

COLUMNS

## Why marketing is selling mobile short

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By **Thom Kennon**

One year ago this fall I wrote in the pages of Mobile Marketer ([see story](#)) a piece which suggested marketers do something that seemed to me at the time pretty simple try putting mobile at the center, not the outer rings of your next campaign. With rare exception the reaction was fairly unanimous: you must be kidding.

Since then I have evolved.

I have changed my thinking and sing a new tune. I no longer believe that mobile needs to move to the starting point of our channel and media strategies.

Chained to change

This past year has taught me, as challenging as it might seem to some brand managers and marketers, that such a worthy exercise would be easy compared to what I think the actual task at hand startlingly has become.

Mobile, as way of understanding, reaching and engaging with your customers, is not just the life-giving sun around which we should craft the orbit of our emerging channel marketing campaigns. It is the most likely candidate to become the beating heart of your brand itself.

Sound whacky, unimaginable? Imprecise, undoable? Hysterical, pollyanish? Maybe. But not to me.

I reckon it does not sound too nuts to brands such as Ralph Lauren and Subway or Sephora and H&R Block or even ESPN and AOL.

Do not just look at the campaigns and content extensions these companies are launching. Look at the very essence of their evolving brand's promise and its value.

The promise of persistent availability, the promise of personal treatment and instant outcomes, real-time targeted consumer benefits. The at-your-fingertips quality of a whole new kind of always-on brand.

I read the same blogs and trade pieces and listen to the same guys on panels as you do. I am, in fact, more guilty as charged than many.

Yet I remain astonished that our colleagues continue to fret and parse tea leaves over whether "mobile" is really about CRM more than it is acquisition, or "mobile" is simply an additive media channel, or how "mobile" is really about applications (sigh) or it is really, mostly, only just about local search or redeemable coupons pushed through whizzy new locationbased services and social check-in applications.

Take a closer look at what is going on.

While I, and the rest of my esteemed pundits many of us frighteningly responsible for imagining and running all-channel campaigns for our brands and clients argue and debate over what kind of tactical beast mobile presents,

the inspired brand and product managers are quietly going about the job of re-imagining and re-tooling their businesses themselves: their brand architectures, and product strategies; their consumer propositions and their distribution networks; their retail and partner models, and, yes their advertising and their marketing programs.

They are, in no small way, transforming their brands themselves, as all around us a single, stunning fresh fact of life becomes clearer every day: mobile is changing everything.

Jury's out

I just returned from an extraordinary experience serving on an international jury for the World Summit Award in Abu Dhabi.

A truly international panel of guys such as me but smarter and, mostly, younger gathered from markets as diverse as Finland and Algeria, Kuwait and China, South Africa and Mexico.

We spent four days locked up together in an Abu Dhabi hotel judging more than 400 entrants into the WSA's first annual m-Content competition. (For more information about this incredible organization, check: <http://www.wsa-mobile.org>.)

I return to my boisterous Madison Avenue perch, poised along with you all, on the shared verge of our post-digital marketing futures, an utterly humbled global marketer.

Our 20-member jury was tasked with evaluating and assessing as many as 30 entrants each across a range of categories of mobile content, including government, media, entertainment, commerce, education, environment and healthcare.

We dissected and debated programs built around low-fi SMS programs for farmers in Uganda alongside iPhone applications that helped the handicapped navigate the complexities of the German train system.

There were mobile information and alert programs which allowed citizens to monitor their nearby power plant in Slovenia, and there were mobile tracking and feedback systems that tracked children in Sweden and elderly patients in Hong Kong.

As I reviewed and analyzed this incredibly rich, diverse trove of mobile content candidates for world-class-award status it slowly dawned on me: there were no marketing applications.

Even the business and commerce and the entertainment and media categories were utterly bereft of anything close to what we might consider a marketing or advertising or branded engagement application or program.

As day three struck midnight and our room-full of bleary-eyed international mobile mavens started to flag towards exhaustion, I myself began to fall into a mysterious and troubling funk. What was going on here?

How could the best and brightest of cutting-edge international mobile content providers, properties, programs, sites, applications and platforms have utterly left out anything even remotely approximating a mobile marketing campaign or program or, heaven help me, an application for crying out loud?!

For the rest of the intense and ultimately rewarding jury-wrangling and final voting I was distracted by this weird anomaly and pressed hard to put it out of mind. But this was not an anomaly. Something was going on, and the myopic goggles I stubbornly affix to my marketing world-view had been preventing me from seeing it.

Marketing, apparently, is not remotely relevant to mobile at least in the eyes of the thousands of content and application creators and curators who fed the fountain of eventual finalists at the WSA final adjudication process.

This was not an anomalous artifact of overly rigorous assessment it is an emerging reality, and one I failed to grasp from within my digital marketing and advertising cocoon. It is a reality that has shaken me to my core.

Adding truths

While we have been arguing over whether an iAds campaign is worth a million bucks a pop, or whether Google's bloated numbers from mobile display signal a world safe once again for old-fashioned advertisers, the rest of the world was doing with mobile what it was truly meant to do: transform people's lives.

On my trip back from the Gulf, and in that short time since popping about Manhattan, a quick trip to Richmond, VA, and this week sleepwalking just kidding, sort of about a glorious autumnal London, I have begun to pay a new-found attention to something I had been missing completely: the simple yet profoundly insightful behavior of people interacting with their mobile phones and each other

interacting with their mobile phones and each other.

I have been watching business men in pairs and gaggles on plane seats and on train platforms compulsively looking down into their hands, a one-handed communal prayer gesture that has meant the end of the two fist Journal and FT reader almost.

I have watched Arab youths pass around a sacred, shared smartphone apparently playing a game together.

I have watched cab drivers wring magic from a juggled set of motley mixed feature phones, while driving and talking with other blue-toothed hacks.

I spied two women of a certain age clearly enjoying a Sudoku match on their matching high-end Androids.

I marveled at my own daughters curled on my new, cramped bachelor's couch swipe a single, slipping hand across three keyboards in three seconds, the famous three screens melded for them into a moment uninterrupted by considerations of media or channel or touch point. Even content, for them, has morphed into near seamless perfection of community, connection, social currency.

What I have not seen is telling.

Not seeing is believing

In this admittedly random and subjectively qualitative urban ethnography, I have not seen many people clicking on or sharing the awesome campaign content or applications or display advertising you and me have been arguing over modest budgets about for the past three or four quarters.

There is something else I do not see, which is infinitely more troubling.

I do not see any one amongst us recognizing that real marketing, effective marketing, does not strive to change behavior or create new and strange behavior.

Real marketing seeks to attach to existing or even latent behavior of our customers by humbly offering up and inserting perfectly placed instants of value, maybe even magic, into the human mix of natural and multiplying mobile behaviors.

At the WSA jury gathering in Abu Dhabi I discovered something I should have already known that there is an entire planet bursting with people, people behaving like people with a new touchstone, a fresh tether to themselves and to this world.

From the dusty farms and savannahs of Kenya to the dense and humid cities of Indonesia, world citizens are using their mobile phones in ways that are changing their lives, transforming their communities, igniting local economies and connecting them to other people in ways unimaginable a few short years even months ago for many of these citizens.

Rethink mobile

I return to my original suggestion: what we as a community of brand and product marketers, application developers, platform and system providers, carriers and device manufacturers are doing borders on the bankrupt when compared to what the rest of the global mobile community of citizens, consumers and organizations are doing.

Perhaps that sounds harsh, but I mean to be urgent.

I suggest it is time to not simply move mobile onto center-stage of our marketing plans or advertising budgets. I suggest it is time we completely rethink the nature, output and effect of every inch of our brand, product and marketing roadmaps within this new context: the context of mobile.

The context of ubiquity and transparency. The context of near-frictionless distribution and reach of message and content. The context of empowered devices in the hands of people already transforming their lives in ways that could never have been foreseen in the context of the printed word or television or the Internet, or even the current heavens ruled, for now, by the gods of Google and Apple themselves.

It is time we re-thought what our brands and products are meant to be and do in this new context. How they are meant to behave.

It is time we consider mobile as not merely a marketing channel or a medium, but the very real and new ecosystem itself within which we and the brands we market will live, thrive and hopefully create meaningful value, as they transform the world of us all, humans and marketers alike.

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