknowledging any of this. However in the long term don't expect to grow or even maintain market share if you don't, because the best customers are likely to be heading elsewhere.

¹ Author of *The Brand Innovation Manifesto – How to Build Brands, Redefine Markets and Defy Conventions* (2006), John Wiley and Sons and co-founder of advertising agency St Luke's.