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Consumer Behavior Has Shifted: Has Your Business?

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The last decade has been characterized by tremendous change in consumer behavior: how people gather and share information and how they interact with companies and brands. This shift has touched nearly every company doing business today, but none more so than those in the marketing services industry.

Our business lies right at the intersection of where brands and consumers meet. And as this boundary shifts – driven by technology and tectonic changes in the media landscape – so too has our business. And this is just the beginning. Marketing agencies will need to continue to evolve to keep pace with the accelerating rate of change.

But how specifically is the marketing world transforming and what does that mean for clients? As head of the world's largest group of marketing services companies, I have the opportunity to meet with senior executives across many industries all around the world. Here are just a few of the topics we discuss.

First, the very process for how marketing gets done has changed. In years past, the marketing table was long and rectangular with the client and the ad agency at its head determining the brand story. Now the table is circular – with the brand and its communications challenge at the center. And while the ad agency previously enjoyed top billing among other agencies, this is no longer the case; it is now joined by public relations, direct marketing, field marketing, sales promotion, shopper marketing and brand agencies—all of which now hold equally important positions.

Clients want these agencies to embrace their brands and collaborate to create a total brand experience. They're no longer concerned with how many agencies touch the brand, as long as those agencies are strategically aligned around the brand challenge and are well integrated and connected enough to share digital assets. Agencies must be more nimble, quick-thinking, proactive, participatory, insightful and insight driven than ever. These entrepreneurial qualities are no longer "nice to have"—they're the price of entry.

Second, part of being entrepreneurial, nimble and quick thinking means having a deep and evolving understanding of the digital and social media landscape. It's impossible to ignore the fact that the proliferation of digital technology and the rise of peer-to-peer networks and other social communities has fundamentally disrupted all of the marketing disciplines, from advertising to public relations and everything in between.

Clients have come to expect from their agency partners the most forward-looking, creative, and insightful thinking when it comes to understanding these new mediums for their specific needs. And here's the biggest challenge: There is no finish line in sight. Digital and social media are in a constant state of hyper evolution and agencies must be up to the challenge of staying one step ahead.

Third, techniques for proving return on investment are becoming more rigorous. Conventional metrics, such as reach and frequency, are no longer enough. Marketers are drawing upon whole new sciences – not only to prove the impact of communications campaigns, but to understand what customers really want in the first place.

For example, marketers are tapping into ethnographic research to determine the cultural factors behind the decisions consumers make about brands. And they are looking to neuroscience to track—literally-- what happens in our brains when we experience a brand. Along with data analytics, these new tools are helping marketers build stronger brands and more effective – and less intrusive – ways to engage consumers.

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