

Brand of the Year 2020

Brand of the Year time again. Congratulations to the winner; I'm sure it was well deserved. But I would advise them not to get too complacent because I am convinced that the winner of Brand of the Year in 2020 will be a brand that doesn't yet exist using approaches and techniques we haven't yet thought of. This is because I think there are some seismic shifts happening that will require a reinvention of the marketing profession.

When change happens in our world, it can be fundamental, fast and permanent. In 1890, over half of all consumer advertising was for Patent Medicine brands; 10 years later, their spend was insignificant and most of the brands had perished. The charlatans and tricksters had finally been exposed for their broken brand promises and the shallowness of their tools. I see signs that history might be repeating itself.

Brands trade in the currency of trust, a currency that is once again being rapidly devalued. If we cannot trust Toyota to build safe cars, Maple Leaf to process meat, Mattel and McDonalds to not expose our children to lead, then who can we trust? I'm sure all those firms will vehemently protest that we can trust them...now. But I trusted them before and where did that get me? As far as it got the people once trusted such brands as Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound and Dr. Williams' Pink Pills For Pale People. Partly as a consequence of such high-profile breaches of trust, the attitude of the general public to us as an industry is changing for the worse.

This change in attitude towards us is, I believe, much stronger and more prevalent in our youth, as I became painfully aware from my daughter who last semester took a Grade 11 marketing course. And when I asked her how she felt about the course, her reply

stunned me. She said, 'Dad, how could you?' She, and a good percentage of her classmates, were outraged at the real and perceived excesses of our industry, just as readers of Ladies Home Journal had been outraged to read of the excesses of the Patent Medicine people in a series of exposés that brought down an industry. But it's not just a product category that people are becoming leery of this time around; it's the whole concept of Marketing as being a force for good. In reading a recent National Post article by Hollie Shaw I became convinced that our industry's attempt to regulate itself on advertising to children was at best a failure or more realistically a sham. Flavoured spirit brands, flavoured cigarettes, inappropriate product placements and the like are proof in the court of public opinion that we are basically no better than our snake oil salesmen forbearers.

I believe that our ever-increasing propagation of the disciplines of Marketing to today's youth and student populations is having two insidious effects on our industry. Not only are we educating a cohort of non-believers, I feel that we are like conjurors revealing to the audience the secrets of our trade. The presence of such knowledge in an increasing portion of our audience is blunting its effectiveness, in the same way that a magician gets barely a ripple of applause when doing a trick that we could all do ourselves. I saw the first signs of this a few years ago when I noticed that seemingly every focus group contained someone who was doing, or had done, a marketing course. They would then lead the discussion not with a response to the stimuli, but with an appraisal of it. Marketing was never developed to be an open resource where we all knew what was going on.

So today and tomorrow, we can no longer assume that trust is a given until we screw up and that people will respond to our tools as we assume they ought to. We have to build a

new level of trust based on an unquestioning devotion to the principle of over-delivering on both our promises and consumers' expectations of us 100% of the time. We also have to invent some new techniques and not spill the beans to see our names in print in a case study that will be being taught worldwide three weeks later.

But don't ask me what these will be, that's your job. And if you can do it, congratulations on being Brand of the Year 2020.

