

IT'S COMPLICATED

Christina Smedley, Global Chair, Consumer Marketing

When “It’s Complicated” – the movie that turned some traditional stereotypes of women over 50 upside down in an amusing fashion – opened in cinemas worldwide, it struck me that this was a good way of summing up what it’s like to be thinking about brands, marketing and consumers in 2010. You don’t have to have been in the marketing or public relations workforce in 2000, or even 2007, to be aware of stereotypical consumer behaviours changing. It’s generally said that the rules don’t exist anymore and that chaos reigns. I’m not so sure that is completely true, or perhaps I just can’t rid myself of rules, rather I’d like to say instead that it’s complicated.

For sure there’s a new creative in town – consumers – who will participate with brands on their own terms but they also are forming, as individuals and as groups, new parameters of engagement. And as we attempt to reach consumers with campaigns that they respond to and inspire them to action, it’s worth thinking about what we might want to call “new rules lite” (NRL for short).

To help me in this as I travelled around this last quarter, over a few light refreshments, I asked four marketers in London, Mexico, Singapore and Kentucky (to represent the U.S.) what was complicated and what version of NRL might apply. I’ve added in some of the opportunities we at Edelman are watching closely.

It’s complicated because there’s so much, to read, absorb, look at, pass along, think about, be part of, to engage with. Not that we are complaining – we have almost effortlessly added waves of information to our lives. It’s estimated we now receive more than 400 messages daily from a variety of different sources. Note that it’s not just online and is more in some countries, although my Chinese colleagues said it is as low as 150 in some Tier 3 cities. And with this swirl of information and content around us we are seeing a distinct opportunities for brands.

NRL: Find your influentials. The rise of what at Edelman we call action consumers. These are those individuals who act as the catalysts for the communities they exist in and, by the way, the traditional way of dividing consumers by traditional demographics isn’t enough anymore. For instance, a mom cannot merely be characterized as a woman with children. We have to take into account age, lifestyle, hobbies and community.

These action consumers are our filters – the people who we trust to give us the right answer when we have a question or who know where to get the best answer or who could start a conversation online, which will end up with a mass gathering. We believe campaigns that put these groups or individuals at the center will produce waves of reverberation which generate deeper and more committed brand engagement. And to be clear, this isn’t a popularity contest as popularity online doesn’t necessarily indicate influence either on or off line.

It’s complicated because we’re moving constantly. We all carry our worlds with us on our mobile devices, from the pictures of our loved ones to the information we need in our pocket. We are no longer

alone, even in busy places. In Brazil, Twitter updates let the citizens of Rio de Janeiro know of traffic problems, and it's just the tip of the iceberg. In 2009, the United Nations estimated there were more than 4 billion mobile phone subscriptions worldwide with more than two-thirds of them in developing countries. In 2009, eBay buyers and sellers globally generated more than half a billion dollars of transactions via mobile applications (eBay is a client). That's a whole heap of shopping going on. For sure, mCommerce is here to stay. But there's a deeper change happening, too, involving the physical interaction we have in store with the information we can get in our hands. It will change the way we will begin to make purchases and how we act at retail stores.

NRL: There has to be a mobile part to every campaign targeting consumers. Brands need to be ready with their solutions in providing the information consumers are looking for – be it details of a location, answering a product question, providing information about a better price or sending gift certificates and money to friends.

It's complicated because engagement is faster than the speed of type. Think back to where you were on June 25, 2009. Surely you haven't forgotten what happened that day? And, no, it wasn't Portugal playing Brazil in the Rugby World Cup in South Africa. That was the day Michael Jackson died and en masse audiences in multiple countries turned to social networks for news, something we are seeing more and more in the political arena in places like Iran or the hundreds of thousands of i-Reporters on CNN.

NRL: All brands and companies now must have their speed-of-type plan created to enable information to flow freely through reliable and trusted sources in multiple formats – this isn't just crisis preparation, this is everyday preparation.

It's complicated because we know better, or think we do. We can write reviews better, tell stories through blogs better and share information better. As a matter of fact we know what we want better than mysterious lab technicians or manufacturers. This answers a rising need to participate and have a view – Nokia, Starbucks (a client), Volvo and Electrolux have all brought products to market which were heavily influenced by their target consumers.

NRL: Enter stage left the new all-knowing DIY brand builders and the rise of consumer-to-consumer marketing. We recommend brands should consider how to co-create with their target audiences from new product development to experiential labs where consumers can be in-the-know from early in the process. This gives brands the chance to respond to negative reviews by pointing to other "real people" involved in the product creation.

It's complicated because we want to do good but are not giving up what we really, really want. Consumers have changed, the global recession has changed our value set (even if just for a short while) but – and this is important – we have not stopped making purchases or wish lists; we're just doing it in a more reflective manner.

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Participation with charities and causes is up. Financial giving is also holding steady, even in times when many are facing hardship at home. Consumers expect companies to both put something back and make a difference. Look at the outstanding success of IKEA's Sunnan LED light, which is solar powered. For every one bought, IKEA gives one to people in refugee camps.

NRL: It's not just about giving money. Campaigns should enable consumers to make a difference themselves, and in this increasingly virtual world, we think physically bringing this to life for people, too, is important. There's a small sense of community that comes in knowing the light on your dresser is the same as one in a village in Africa.

It's complicated because we are all the same but are so very different. We all watch the same TV shows, movies and online videos wherever we are in the world. In the space of three weeks, I had the same conversation about a YouTube video in five different countries (yes, it was Susan Boyle), and they were all a little different. Our sameness comes from the fact that we are impacted by other countries and cultures wherever we are in the world. I know for sure I was happy to hear that Indian food is likely to take off mainstream in the U.S. in 2010. On our differences, we can't just mass group consumers together anymore. Take that elusive group commonly known as Millennials. Mention them in most marketing meetings, and everyone sagely talks about young people. Well, yes they are, but the oldest Millennials are now 30 and many have children. It's a hugely influential and powerful group and we at Edelman through our 8095 team are exploring their differences to build campaigns that reflect their globalness but also the individuality.

NRL: Although you might be focused on Milan, Italy, there's a chance that someone in Minnesota, USA, or Mumbai, India, might also become aware of your campaign. This movement is critically important for the global brands we work with. But also there is the need to supply multiple inflection points for consumers who may appear to be the same but are really quite different to participate.

It's complicated because it doesn't have to be perfect. This is a hard one for us perfectionists. I often refer to the new game of "pass the electronic parcel" in groups of people. It's when a cell phone is passed to another person or a laptop is swung around in a meeting so that a new funny video, post or song can be shared or a photo checked out. Despite the increase in sales and drop in prices of high-def TVs, we are quite happy seeing content, listening to music or looking at photos on tiny screens. It's almost as though we value the home-madeness of them all – just as long as we can pass them to someone else in a physical setting.

NRL: It's about the instant, and brands need to find ways to be current and part of social fabric in a moment. This means letting go of some of the high-resolution ads we've seen in the last decade, not that we are suggesting that quality should be undermined, more that taking a fresh look at content is critical.

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So, yes, it's complicated. But like the movie, it's funny, uplifting and game-changing. For my focus group of four, we all agreed there's never been a better time to be building global campaigns, and we're quite looking forward to breaking a few more stereotypes as we go into this next decade.