

A DECADE OF ACTION: WHAT'S NEXT?

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The kickoff to 2010 means a close to the new millennium's first decade – a decade in which marketing to consumers has experienced nothing short of a transformation. As a double major in business and history in college – often at odds with one another – I am invoking one of my history professors who urged us to look to the past to learn from for the future.

As everyone knows, the theme from the last decade has been the emergence of the empowered consumer around the world. These consumers can be a brand's worst enemy – see Dave Carroll, the musician whose guitar was destroyed on a United Airlines flight and who subsequently was viewed 6 million times singing about the incident on YouTube, resulting in a drop in stock price. Even more important is to study the positive impact that consumers can have on brands when they champion them. In my own life, I would not wear Essie Chinchilly nail polish or wear my Frye boots devotedly were it not for my girlfriend who passionately advocated for both. Likewise, I have turned many a friend and colleague on to my morning beverage of choice – the grande nonfat, no whip, white chocolate mocha from Starbucks. I truly believe my day would not start on the right foot without it.

At Edelman, we call this tipping point Consumer Actionism.

Let's look at the past decade for signs that confirm that consumers – when empowered to take action – often get it right.

“IDOL” EFFECT

Look at the juggernaut that is the “Idol” (American Idol, X Factor, Britain's/America's Got Talent) effect. In the last decade, consumers evangelized for Kelly Clarkson, Leona Lewis, Carrie Underwood, David Cook and Susan Boyle, and with one possible exception (see Taylor Hicks), consumers have gotten it right. Consumers' love of these unknowns have propelled them to win these high-profile talent contests and more importantly, made Clarkson and Underwood some of the most successful entertainers of the decade. Consumer Actionism made the Susan Boyle audition the No. 1 YouTube video of the year and propelled her to global stardom. After Boyle's current reign as the No. 1 selling album in the world to close 2009, there is every sign that these consumer-chosen, global artists will continue to dominate the music industry.

SLAUGHTERING THE COMPETITION

The horror film industry truly bookended the decade with perfect examples of the power of consumers who evangelize for a brand. The film Paranormal Activity, the first major film release “decided by you,” ceded power to the passionate consumers of horror films and let them advocate for it online and demand national distribution via Demand It technology. By the time it opened against the more traditionally marketed Saw VI – it blew the franchise away at the box office and continued to dominate the competition. Long before the digital advancements of 2009, The Blair Witch Project showed the power of consumers taking action around a low-budget horror movie when people rapidly spread word of mouth that helped generate \$248 million at the box office. That's quite a return, considering the final

budget for the movie was approximately \$500,000. Now, I'm not exactly what you would call a horror movie fan – but I think it is safe to say that both of these films, dependent on consumers' advocacy, represent the best of the best in their genre for the past decade.

SOCIAL PURPOSE AS SOCIAL STATUS

This is also the decade where consumers are taking action by displaying their social purpose as a new form of social status – a tremendous opportunities for brands. This was the decade that men and women showcased how they Live Strong, rallied around a little hybrid called the Prius, decla(RED) their support for the plight in Africa, turned down paper and plastic for environmentally friendly grocery bags, turned October into a rallying cry around supporting women with breast cancer, partnered with Dove to challenge the beauty industry on what Real Beauty really means and went into Häagen-Dazs to purchase ice cream that saves honey bees.

THE IMPACT OF I

Brands thrived when they gave consumers the ability to personalize and evangelize for them. Ipod, of course, led the notion that consumers want technical advancement that empowers them to customize their set list. The music industry will never be the same and has experienced some hiccups keeping pace. Ditto the emergence of gourmet coffee and Starbucks, which makes coffee 3,000 ways, yet everyone feels like they have a drink of their very own. And my personal favorite, the Tivo, has single-handedly changed how we consume television by giving complete power to the consumer over what to watch and when to watch it – transforming the advertising industry in the process.

At the turn of the millennium, we couldn't have predicted what was coming but there is now no doubt that we as marketers have had to evolve swiftly to meet the demand of consumers. Moving into 2010 and beyond, it will be interesting to see which brands cling to the past and which brands seize the opportunity to become a catalyst for consumers to take action.