
DARLING, I'M NOT CONTENT!
Why content will kill the ad campaign - and how ad agencies can adapt

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Why content will kill the ad campaign - and how ad agencies can adapt

The year was 1970. At a party somewhere north of Los Angeles, a radical young director called Dennis Hopper fixed his dilated pupils on old-school Hollywoodian George Cukor and muttered, "You're finished. We're going to bury you. We're gonna take over." And over the next five years, they did.

Fat on formulas and stale plots, the big studios had stopped taking risks and sunk into mulchy lowest-common-denominator blandness, while edgy films like M*A*S*H, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and Easy Rider spread across America. Yet Hopper hadn't "succeeded" according to Cukor: Easy Rider had little marketing budget and some camerawork the big studios would've edited out in a flash. So what was feeding Hopper's confidence?

One word: content.

Easy Rider was content. It was something with real substance created by a few talented people because they wanted to. No formula and lots of risk. People saw Easy Rider not because they'd read the reviews, but because a friend told them about it. Its content got bums on seats by word of mouth. And Hopper knew compelling content can outride big budgets.

The same thing is about to happen with advertising. A million niche brands will - have already - grip the grassroots with compelling content, while the Proctor & Gambles blast yet more advertising to ABC1s and wonder why they're not listening. Content will bury mass-market advertising the same way Hopper buried Cukor.

And unless ad agencies look up, they'll be six feet under too. (A Regional President of a major ad agency recently described many agency bosses as 'contemplative, complacent, fat crypto-Buddhas.')

Because as couch potatoes move onto the web, they're fragmenting into a million hobby tribes; most belong to more than one and mix n' match them every month. No clever wordsmithing or art directional pzazz will get them interested; you've got to give them something with substance. The advertising campaign as a distinct media entity is therefore dead.

Let's sum up how content differs from advertising:

Advertising is about knowing your customer. Content is about knowing yourself.

Advertising tells you how to buy tickets on the web. Content is a travel agent putting her travel diary on the web. Advertising tells you the benefits your family get when you die. Content is a broker's story about rowing to someone's house to assess water damage. Advertising is a house campaign for an ad agency. Content is an art director showing you his etchings. Content tells me

who you are. And if I like you, I'll buy from you. But if you ever shove your logo in my face, I'll walk away.

Of course, after reading the travel diary you still need to know how to buy tickets. After seeing the broker's subaqua photos you still need to order the policy. But when those tickets and policies are available from a million places, how do you differentiate your offering? By wrapping your slivers of advertising in tasty rolls of compelling content. By being an interesting place to hang out.

Consultant Christopher Locke (www.rageboy.com/ewc/people.html) uses the term "gonzo marketing". Gonzo marketing is to traditional marketing what Hunter Thompson is to journalism. Gonzo marketing is about not worrying what your customers think. It's about being yourself and standing for something. So to create compelling content you've got to go gonzo. Know who you are and create for yourself; in a webbed world, people who like you will find you.

(Hell, compelling content gets people gunning for you! Ten thousand people with a stake in your success. Versus advertising: a glooey mass of people you've merely persuaded to buy something. There's no contest: content outguns advertising.)

As "RageBoy", Locke sends weekly email rants to several thousand web adepts, sometimes a single anecdote that amused him, sometimes a short story he wrote, sometimes a carefully-constructed essay like the 7 Deadly Sins of Web Marketing (www.rageboy.com/scream3.html). He's funny, erratic, and often crude. But he entertains. And as long as he entertains, he's welcome in my mailbox.

The Absolut Vodka site (www.absolutvodka.com) gets it right: it's all content. On the site you'll find content as diverse as a book on evolutionary design, web sculptures around the absolut theme, and a mix-your-own DJing application. No booze. Yet the enigmatic Absolut brand is there on every page, reflected in the content.

And ad agencies? At Kirschenbaum Bond & Partners's website, there's a pageful of private email exchanges between employees culled from the agency's server. Employees make jokes, mock bosses... content never created for the mass market. Yet after reading some of this office banter, you've got a pretty good idea of KB&P's culture. Far more than you'd get from a house ad.

It works in the paperbound world too. Tom Clancy put the first two chapters of his last book on the web; this content compelled punters to buy the book. Consultants Chunka Mui and Larry Downes put the entire text of "Unleashing the Killer App" on their site; I read it all and ended up buying four copies for colleagues.

Software companies rarely advertise; rather, they give away their wares over the web. Once a critical mass of people are actively using this content, they can start charging for it. Content drives software industry sales.

On the web, your brand is your content. Advertising campaigns are media entities inherently without content; ergo, they're dead. To succeed on the web, create content, not ads.

Yet any creative knows what it's like to write an ad from a contentless brief. To create something, you've got to reach inside yourself - but to succeed you've got to have something there to pull out. On the web, it'll be instantly obvious if you're bluffing. ("We're just soooo excited about our kewl new offering!")

So what do you need to create content on the web instead of campaigns? Three things.

First, you've got to know the technology.

On the web, content is enabled by technology. Creating web-based content without knowing the technology is a bit like building the tip of an iceberg without the nine-tenths that's underwater: your site will dissolve fast.

Many agency people panic when you mention Perl scripts, Java applets, and Dynamic HTML. (See?) But there's no way around this one. You don't trust someone unschooled in design to do your layouts; why do so many creative directors think they can creatively

direct a website into being without learning the nuts and bolts of site building?

The grammar of web design goes far beyond the look and feel of the home page. Yet to most creatives, a website is a work of graphic art, nothing more; the level of technology literacy among creative directors, even younger ones, is appalling. Few ever think to check the dHTML structure, the style sheets, the XML markup that'll bring far more visitors to the page than cute art direction. Yet these things are as essential to website success as contact details in a direct response ad.

The Dilbert Zone (www.dilbert.com) knows the importance of knowing web technology better than most sites. Its "comic browser" lets users "surf" the day's comic strips, over a dozen of them, without visiting the individual home pages of the strips. (The site also features cartoon strips rejigged into three-dimensional VRML scenes you can move around in, a 'mission statement generator' that strings random lumps of corporatespeak into the kind of puffed-up jargonese found at so many blue-chip front desks, and an archive of strips: all this content can keep surfers in the brand environment for hours.) The idea for the comic browser came from a simple insight: newspapers put all their strips on the same page because readers like to read them all at once. But to put flesh on that idea, the site builders had to know the technology.

HotWired (www.hotwired.com) is one of the web's greatest brands: it invented the banner ad and has reinvented itself at least six times since 1994. The content on HotWired today - an archive of articles on web building, a technology news section, and a search engine - is totally different to the lifestyle articles and cocktail recipes it used to have. Hotwired knew the technology and used it. Every HotWired piece bursts with rich information obviously created by experts. Locke again: 'Content isn't something you get out of a can and pour into a pie shell.'

Sites like Dilbert and HotWired also illustrate the importance of being state of the art: their content revolves daily, and there's always something there you haven't seen before. Graphic design can attract surfers to your site - once. But only content can keep them coming back. So forget about design; that's something any art director can slap on in a day.

Build your site on content, not graphics. And you can't build your site on content without knowing the web. No excuses. Start spending five hours a day on the web and get to know the technology.

Second, understand what the technology can do.

Carver Mead, who co-invented the chip, told techies to "Listen to the technology. Understand what it wants to be." What the technology wants to be may be something its creators never imagined; the street finds its own uses for things.

Before the web got rolling, the first killer app was the spreadsheet Lotus 1-2-3. Accountants, its creators reasoned, spend many hours adding up figures. By giving them a tool to add up rows and columns, we'll put an extra three hours of free time into their days!

But soon after hitting the market, nobody was using 1-2-3 to add up last month's figures. Instead, they were using it to add up next month's figures - and the month after that, and the month after that, dozens of times each. Because it made adding up rows and columns effortless, accountants used it for forecasting, performing thousands of what-if calculations and scenarios. The technology didn't want to work on the past; it wanted to work on the future. Accountants didn't go home three hours early, but they got promoted a lot faster.

The Rocket eBook was designed to store and display electronic versions of books, letting you carry a hundred novels around in your pocket. But six months after its launch, the paradigm's already shifting. Director's-cut versions of books are appearing, unedited texts with all the wild prose left in. Textbooks are being sold pre-annotated by top professors. The content creators understand what the technology can do; they're not limiting themselves to the paradigm (print) the product (books) was born in.

A Singapore creative working on a pitch for broadband consumer services found it impossible to understand what the technology was capable of, thinking broadband meant nothing beyond faster file downloads. Yet games like You Don't Know Jack (www.berzerk.com), which simulates

broadband thanks to a 2MB download, demonstrate that high bandwidth allows qualitatively different experiences to low bandwidth. Even Intel's Andy Grove once couldn't explain what a PC would be good for, struggling to come up with a suggestion that housewives could keep recipes on it. (He knew it had huge potential; he just didn't know what that potential would be.)

Because as an enabler, the PC can do almost anything - but smart guys have got to fill that enabler with content (software) first. Putting content into the enabler is the basis of Silicon Valley's success: a fertile economy of ideas and the skills to turn them into products makes the northern California region the most successful place on Earth. Today, Intel spends US\$500m seeding software startups, knowing that the innovative content they create will drive demand for the processors it builds. Content is what helps your readers to understand what your products are capable of, creating demand where none existed before.

When television was young, shows consisted of talking heads around a mike, because that's how radio worked. It took a few years for the extra depth of television to be explored. Similarly, far too many people are treating the web like television. So for every piece of web-based content you create, ask yourself, "could this be done on television?" If it could, your idea's not strong enough. Start again.

Listen to the technology and find out what it wants to do. Then let it do it.

Third, and most important, learn how the web works.

Locke once more (in facetious mode): "Goldurn it! This dubya-dubya-dubya thing is just another advertising medium is all it is! Why, in my day, we woulda licked this whippersnapper into shape in nothin flat! Hell, we woulda just bought the sucker!!!"

Locke's sarcasm illustrates the point that the web isn't a captive audience. It's a party, and an ad campaign is like the bore at a party who tries to get everyone to shut up and listen. TV networks don't understand this, even as a million Americans a year just stop watching television.

On the web, intrusiveness and pervasiveness are minuses. You can't force people into consuming your content; that's not how the web works. Many advertisers and ad agencies think the rules of reach and frequency are just as relevant in the webspace. They're wrong. Reaching people on the web needs new methods.

As an experiment, I'm starting up a newsletter, 'Bandwidth'. Each month it will explore one conceptual web application that will be possible in five years, when multimixed fibre and abundant spread-spectrum CDMA give everyone ten-megabit connections to the Internet. One difference between Bandwidth and other newsletters: Bandwidth won't have a distribution list.

Instead, it'll be passed on by 'word of email' - I'll send it to just six people. If they like it, those six will pass it on to others, and so on. (My last essay reached 400 people in four days in this way.) By not having a distribution list, I'll have people on the lookout, perhaps visiting my website (www.chrisworth.com) to see what's new and absorbing the Chris Worth brand because they want to, consuming the content I've put there. Best of all, if I write a dud one month, it won't go further than those six people and they'll all tell me what's wrong with it. As a brand-building tool for Chris Worth the wannabe radical technotheorist, it can't lose. It spreads its influence the same way Easy Rider did.

That's the secret of getting your content out there: let the network do the work. People come to the web not because your site's on it, but because there's a million sites on it in addition to yours. The killer app that drives PC sales is the Internet itself, not any individual site. This is illustrated by Metcalfe's Law, which states that the value of a network increases as the square of the number of nodes in that network. People buy a fax machine not because they like the bells and whistles it has, but because they like the network of ten million fax machines they can connect it to. (This is the problem with all technology advertising today: it sells the node, not the network.)

Understanding this, in 1995 GeoCities offered free space on its website for your homepage. Millions took them up on it; today GeoCities gets millions of page views a day. It created a community without ever having to create content itself. Now in 1998, the community metaphor is shifting from home pages to homes spaces, just like the real world. One of these - ActiveWorlds - is

a GeoCities for the next decade, thanks to smart programmers understanding how the web works.

Active Worlds's webspace (www.activeworlds.com) is a 3D landscape on the web, divided into plots of land where users can build a house. (There's a variety of designs to choose from.) It even has its own TV of sorts; it's possible to install 'cameras' elsewhere in the virtual world and have the output of those cameras fed to screens in your 'house', letting you know what's going on in your community. These features use the true power of networks. Without urban planning, a coherent city with central districts and suburbs has grown up. (One flaw: Active Worlds uses proprietary software instead of the open standard VRML. But something like Active Worlds will almost certainly be the online community of tomorrow.)

The community of gameplaying has Ultima Online. (www.ultimaonline.com) It's a graphical world on the web, each player an 'avatar' able to move around the virtual world. Experience shows users quickly get bored with this. But Ultima Online had one feature that stood out: it had an economy. The longer you stay in Ultima Online, the more credit you earn. You can earn extra credit by doing jobs in the online world, bartering, even starting a business. Today, Ultima Online is a strange mirror of real life, with an underclass, an elite, and a diverse population. When someone attempted a public assassination of powerful warlock Lord British (in reality the game's creator) the mass of avatars around British's avatar dissolved into chaos, just like a real-life mob. There have been riots, strikes, and political struggles; someone even started a newspaper. The web built the society.

Using the web's propensity for stealing and redistributing images, programmer Harlan Hugh created Desktop Toys, animated website icons anyone can "steal" and put on their own site. Since those icons contain likeable content - talking South Park characters, laconic Doonesbury quotes, poets - your brand gets spread around the web by your fans.

So to extend the appeal of your content, don't fight the web; turn its features to your advantage. Weave your content into a broader context. Be generous with linking to other sites, even to your competitors. (RageBoy Locke has a theatrical love-hate relationship with a rival newsletter, JoHO; both have increased circulation because of these exchanges, with many readers subscribing to both.) Let your work be freely redistributed.

For inspiration, look to the past. Charles Dickens's novels weren't written as single works; they were published in magazines as separate chapters, with Dickens writing and revising weekly chapters to reflect signs of the times. This is possible to a far greater degree on the web.

Imagine applying Dickens's principle to email. You send a weekly email to interested subscribers, perhaps a chapter of an adventure story you've started on. ("September 12 was like any other day until the sassy brunette walked in...") Like any ripping yarn, each episode sets up eager anticipation for the next one with a cliffhanger.

But that's not using the web. The web is a culture of participation. So let's bring our readers into the narrative. After three episodes, your readers get a strange additional email - apparently a misdirected message from one of the characters in the story to another.

This sneak peek at the greater world of the story contains something that puts a totally new spin on it. Perhaps the sassy brunette the detective's been dating plans to murder him. Perhaps the smoking man isn't really part of the conspiracy. Whatever. Your readers are now involved with the narrative in a way they weren't before. Instead of viewing the movie, they're now extras on the set.

Now suppose the sender of that misdirected email starts believing the reader is the correct recipient, and brings that reader into the story itself. He responds to that email and his response causes the plot to twist. Perhaps the detective mentions him by name and tries to track him down in the next episode. Like Infocom's text adventure games from the 80s, the reader's now inside the story, one of the principal characters.

Perhaps only one person gets that misdirected email that brings the story to life; perhaps many readers get different emails, creating an "information gap" that could drive an online community. (Clues in the scripts of the X-Files drive over 10 000 websites exploring the

show's greater canvas, while "fan fiction" - stories written in a show's universe - is a major feature of Star Trek and Star Wars hobby sites.) When creating meaningful content on the web, you're not a musician, you're a mixmaster. Best of all, most of your story gets written for you.

Take this further. Imagine building this narrative around one of your client's products. ("It was a dark and stormy night when I found the secret message in the packet of Tide...") Just as TV soap operas were created as content to wrap commercial breaks, web content is what will build brand equity for your clients in the post-advertising age ahead. If that content can be tied in to real-world products for clients - does one packet of Tide on supermarket shelves actually contain a secret message? - the possibilities are endless.

(Coming close is Calvin Klein, whose new campaign features email addresses of the models in the ads. Anyone who emails gets a response written in the model's voice - linking the web to the world.)

Several years ago a site called The Spot built a community of 30 000 regular visitors. The Spot was an "episodic" site - a little more real than television, a little less real than reality. A situation drama based around six friends living in a beach house, the site consisted of pages from each "spotmate"'s private diary, chronicling the events in and around the house from several perspectives. (Was it inspired by Dickens or the Gospels?) The site has now gone, but the brand lives on, on hobby pages and a newsgroup.

This is how the web works. And it's how you'd better work, if you want to succeed on it.

Okay. So now you know how web content works. But how can you foster a culture of content in your ad agencies? Intimate knowledge of Pantones and Jack Lacy's Six Points won't help you create content; content comes from the gut, from fascination and familiarity and desire to tell a story. These traits are missing in most agencies, yet they're common in other creative companies like software startups. Why?

Large ad agencies are bureaucracies; software startups are "adhocracies". In an adhocracy, everyone does what needs to be done, every day. There are no job descriptions and no mandatory duties. (Venture capitalist Ann Winblad recounts a friend's story: "I think the company that's just moved in next door is a software company - because nobody ever seems to do anything over there.") Yet software startups are fertile fields for content creation.

It's because software startups have flat structures and vast numbers of interconnections between people. These interconnections - project teams, object-model experts, shared C++ experience - are dynamic, changing all the time, but the overall interconnectedness of the startup is constant. By contrast, "integration" in most ad agencies means hardened silos of account service, media, and creative, bound together by business plans written forty years ago. And tighter integration of your experts - (definition of expert: someone who knows virtually everything about virtually nothing) - won't work either. It's too static, too brittle. But a discussion of outdated ad agency practices would get us hopelessly sidetracked here. (Oh, all right then. click click, you're dead.)

So don't build bonds of steel between a few departments; rather, foster more and looser links between people. Make creativity something anyone can do and give them time to do it. (At San Francisco design house Construct, it's compulsory to spend ten hours a week on your own creative projects; the free time energises staff to do the paid work.) Hire a poet for a month. Learn Hokkien. Ask a traffic girl out for dinner. Learn to deal with the pain of refusal. Cultivate illegal drugs in the mailroom. Start your own newsletter. Foster email culture.

(One Singapore ad agency recently circulated a mail stating how email was for "business purposes only." A business purpose in the new economy is anything that helps your business - and the friendships and sense of community fostered by jokes lists and Phwoar!-look-at-this JPEGs certainly fall into this category. Email costs nothing, but can give so much; accordingly, limiting email to job reqs, briefs and contact reports is idiotic. Let your people use email for anything they want.)

Most importantly, good content, like good literature, ideally comes from just one person. (When you're creating something on your own, you've got an incentive to work hard, since you can't rely

on anyone else.) So make sure everyone has a sizeable stake in the work they do. Even mighty Microsoft sensibly keeps its product teams small; Word was ultimately created by around eight people. Creating content is an act of enjoyment. To build a culture of enjoyment, give your people space to play in. Then sack anyone who isn't enjoying himself.

You may protest you can't afford this. Actually, given what's on the way, you can't afford not to. So to foster a culture of content, turn your agency into a hive instead of a hierarchy. Let a hundred flowers blossom. And let most of them wither, too. Sturgeon's Law states that ninety percent of everything is crap; nowhere is that truer than with creating content. But as any venture capitalist knows, funding nine software startups increases the chance number ten will gush forth a hundred million IPO dollars.

The content you create may even appeal to no one at first, then suddenly to thousands: it's created a hobby tribe that wasn't there before, just as Tarantino's mention of Met-Rx in a movie turned an obscure health food into a cult. Throw your content out there and let the web do what it wants with it. It might end up starting a tribe. (As an aside, market research as a discipline is in serious trouble here.)

This stuff that holds tribes together is the new brand equity. And to survive, agencies had better get good at creating it.

So advertising campaigns as distinct media entities are dead. But is there any place left for ads?

Perhaps - if they're part of the content. But not up-front. The paradigm has shifted; consumers will judge you on your content, not your ads. You may say how great you are, but if there's no evidence of it on your site, why the hell should anyone believe you?

One possibility for inserting ads into your content comes (once again) from knowing the technology. Ipix (www.ipix.com) lets users view a wraparound photo as a seamless 3D space. (Imagine being inside a soap bubble with photos of the outside world pasted all over the inner surface.) Natural objects mapped into the scene can contain hyperlinks. Perhaps clicking on a car in the photo leads to a two-minute infomercial about the car brand. This is acceptable to consumers, because you're advertising to them with their permission.

This idea's already been explored in advertising: a famous Diesel campaign had nothing to do with jeans, the branding coming from old Diesel ads playing in shop-window TVs in the background as the commercial told its story. This most postmodern of campaigns is perhaps the way forward. It works because the ad is behaving like content: it's not intrusive, but it's there if you want it. American TV shows sometimes pull the stunt of having characters visit from another show. (Ally McBeal took this a stage further, with the storyline split across two series; to get the full story you had to watch both shows.) Co-branding ideas like this have huge potential in the open, standards-based environment of the web.

But the future of your ad agencies is branded content, not ads. You'll still create ads, but they'll be a few strategic messages woven into the content you create, not the main show. (And the market for content will be huge. Many large companies don't "get" content. Online news services quaked two years ago when dozens of journalists were lured to The Microsoft Network by high salaries; today, most have gone, frustrated by the control over content Microsoft demanded.)

So now's the time to start turning your agency into a content hotshop. Your biggest mistake will be thinking you can't do it because you're in the ad business. Wrong.

You are in the communication business. And the tools of communication tomorrow will be content, not ads.

So be ruthless. Flatten your agency structure. Give control to teenagers. Create skunkworks in your agencies, give them a budget, and let them make magic. Give the suits markers and pads and let the creatives write media plans. Hire evangelists, the way software companies do, not to sell your product but to sell your vision and get people onboard your dreams. Make your agency a mind-blowing hotbed of near-chaos. Out of this firestorm of ideas will come solid content.

And on that note, back to Dennis Hopper. He was both right and wrong. For years the big studios were comatose, putting out flop after flop without knowing what to do about it. Now they've adapted. They've become flatter, skunkworks-type operations, putting together teams of a thousand

people who'll work shoulder-to-shoulder for a few months then say goodbye when the movie's in the can.

Today, the blockbuster is back: Titanic grosses a billion dollars and the new Star Wars Trilogy will probably do even better. But the films showing the highest margins - profits as a percentage of what the film cost to make - are independent films with sub-\$3m budgets. Cukor was thesis; Hopper was antithesis; today we have a synthesis, with The Full Monty and Boogie Nights showing next to Titanic and Men In Black.

But through an Internet lens, most ad agencies today look a lot more like Cukor than Hopper. So don't Blow It, Man; it's Saturday afternoon and the sun is shining. Harley revved and ready?

Hit the road.

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This essay, which won WPP Group's Atticus award in 1999, was written in December 1998, but many of its principles still hold.

Chris Worth - October 2000