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COLUMNS

Try this: Tesla and Airbnb's bottom-up thinking vs. national down

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Mike Fantis

By **Mike Fantis**

Spending big on national branding campaigns does not necessarily equate to growth. Just look at Tesla, which after 15 years has only recently decided "[to try a little advertising.](#)"

Despite an unconventional strategy which has ignored traditional marketing in favor of cultivating brand advocacy, the model Y successfully [ousted Toyota](#) from the global top spot for bestselling vehicle in the first quarter.

Tesla, like Airbnb, did of course have first-mover advantage in what were new categories. What is telling is that both disruptor brands became hugely successful without leaning too heavily into eye-wateringly expensive branding campaigns.

Airbnb has grown from a single destination in San Francisco to a global marketplace of more than 4 million by embedding its business model in the public consciousness. It joins names such as Google, Zoom and Hoover that have made the transition from brand to verb.

Awareness is not enough

In the face of unprecedented technological or financial disruption, very few brands regardless of how established they may be can surf the wave of brand awareness forever.

Change seems to be the only given in a fast-moving world. It is one in which hard-won equity can be lost to the next disruptor, or may be wiped out by a [wave of social media outrage](#), even the displeasure of a disgruntled de-influencer.

In the context of a market in which the perception of authenticity is increasingly significant to consumers, high-profile traditional ad campaigns might even be viewed as risky unless the brand's walk unquestionably matches its talk.

The potential for negative perception certainly rises and particularly for luxury brands in the face of rising inflation.

As such, the mantra we hear from the advertising and media agencies to maintain above-the-line budgets during challenging economic periods lacks ambition at best and is self-serving at worst.

Rather, if we look at what has driven the success of fast-growth brands such as Tesla and Airbnb, the commonality we find is a model that flips this thinking. Rather than looking top down to start with brand visibility, they looked bottom up to start with consumers.

Think grassroots

Understanding the particular needs of a community and of the individuals within it allows us to build experiences that they will find genuinely useful and engaging.

Performance marketing models do not need to be built entirely around immediate results, nor should they. Yes, performance works around understanding customer intent but that does not mean it is entirely opportunistic.

Driving results over the longer-term often means working with customers at a grassroots level, over time turning prospects into customers, and then into advocates. You do this by building relationships.

I am a recent convert to padel, a sport that is growing in popularity thanks to its vocal and enthusiastic community.

Having brought my first racket and padel shoes yes, they do exist, and no they are not very different from tennis shoes I was disappointed to receive a barrage of generic marketing messages relating to pretty much anything and everything but padel.

To suggest this is a missed opportunity right in the middle of the marketing funnel is something of an understatement.

I would have loved to have received something more tailored to my latest sporting obsession: pro tips, details of upcoming tournaments, clubs in my neighborhood.

I know the brand in question has all my order history plus pertinent data, such as my age, my ZIP code and so on.

To make matters worse, I really am quite impressed by all the gear I have brought from them. When it comes to niche communities, every fan is important, not just the influencers.

Awareness and performance are not exclusive

In fact, every review is important. That brings us back to Airbnb.

By now, everyone knows what the brand does and what it stands for, so it is beyond the education stage for a significant portion of its audience. But its community is what makes it and the hosts make up a marketing ecosystem that sits alongside the brand advertising.

The above-the-line ads sell the dream of the perfect' getaway, while it is up to individual hosts to convince the customer that, of all the options in the marketplace, it is their listing that will make that a reality. The proof, of course, lies in reviews.

In the Airbnb marketplace we see the ideal of how topdown and bottom up models can work in tandem, moving seamlessly from awareness to intent to community-led performance marketing. Of course, the real beauty of this set-up is the entire journey is entirely measurable across digital channels.

THE SECRET to how Tesla or Airbnb have become globally renowned brands within two decades lies largely in their disruptive business models, but also in part to how they have been able to cultivate and engage people through digital strategies.

The brands have recognized that a sale is just the first step in a longer relationship.

If the established brands want to remain relevant over the next century, they also need to understand the importance of segmentation, not just by age, gender, among others, but by community. If that brand community does not exist ahem, padel then they need to build one.

Mike Fantis is managing partner at [DAC Group UK](#), London. Reach him at mfantis@dacgroup.com.

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