

I-MARKETING.

The death of the consumer and the rise of the individual.

Featuring:

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... my name's Auro Trini Castelli ...

Of course, I am what I am.

Now, you can call me by my first name, but can you do the same with all of your clients' customers?

I would bet you can't, but you would probably love to if you could.

To put it simply, we have all come to respect the enduring tradition of calling customers “consumers,” but I think that “consumer” is a completely consumed and exhausted word. And completely out of date.

In this podcast, I'd like to cover both new marketing rules that revolve around consumers, brands and making contemporary connections. What I call *I-MARKETING. The death of the consumer and the rise of the individual.*

The consumer has always been celebrated and revered as a fundamental entity around which brands and marketing actions are developed.

However, today more than ever, the concept of the consumer, which in itself is extremely passive, has become inflated and unfashionable when compared to the active role that he or she assumes in relation to brands and companies.

To describe the role of the new consumer using a brilliant insight, we need only to quote a major advocate of individualism, a person able to give a tin of tomato soup the same importance given to the then ultra-famous Marilyn.

Forty years ago, Andy Warhol famously predicted “In the future, everybody will be world-famous for fifteen minutes.” The far-sightedness of his words is simply amazing.

Today, each consumer is increasingly “the one.”

And, to quote an Italian ad for BMW, “one like no one”.

From mere message receivers to message interpreters, from consumers of products to independent creators, from kings to leaders of a republic of their peers, today's consumers are increasingly becoming communicators, attributing new and revolutionary meanings to the mass marketing concept.

In short, marketing has never been so individual and pop.

There are many reasons for this radical change, but basically it comes down to two factors: the *speed* and *direction* of contemporary communication.

Once upon a time, lovers sent painstakingly handwritten letters to one another via the slow and romantic postal service. Today text messages have replaced this snail mail, giving rise to speed dating at warp speed.

The same thing is happening in the marketing world. More and more brands woo individuals with similar and dizzyingly simultaneous messages in multiple media markets—print, TV, radio,

outdoor and interactive—increasing the frequency and speed of contacts within the marketing relationship.

Trying to communicate with potential customers in the most individual manner possible.

Trying to make contact more than once a day, in different places throughout the individual's daily life and especially at times of psychological importance, or in symbolic places that are most in line with the message to be conveyed.

In addition to the speed factor, there is the *direction* variable of new communication that is radically changing the relationship between brands and individuals.

Once consumers are “invited” by the brand, they feel at home. They feel like welcome guests.

And they much more happily talk—positively and negatively—about the brands and the products/services they engage with.

It is here that traditional brand-consumer communication has been upturned, branching out in different directions.

Not just top-down marketing (brand-to-consumer), but also horizontal (individual-to-individual) and bottom-up (individual-to-brand).

Here is a good example: these days, when we want to gain insight on the use or function of products offered, we no longer just refer to the instruction manual or simply visit the official site.

To know the truth, it is really worthwhile checking out the user group blogs.

The most individual and welcoming brands (from a functional and emotional point of view) even see their hospitality rewarded by their audience with privileged services of the utmost quality.

Apple is the most praised example of a brand that celebrates individualism by adding “I” to the name of its most popular products.

As a result, companies can count on sites created by their devoted fans where they industriously churn out product prototypes, create innovative design solutions and discuss ideas large and small that may soon see the light of day—emblazoned with the Apple seal of quality approval.

The Apple iPhone was proposed on one of these blogs two years before its production. Early prototypes were almost identical to the current version on the market.

The blogosphere. A great parallel engine of innovation that is completely free.

Obviously, the increased number of directions that communications can now take may be extremely beneficial to companies as well as very damaging, if dialogue with the individuals is not sincere and direct.

The recent case of L’Oreal, coming under fire for its excessively striking eyelash extensions, has become the subject of a widespread series of pretense campaigns that only attacked the poor credibility of the above-mentioned marketing campaign.

So, every brand tries to reap the benefits but they must be careful not to do the opposite.

To meet the growing assertion of consumers’ individualism, many companies have even been forced to drop their compact structure and evolve towards a more diversified image and marketing mix that is more in line with the product images of their competition.

Louis Vuitton, for example, has moved from its uniform cream/brown color scheme to more varied and daring color and material combinations: primary colors, gold, silver, cherry red and even blue jeans.

In increasingly individual marketing, the key to the new connection strategies and the new communication economy is no longer based on simple *attention*, but rather on the more difficult and desired component of *attraction*.

Today more and more brands are talking to their consumers. And more and more often. Hence it is not enough to continue ringing doorbells. Companies must open their doors to their consumers.

If a brand values its clients, their ideas and their opinions, clients will be just as willing to come to its defense, celebrate it and support it.

It is not by chance that the terminology that identifies this type of individual defines them as *brand advocates* or *brand evangelists*.

To always create new ones, two-way communication is no longer enough. Communication in every direction is needed.

This approach is changing all the phases and roles of the marketing process.

Let's look at the universe of market research, for example.

BzzAgent and CoBrandiT are two clear demonstrations of how much *speaking with* is more important than *speaking to*, especially when speaking about individual consumers.

The first web-network deals with transforming the consumers into real agents (in this case public, not secret) of the brand, encouraging word-of-mouth and recording feedback and results.

CoBrandiT moves more independently but in any case relationally, studying the brand equity in more detail by collecting interpretations, perceptions and visions shared by the individuals concerning brands that they consider as out of the ordinary.

The I-Marketing Effect touches all the aspects of marketing communication, and the most intriguing are the ones that develop around the product even before the moment in which it is communicated.

The I-Effect touches all the 4Ps of Marketing. If you could just attach an “I” to each “P,” you would have an I-P which, as a matter of fact, is a way to decode individual footprints in a web perspective.

Product and Packaging and Point of Sale have the most visible impact.

A sector that follows individualism, and where packaging has always made the difference, is the *personal care* product industry.

The American company *Method – people against dirty* has made the individualism of its packaging its flag.

Already at its launch, the advice of the company designers was to include images of potential model-clients on its products.

The choice of Eric Ryan, co-founder of the company with Adam Lowry, was initially to make the latter pose as a model, since theirs was a young company unable to pay professional models.

Today Method is a successful company and, despite no typical consumer appearing on its products, they represent the triumph of individualism thanks to an entirely individual product language and marketing strategy.

As well as bringing people in on the brand naming, by the way.

The Body Wash line, for example, truly expresses the insight that the experience of the bath-shower is an intense moment of reconciliation with yourself and your individualism.

And when regeneration and individuality meet a metropolitan target market, products like *Escape Artist* appear which, with its vivid light blue coloring, represents the ideal antithesis of

monotonous and dull city living, or *Pure Minimalist*, a triumph of essential metro-modernist white.

Focusing on personal care, Victoria's Secret shows us that for a product to look sexier, it is even more credible if it is already sexy as it is.

The line *Sexy Little Things*TM and the products *Naughty Little Me*, *Tempt My Lips* and *Keep the Lights On* guarantee the user a unique and enviable look with a beauty model that is attractive and ironic at the same time.

And one thing with the individual, as their name suggests.

And what would you say about a product like water that had a transparent personality and was only differentiated by the quantity of sodium or the fact it was sparkling or still?

Today you have Voss, Tau, Bling H2O, and for each of them the robe does make the monk.

All these products get highly individualized, so today we can say that we are what we drink even when it comes to water.

And you could say the same about a product like Absolut Vodka, being mostly differentiated in the colors of its dozen tastes while dressed in fashionable black by C'N'C Costume National or in glittering mirrors in its most recent version—Absolut Disco.

Even retail, the world that rotates around the product, gets ever-changing and increasingly individual as well—reflecting the soul of each brand.

Take the American brand Threadless, for example.

An entire T-shirt company with a virtual web store, whose products are created by the fantasy of consumers, is the expression of a simple yet smart insight: why pay designers to create

successful shirts for consumers when you can ask consumers to design them for you? And for free, by the way.

Threadless has become the first brand where consumers are also producers, and where the sum of many I's creates a whole alphabet of design.

A seamless brand that doesn't divide the producer from the consumer, and the consumer from the individual.

The success of this formula led to the grand opening of a physical store in Chicago, where the brand has born.

There one can breathe the death of the old consumer-driven model, and the new breeze of I-Marketing.

By the way, each of you can become a designer.

Another bunch of examples relate temporary store phenomena, which moves the focus from fast-moving consumer goods stores to fast-moving individual spots where you can buy them.

These stores are pushing individuality forward. By lowering the cost of what would have been a shop with rigid foundations, and by making each opening a time-limited event, they allow every individual to become a store creator and owner of a new brand.

If success comes, the brand won't be a temporary one and will move from the status of an aspiring Hollywood starlet to that of an established star brand.

The most recent interpretation of temporary stores are pop-up stores, even more characterized since they appear and disappear as fast as the dawn.

The Soco Cargo Experiment, for example, is a rough container that changes its identity every single opening time and becomes whatever a brand wants it to be, then disappears the next day.

Or the Hotel Everland, an individual room hotel that sells hospitality for not more than two individuals. And changes location day by day, from the top of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris to the site of wonderful German lakes.

Day after day, it gets a new individual face and soul.

In a few words, the whole world of marketing is moving from mass marketing to individual mass marketing, or masses of individual marketing.

Consumers are less and less consumers, and increasingly brand co-creators.

They are less of a brand's target, whereas brands are becoming, willing or not, their own target.

So the future seems to be about those who know how to completely throw down the barriers between the concept of the individual and that of the consumer, between the concept of *marketing at* and *marketing with* and finally between one discipline and another.

Not doing it is the best guarantee for a strategy from the last millennium.

Or for the old consumer.

The consumer is dead. Long live the individual.