

Preparing for the End of the Web

A PROPHECY FOR MARKETING EXECUTIVES





About the Author

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I Wake Up...

06:00am

The alarm clock application in the LED TV by my bed chirps out my morning playlist. I hit the "off" button, and my schedule pops up on the screen.

I wipe the schedule aside and catch my personalized news that has learned my preferences from my DVR content filter and consumption behaviors. "You might also be interested in..." recommendations appear at the bottom from my last few day's viewings.

08:30am

I settle to work with email and collaboration updates from my threading RSS reader. Positively trending key phrases are highlighted from the highest rated and highest relevancy ranked articles and connected conversations.

The sidebar of my document generator lets me drag references and content from emails and search results, auto-generating a linked bibliography. Charts auto-populate and format, allowing me to enter my own numbers or grab them from any streaming content.

02:00pm

My feeds and auto recommendations run slim on insights, so I connect through SaaS collaboration portal with my team of analyst colleagues. I receive back chapterized videos, transcripts, studies and quotes from others' crawled presentations on related topics.

I embed interviews, microblogs and market data. I blend these into a living document of my own narrative and a trail of insights from my collaboration team and save my progress. Unlocked portions of my work become part of the content cloud that will help the next analyst find good information.

03:00pm

I thank the team from my desktop and leave them a version of the document to peer review. My mobile phone transcribes a voicemail that a chocolate teddy bear I bookmarked from a radio ad on the way to work is available on my new route home that has been calculated to avoid traffic.

03:10pm

I head home.

Where did the web go? In reality, the web has always been a series of static templates created in an era transitioning from print to today's content cloud. These templates housed information that was pushed by content contributors with a purpose in mind for each individual communication they produced. As users took over and started to define what they needed, they ignored those communications that didn't align with their own unique purposes and quit looking at pages, opting instead for more intelligent, dynamically created answers to their needs.

Entertainment, even of the user-generated kind, moved to in-home connected devices and gaming platforms. Promotions became location and preference-filtered feeds. Educational material, product specs and other "static" data live in real-time management warehouses, transparently accessible to the consumer in microformats retrieved and consumed on device screens of any size without the curtain of editorial and spin.



The Web Will End as We Know It.

It has to in order to survive new methods for branding that now focus on social commentary over the slick taglines generated by Mad Men. Consumer psyche is not what it used to be – changed permanently by ever-on communications that stream to nearly every electronic device. Branding is white noise. Messages aren't considered and implanted in memory as they were when Ogilvy roamed the earth. Behemoths of creativity and psychology get dusted off by consumers whose lives are too busy and who instead react to the immediately relevant, rather than the long-term benefit.

This has made predicting behavior far more difficult due to each consumer now looking different, rather than clumping nicely together into segments. Behaviors are now far more individualized. Luckily, technologies and practices exist to track individuals, but this has put us on our heels, waiting to identify and understand how a user has reacted, when we were trained at controlling behavior proactively.

"Your consumers' desires and styles will change as quickly as the shape of the cloud does."

The task of managing all the moving pieces is daunting for any business that doesn't live in the daily mire, as agencies do. But understanding the problem is the first step to recovery.

Media doesn't Represent Your Brand; It is Your Brand.

Consumers have lost tolerance for spin. Ads are skipped on DVRs accompanied by relieved smiles. Product searches on search engines now include "reviews" in top key phrases. Seven of the top 10 ads in 2009 (according to Ad Age) included consumers as part of the creation process or as real-life experiments in them. Traditional advertising continues to decline, and even digital advertising is flattening out. With so many more mouths to feed, where are the budgets going?

They're not surprisingly going to "social." But what we know about social media indicates that their participants don't want to be marketed to. Advertisers are not welcome to participate in conversations, nor do they have the resources to. Social, instead, has become an avenue for entertainment and corporate responsibility, real-time customer service and an outlet for professionally produced media the average consumer can't create themselves

Social media teaches us that you can't lay claim to a portion of a cloud – it is constantly moving and changing. What you must do instead is populate as much of the cloud as possible with relevant assets. How users choose to mobilize that media, what they choose to say about it, how well they think it's produced and how truthful it is will create a collective view of your brand. This doesn't mean you relinquish

control – in fact, consumers will only be attracted to your brand if it has a unique stance, a differentiated offering and a proposition that satisfies their personal desires and communal styles at the same time.

It's Not What You Say about Yourself, but What Others Say about You.

Your consumers' desires and styles change as quickly as the shape of a cloud does. New business will move fast, thinking ahead of the curve and predicting trends. Luckily, there are ready ports into the cloud to derive business intelligence from that will help lead you in the right direction: user review sites, Twitter, a plethora of commenting, sentiment metrics, social search and a multitude of free Google tools, to name a few.

Conversations about your brand are happening right now. And now. And again, now. And with the right tools, you know this and are using this real-time branding to your advantage. These tools will also tell you whether the sentiment surrounding your brand or product is positive or negative, alerting you to the need to spot check dialog to either react to or capitalize on. But, ultimately, what you have is a thermometer, not a cattle prod.

You can work to shape the conversation with your branded message. You can use big words or small ones based on the readability levels of your intended audiences. You can attempt to construct a decision cycle, a funnel, a CRM plan, but it is a waste of your time if you're not authentic and, ultimately, trustworthy. Consumers can be fickle, but you can combat that. Their tastes will

change, but you can make sure they check in with you first before their next purchase. You will succeed if you understand that your new job is to provide thought leadership, glitch-free product launches and rapid distribution of as many assets as possible for your consumers to discuss and judge for themselves.

Attention is a New Commodities Market You Must Invest In.

Consumer attention is in flux and has limited resources. The overwhelming number of brand messages they are exposed to each day means that exposure, alone, is not enough. Impactful messaging is important – great visuals and multimedia, too. It all must come together like a bedtime story; how long can you tell a story that engages your audience while lulling them into the desire to do nothing else other than listen to you?

Providing too much information is not the answer. You must become a classic storyteller who sets an interesting stage, paints an emotional picture, issues a challenge and evokes a positive reaction from the revealing of an answer. Storytelling content strategy will become more and more important as citizen journalism becomes shorter and less fulfilling. Well-produced, poignant and expertly written messages will gather more and more attention.

The lines between storytelling and the mediums in which they are distributed are blurring. The technology connections between content providers, social messaging, portals and connected devices have become so efficient that “write once, use everywhere” content will be transformed and localized based on who is consuming it and will be

in the hands of your consumers as quickly as you can create it. Your job will become knowing how much they can consume, for which blocks of time they are available, how much attention you can purchase for any given message and shaping media plans with focus and strength, rather than with ratings points and targets. Plan your media as microplans – single arrows shot through miles of Jello, rather than a quiver being unloaded at a handful of targets. The harder you hit, and the more centered you are, the faster, wider and longer ripples you will cause.

Waiting on Analytics Means You're Not Thinking Far Enough Ahead.

“Our targeting systems have become learning systems.” This was a quote from an executive at Coke that emphasized we were in a new era – one in which the divide between West Coast optimization systems and East Coast targeting practices is quickly becoming wider, and the battle for ROI is being energetically fought. And won by the West. Great enterprises recognize that both approaches have their places, but have invested heavily in analytics and technologies that micromanage every bit of media in every placement based on its performance.

This is changing too. What analytics and optimization systems are not adept at is recognizing the large variances in types of customers, how many different concoctions of marketing vehicles each customer type consumes on their way to making a decision, how to effectively target based on brand preference level and which of the many levers to make microadjustments to in order to improve the ROI of the

entire marketing ecosystem. As in chess, when up against an unknown opponent, waiting to see how they move is not thinking far enough ahead to ensure a win.

As consumers digest messages and media in contiguous experiences that span every device they own, targeting, storyline, distribution, analytics and optimization must be predicted in sophisticated models tied to expected returns. Every chess piece has its role – a few power pieces alone don't win a complicated game. Every tactic in the strategy affects the outcome of every other downstream tactic. So once the right mix of tactics is defined, they are to be left in place and adjusted. It is always a mistake to assess the effectiveness of any individual tactic outside the context of the entire plan and eliminate it from the mix. Only eliminate what you have identified as underperforming tactics if you are willing to revisit the entire model over again to assess the overall effects on the strategy.

The Future of Business Belongs to Technologists, Not Marketers.

Collaboration, content management, digital asset management, XML, RSS, portal frameworks, APIs, SEO, metrics, behavioral metrics, personalization engines, localization, geo-location, mobile UX – these are the new tools in the marketing kit that need to be considered in any marketing, advertising or media plan. The reach, speed and personalization of future marketing relies on the right combination of technologies running in the background that operate much faster than the human mind can react to so many simultaneous learnings. This will require close knit cooperation between systems integration and

content strategy, marketing and IT, developers and sales if you are to realize success.

Nonpartisan business operations may sound intimidating, but it is the future. Projects will run as agile sprints utilizing loose collaborations of specialists instead of the isolationism of waterfall progression through disconnected disciplines. Business will get done faster. Decisions will be made more automatically based on models and decision engines, and humans will participate in the process more as spot-checking validators and managers of the systems, rather than the gatekeepers. With the right strategy, the right content and total transparency, why not let the brand loose on the world? Why not let consumers engage with your company as they want to, rather than pushing information to them?

Despite technology's rise to dominance, there will always be a place for great Creative. After all, no amount of just-in-time information is going to make consumers pay attention if it is not attention grabbing. The new commodities market trades in instant evocation and resonance over bits and bytes. In the valuable time it takes for consumers to find and consume your message, they could be improving their lives – you must attach yourself to that improvement, whether through knowledge, efficiency or status. Branding, too, though it will morph from social involvement, will remain a cornerstone to success. Shortcutting the decision cycle with an established brand reputation means your strategies can contain fewer tactics, content can be more direct and systems can make fewer decisions.

03:15pm

Driving home I think about how a web is intricate, sticky and slow to navigate, which is why it has been replaced. The new paradigm looks more like a short tightrope connecting two places consumers have determined they want to go. Shorter attention spans and more competition means your consumer is either on your tightrope, or off. There is far less room for error. Far less time for adjustment. Far more risk if you act like the world hasn't changed around you and you choose to market like you always have. Ultimately, success is metered by your ability to plan an adaptable strategy; one that can change and evolve based on consumer insights and inputs.

There's an entirely new way of thinking that affects business in profound ways that relies less on personalities and more on productivity. Less on pride and more on humility. Charity and profitability are now a familiar mashup. And we have come to realize that our role in society doesn't necessarily scale only as big as the footprint of our bottom line. Consumers have always been the loudest voice; they just haven't had an effective bullhorn. They do now. They haven't been an inextricable part of the brand ecosystem. They are now. In fact, they make and break more brands far faster than we ever planned for.

At the end of the day, the biggest lesson for us to learn is that even though we businesses have always sought to change the world in our own small way, in the end, the world will change us. That's a good thing. As in any collaborative culture, the more ideas brought to the table the

better. And now businesses can crowdsource successful campaigns, product development and even entire business models. Our role may have changed, and the reigns may now be in the passenger's hands, but if we act like the stewards our consumers have always wanted us to be, relinquish control and let the market define the marketplace, we will surely enjoy the ride.

"With the right strategy, the right content and total transparency, why not let the brand loose on the world?"

About LEVEL Studios

LEVEL Studios is an independent digital agency that amplifies global brands by innovating across desktop, web and mobile environments. Founded in 1995, the agency now operates three California studios specializing in user experience, digital media and application development.