

BRAND 2.0
INTELLIGENT BRANDING
A WHITE PAPER BY DIGIT



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INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out the need for a more intelligent approach to brand building, one which responds to the complexity of our changing social landscape. Brands urgently need to respond to the complex cultural changes underway.

New networks and new technologies are fundamentally impacting upon our communications, our markets and our behaviour as consumers. Just as importantly this is touching our social and recreational behaviour too.

But brands need to do much more to adapt to the new dynamics, if they want to increase their relevance and commercial potential.

We argue that a new approach is necessary to give brands flexibility to respond to change. 'Adaptive Branding' takes advantage of the networks and builds people into the equation directly. We argue that the failure to adapt will mean failure to succeed.

This paper is the result of the hard work of the whole Digit team which has been developing Adaptive Branding for considerable time.

“To understand complex issues, we must try to free our minds of dogma and to guarantee the freedom to publish, to contradict, and to experiment. Arguments from authority are unacceptable”

– Carl Sagan, Billions and Billions

DOES ANYBODY ACTUALLY KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON?

Technology has bitten deep. For the last decade, we have been experiencing sweeping transformations in the way we organise and live our lives using technology. Particularly among younger generations, it is changing the nature of 'society' altogether.

It began with our communications - the way we talk, the way we work - and pretty soon it changed the things we call 'doing business' and 'recreation' altogether - what we buy and sell, the way we trade, the way we relax and entertain ourselves. More recently it has begun to change the nature of power, and of democracy, the way we structure our social circles (Facebook events), the way we choose our political leaders (the 'post-digital' Obama election) and the way we voice our collective opinions (online protest groups).

The new ways of interacting have enabled non-connected individuals to become collectives.

Chris Anderson, author of the influential book *The Long Tail*, demonstrates how 'technology is turning the mass market into millions of niches.' Thanks to the internet, says Anderson, markets re-align around the 'hidden majority'. In the networked world, we may need to reach out and identify with people we can barely begin to profile.

'Brand owners have seen control of their brands pass to consumers,' write Austin and Aitchison, in *Is Anybody Out There?* The democratisation effect has seen a fundamental shift in the demand-side of the economy.

What we have then is a situation where we not only find changing customer behaviour, but the changing nature of markets too. But if the recalibration of our communications infrastructure is seeing customers and markets adapting, what about brands?

BRANDS AREN'T WALKING THE WALK

In the face of social reinvention, brands have shown huge reticence for change. You'd be forgiven for thinking differently because brand owners have actually been making a lot of noise about it. The 'social media effect' is written and theorised about everywhere. Yet brands still cling to conventional brand strategies and media that are not adaptive enough for the new world demographics.

“While marketers have more strategic options than ever before, too often they tread the same well-worn paths. Put it down to habit, the fear factor, lack of knowledge, flawed advice, or the fact that the advertising industry has remained unchanged for decades, today's options remain largely underutilised. Yet a growing voice, especially among the more-sophisticated marketers, is demanding fundamental change in the way their agencies work and think”

— Austin & Aitchison, *Is There Anybody Out There?*

WHERE ARE THE BRAND PIONEERS?

The list of real brand pioneers, the ones that talk the same new language as their free-roving, newly empowered customers and audiences – those that respect the idea of a more equal, direct relationship - is modest. The case studies haven't changed much over the last few years - Innocent, Apple, Virgin... Alongside them has arrived a new slew of virtually birthed brands beset with capital letters, such as eBay, Facebook, MySpace YouTube and Google. In recent years, the challenge for the older brands has been to understand how to extend into the community space; the challenge for the newer brands to join the big bad world. It's been unfolding for a while - Google has a fleet of Smart cars with cameras on top. Innocent runs festivals and knitting groups.

But even though some brands behave interactively, with very progressive service propositions that work with the technology, their brand communications are not responsive. The challenge in the future will be for all brands to configure themselves for a world in which we don't discriminate between online and offline at all. A world in which evolution and responsiveness are built in.

BRAND CONSISTENCY DOESN'T MEAN 'IDENTICAL' OR 'MASS PRODUCED'

Let's start with the basic premise that brands are construed conceptually, in the minds of the people that buy them, play with them, watch or interact with them. It seems reasonable. Brands aren't about logos. We all have our own experiences, memories, ambitions and desires for the brands we interact with. We each conjure them up for ourselves in unique ways we understand and probably can't even articulate. The language of brands has never changed. And the theory is still sound. But the application has always suffered from an inevitable flaw: a problem arises the moment the brand idea is realised visually or physically. It becomes instantly out of date.

Because of this brand owners take huge pains to caution careful management by agencies giving rise to the dogma of 'brand policing'. Brand consistency is the watchword of all brand handbooks.

Brands are given guidelines, distilled into visual identities, given a fixed tone of voice - all in an attempt to 'realise' them, to control them, to give them a singular 'essence' that threads together their many faces in the tangible, physical world.

These definitions served us all well as an ambition for brand behaviour for a long while. But perhaps we've taken them far too literally. As brands consistently rolled out their badges, they came in for a rude awakening, with accusations of insular behaviour, self-interest and a book called No Logo. Suddenly all this ultra-consistent brand behaviour is not only starting to feel 'mass produced' and devalued, but is itself not consistent with the new spirit of social openness and consumer empowerment. Brands now need to move with the times.

"The fundamental idea behind the brand is that in everything the organisation does, everything it owns, and everything it produces it should project a clear idea of what it is and what its aims are. The most significant way in which this can be done is by making everything in and around the organisation – its products, environment, communication and behaviour – consistent in purpose and performance, and where this is appropriate, in appearance too"

– Wally Olins, The Brand Handbook

Baudrillard, the French intellectual canonised in *The Matrix*, was critical of the media rollercoaster – the production of more and more images and ideas with no authentic connection, no continuity and no ongoing relevance.

He shrank from these creations, what he called ‘simulacra’ - copies without originals - hollow, without meaning, relevance or identity. It’s easy to see why.

He recognised this ‘implosion of meaning in the media’ was to do with lack of fixity. That is to say fixity in time. ‘All original cultural forms... are absorbed in advertising because it has no depth, it is instantaneous and instantaneously forgotten.’ He is not critical of advertising per se, but of its ‘form’. It lacks continuity. The question therefore is how to anchor our media messages in relevance that is not lost through cultural change. How do we give brands ongoing persistence in time?

Traditionally, brands are rejuvenated only when they have all but lost relevance. This is usually quite infrequently, every few years or so, with a new campaign or change of marketing director. But what if they could just evolve? Not only would the need for reconstruction be eradicated, but they would always have traction with their customers.

The German philosopher Heidegger was one of the first to consider time as a flow of continual existence, rather than a series of connected points. “Time is not a substance but a way of Being,” he says.

The ideal situation for brands would be for them to ‘live’ in a continuous state of past, present, future. Evolving and adapting as and when, by themselves - not after the polish has rubbed off altogether. Brands that continue to behave in this way risk becoming an endangered species.

“We live in a world with more and more information, and less and less meaning”

– Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra And Simulations*

I am not in the past, present, future - I am my past, present, future”

– Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

STOP SHOUTING - TRY HAVING A CONVERSATION!

With technology we can have an intelligent conversation with anyone we like, irrespective of where they are, a thousand conversations simultaneously if we want to.

These days, we make new connections, virtual and non-virtual, every day. We've become hungry for them. Every day in the UK we send 1.5m picture messages, in the US there are 77.7m blog users, there are 115m Facebook users (Dec 2008). We are quite prepared to post, tweet on Twitter or write on someone's wall, without ever knowing who will read what we say, or how they will respond. These conversations are happening everywhere, through blogs and social networking sites, through online forums and communities, over platforms like Skype and the mobile internet.

These conversations are not a fad. The most traditional media dinosaur of them all, the BBC, is one of the biggest proponents of emerging media.

We can now consume our newspapers through our iPhone, or post to a news site from the back seat of the bus.

For brands to engage in these conversations they need the vision to understand how to fit into the picture. In a previous white paper, Moments (Digit, 2007) we put forward the thesis that brands and businesses need to become part of a larger dialogue. What is important is not the one-way bombardment of brand messaging, but 'moments of interaction' that join up people, brands and technology. Shouting has never been as effective as having a conversation.

The power of technology to support a dialogue is immense. Not only does it provide reach across space and time, but a continuous feedback loop for conversations to sustain themselves.

"Mobile phones herald a change in the way we organize ourselves because now a phone belongs to a person not a place"

— Charles Handy, *The Elephant and the Flea*

IT'S TIME FOR BRANDS TO BE 'ADAPTIVE'

Brands have a huge opportunity now to start constructing themselves intelligently. Although they've aspired to link themselves to transcendental ideas that endure, the reality is they fade all too quickly.

It's time to move towards a new way of constructing brands that allows them not just to reveal themselves in a single way, but to invite us to physically construct them. For brands to move beyond a state of stasis, they need to rethink themselves from the bottom up. They need to become 'adaptive'.

"The fact that computers are designed to handle complexity does not mean that we do not need to design for simplicity"

— Edward De Bono, *Simplicity*

WHAT IS AN ADAPTIVE BRAND?

Become adaptive:

- by connecting users individually
- by being multi-sensory and fully experiential
- by remaining consistent to a core idea
- by holding ongoing 'conversations' with people over time
- by evolving relative to events or stimuli
- by being honest, truthful, respectful and authentic
- by engaging all the principles of interaction (see Feed)

Adaptive brands should evolve and change according to your behaviour over time. It could be your own behaviour, your organisation's behaviour, your customer's behaviour, or elements of them all. This behaviour can be fed into a brand identity or brand environment automatically using external electronic feeds like GPS systems, IP locations, weather information, or time of day. It can be based on any individual activity that can be tracked (like the number of times you walk past a checkout, or the number of e-mails you've received).

Making a brand adaptive involves finding their most relevant dynamic. Adaptive brands are responsive and can be 'always on' like the technology infrastructure around them, or turned on as appropriate when needed. They can be brought to life on or offline. By taking this behavioural information we can create a number of inputs or live feeds, which can be used to affect the brand's visual look and feel at any moment in time.

"The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images"

– Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle

VISUALISING AN ADAPTIVE BRAND

To be adaptive, a brand identity has to have one element that is responsive to change. Mathematically speaking we can think of it as having a fixed part and a dynamic part.

The fixed element provides the brand continuity, while the dynamic element provides the feed or the inputs to affect the relevant local, or temporal colour.

Take our own Digit branding for instance. Our business cards are not bulk printed. Instead, we print them when we need them using pictures we post on our Flickr page. Each one is date stamped with the day and time it was individually created, and printed with our names on.

Our homepage currently constructs itself according to the outside temperature, the weather in East London and the time of day or night.

We can change these inputs whenever we like. Or add one, or change the source of the feed. We can adjust the volume or change the slider whenever it suits us, just as Marshall McLuhan recognised: 'the computer can be used to direct a network of global thermostats to pattern life in ways that will optimize human awareness.'

We adapt our visual brand imagery on-screen in response to real time feeds, and tailor our off-screen branding with the latest image or photograph.

ADAPTIVE BRANDS CAN BE 'LAMPS OF MEMORY'

The architectural theorist John Ruskin made it his life mission to preserve ancient buildings to 'commemorate eternal human truths'. Brands have gone some way to achieving physical sublimation (the Prada stores, Niketown, the Apple Store). But few have gone the extra few yards, using technology to connect brands physically with their customers, employees and brand advocates in real time.

Even though the opportunity exists, brands have not yet taken it upon themselves to harness or to store the moments of interaction they have with their customers, things like streaming real time video, live data feeds, personal images or conversations. All these moments can be collated, collected and re-used on our office walls, in our lobbies, on the sides of our buildings, or in multi-sensory installations at our corporate headquarters. The most ambitious brand environments will become a homage to their customers - living archives and lamps of memory.

By adapting themselves in this way, brands are able to evolve and breathe, and to blow in the wind just like people and nature. As Guy Debord puts it, 'images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever'.

Brand owners used to be advised to 'understand and resist organisational biases toward changing the identity, position and execution' (David Aaker). But the adaptive approach is a way for brands to be both consistent and personalised at once.

To build brands that are adaptive in this way, we need to take a long hard look not just at our own aims and ambitions, but also where we are, what we are doing, and how our audiences and customers interact with us.

It is for us as guardians of the brand to establish the framework for the relevant adaptive brand variables.

ADAPTIVENESS IS MORE THAN 'LOOK AND FEEL' IT IS A COMPLETE APPROACH

"A campaign, like a brand is not just a number of bits put together... if we try to produce it by the atomistic approach, we will end up with a sort of identikit brand. It will be a perfect description for the structure of the brand...but it won't be the same thing. The brand will never come to life"

– Stephen King, What is a Brand?

CONCLUSION - SURGING TOWARDS ADAPTIVE BRANDS

There is clearly a lot for us all to think about. It is our job now, to give the brand this new sense of intelligence. The journey towards adaptive brand thinking fits a mood. But it is not only prescient because of its timeliness, but because it has the ability to fit into and make sense of the broader marketing landscape, which is evolving faster than most of us can keep up with. It is part of an answer to the big challenge facing all marketing professionals and chief executives: "where do we need to be and how do we get there?"

Describing the Obama campaign, Russell Davies suggested it was "so fluent in digital thinking that the newness or specialness of the new marketing tools lost their meaning and became integrated in the total marketing effort". In the same way, adaptive brands have the ability to integrate seamlessly with what has gone before and what will happen in the future. It is the test of any effective marketing strategy.

But the rise of the intelligent brand will happen not just because it is visually arresting, and strategically sound, but because it makes commercial good sense.

In this paper we have not had space to explore the benefits of trackable and measurable 'moments of interaction' by adaptive brands, nor have we explored the extent of the environmental benefits that clearly exist from using non-wasteful 'adaptive' techniques. However, these benefits are implicit.

As we look forward, brands are not only facing challenges from the fragmentation of media but from economic reality. We are committed to showing brands the benefits of fostering adaptive brand behaviour, and giving them a lucrative ticket to the future, which builds on their past.

– Mike Exon and Daljit Singh

ABOUT DIGIT

Digit is an interactive communications agency. We're acolytes of digital but our ambitions range wider than any one medium. What we do is craft experiences by pulling together people, brands and technology. We call it creating "simple human interaction".

We work with global brands, often combining the online and the physical. We do this by understanding the "moments of interaction" that people have with the world around them. Our working philosophy is called Feed.

Our core skills are in interaction design, technical build, planning and strategy, R&D, writing for interaction, and content creation. But we also create new ways of working when we need to with our partners across the WPP Group. Businesses from all sectors come to us to make sense of the digital maelstrom. We know how to rethread communications for the technological age.

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