

Creating a Digital Conversation

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Technology is a funny thing. I can remember back when the first kid at school got a Walkman; at the time it felt as if the very zenith of human achievement had been reached. We wondered at how the designers had managed to squeeze all that stuff into something so tiny. We despaired at the fact that, until we got one too, we could never be as cool as that kid and his personal stereo. I mean, it had auto-reverse. You can imagine the furore when another kid trumped this Walkman pioneer by inviting us over to his house to check out his Commodore 64.

Back in the early 1980s, we tended to assume we'd be almost ready to colonise space by now. On Earth, life would be all about sipping hi-tech cocktails as we luxuriated in short work weeks and the unlimited holiday possibilities afforded by travel at twice the speed of sound. But while dwindling natural resources, global warming and the credit crunch make such ideas seem a touch naïve, progress in personal technology has been genuinely Space Age.

The launch of the second-generation iPhone marked a coming-of-age for the mobile Internet. Where once the idea that consumers would happily spend hours surfing on their mobile phones seemed fanciful, it now seems completely credible. The technology has caught up. Likewise, the communal, family-oriented Nintendo Wii and the well-populated online networks of the PS3 and Xbox Live have revolutionized the hitherto rather solitary experience of consoles and computer games.

All of these breakthroughs have had a remarkable impact on brands. Suddenly, all of those ideas that were hampered by technological restrictions have a home. Not only that, where many campaigns have been about pushing people into viral areas such as campaign sites, there is now the potential to exert a vastly more powerful “engagement factor”. They also offer a sharper focus on the brand as a whole, rather than an individual campaign.

What has catapulted us into the Space Age of technology? A combination of innovative brand content and cross-promotions, revolutionary communication channels, and new distribution options.

The possibilities for compelling branded content are now greater than ever, and some brands are already showing the way. Burger King in the U.K. recently created a series of games for the Xbox, which were sold over the counter across its restaurants. Priced at £3, the games flew off the shelves, with the chain selling an astonishing 3.8 million units in the UK. What this proves is that this kind of branded content is not only welcomed by consumers, if created and packaged in the right way, it can even create a new revenue stream.

The latest generation of consoles, the Nintendo Wii in particular, offers fascinating avenues for exploration. Thanks to its unique positioning, it has managed to make the idea of cross-generational, cross-family gaming a serious proposition. The idea of a grandmother playing against her four-year-old grandson on a Wii console is something very real, so the possibility of a brand taking on a role in that context is an exciting one. Wii games can be designed in Flash, so this is something people in our industry can get involved in immediately. If we can then cross promote them on-pack and across a fully integrated range of media, we can deliver something that offers a relevant, involving and rich brand experience that people will readily adopt and embrace.

The iPhone and its 3G contemporaries also open new doors. The number of applications downloaded at Apple's store since the second-generation iPhone launched is extraordinary – the Carling iPint (www.carling.com/ipint_details.html), for example, seems to have captured the imagination of the media as well as the public. With Google Maps, GPS and the power of the hardware to support genuinely entertaining content, the doors have been flung open to creative ideas that bring people together in a social context.

With console platforms such as X-Box Live and Sony's online PS3 hub, Playstation Home, alongside new developments such as T-Mobile's upcoming rival to iTunes, the distribution models are changing too. Add in the likes of Nokia's 'Comes with Music' service, and there are plenty of pointers towards a future of content delivered by brands.

Essentially, brands today need to view themselves as toys for consumers to play with in any way they choose because, whether brands like it or not, that's what consumers will end up doing. The beauty of so much of today's digital media is the way it allows consumers to be creative with brands, engaging with them in the process. Trading control of brand communication in return for a little influence in consumers' conversations is no bad thing, and the content we can now offer via the latest digital developments can only make those conversations more interesting. It's creating social currency, and giving brands a life beyond the static realms of traditional media.

This really is the most exciting time I've ever known in our industry. If only I could get hold of that kid with the Walkman now. I'd tell him a thing or two.