

## Think Like a Scenario Planner

# Marketing in an Age of Uncertainty

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Visionaries state the future in terms of it used to be like this, and now it's like this. In marketing, the move from media silos to integrated media provides an apt example.

But most of visionary work is really early adopter watching. Future trending or cool hunting doesn't discover the unknown coolness or the weak signal; they usually *discover* something the audience hasn't heard about yet that someone else is already doing. As William Gibson said, "The future is already here, it just isn't evenly distributed." So most discussions on the future are really about what innovators are doing in the present that the analyst or writer thinks will become commonplace over time. People who look for trends without contextualizing or qualifying them must be cautious when asserting a trend, because emergent behaviors, by their very nature, have very little corroborating data—intuition and bias have more to do with most forecasts than facts on the ground. For scenario planners, emergent ideas drive uncertainty,

because even though no data exists from the future, these discoveries represent possible

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## Market Insight

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components for the future, and therefore, can be played with against various social, political, technological, economic and environmental circumstances to see how they might evolve over time.

Bloomingdales in Santa Monica, CA offers a very cool innovation of in-place dressing pods that fall from the ceiling to envelop a customer where they are, so they can quickly try on a gown without schlepping to a dressing room, sales person and clothing in tow. These dressing pods differentiate the store, where they hang from the ceiling like echoes of the future, saving valuable floor space and creating industry buzz. The on-floor try-on experience, however, hasn't spread throughout the clothing industry.

Pepsi developed the Social Vending System™ that enables people to gift soft drinks to others. This is a real marketing innovation that gathers point-of-sale customer information on previously dumb devices. How many people, however, will want to log into a soft-drink machine, send soft drink gifts along with a message or video (and if they do, for how long before it gets old)? We don't know. In contrast, using the Internet for remote management of vending machines drives efficiencies and reduces operational costs. A number of vendors sell remote management software. Over the next decade most vending machines will be connected to the Internet. For marketers, remote management can make location, product choice and consumption data available, but in a passive way to the consumer. Because that trend is operational and back-office, (as well as back of machine), it doesn't get the airtime it deserves, even though it is much more a trend than social vending machines, and potentially a more pervasive source of data.

Although flashy technology makes the futures slide deck, often the more mundane and less visual technologies do not. People looking at the future of an industry or a role have to be open to both. This paper will not focus on specific trends or predictions like social vending machines or Twitter-powered customer dialogs, but rather explore the categories of skills marketers will require regardless of how various uncertainties unfold. In this way they can be prepared for any future that arrives, not just the one they hope for.

**Lead Information Technology.** Not “align with,” “lead.” To many customers, the first technology connection with a brand, retailer or product doesn't come at a point-of-sale terminal, it comes via a web-browser or as an advertisement, either subtle or pushy, or as a branded website — or as an app on a smartphone or tablet. As digital marketing takes the lead, many IT organizations find their long-term investments in process automation and transaction skills difficult to translate into marketing experience development or the delivery of an interactive ad or app. Marketing needs to take a leadership role in marketing technology execution, which not only means partnering with IT, it may mean getting them out of the way and hiring a contractor who can deliver in a timely way, and then

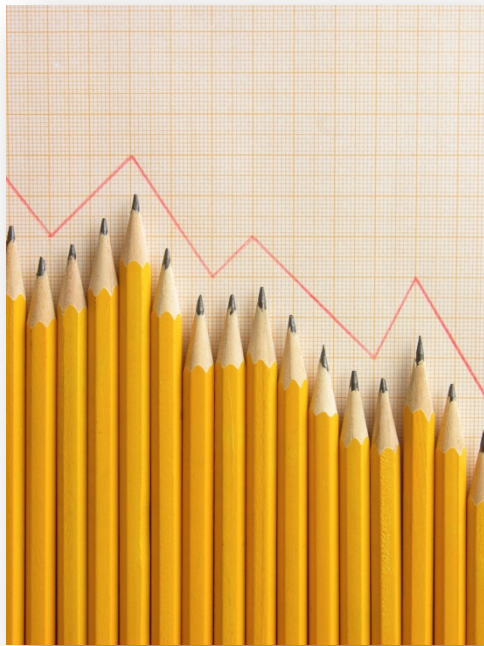


leading IT to work with the vendor to get the data, or capture the data, required for the app.

There is one other reason to use the word “lead” here. Co-marketing. Co-marketing used to be Intel latching on to a Dell computer advertisement. No more. Media outlets, as well as website and app developers, are going beyond co-marketing in media toward deep integration across apps and platforms to share data and provide new advertising opportunities. Salesforce, through their Marketing Cloud, for instance, integrates with Facebook’s customer audience tracking. If you don’t already know how to integrate CRM with social ads, then you need to learn how, and learning is the first step toward leading.

CIOs may not like the suggestion that CMOs lead IT, but customers will quickly lose interest in organizations and brands that don’t actively engage them. If IT can’t get it done, then the marketing line of business needs to take control of its own destiny.

**Master Data and Analytics.** There is a lot of data. Too bad it isn’t all relevant. Too bad it isn’t all made to play nicely together. Some think understanding analytics is the most critical business intelligence skill for marketers, but that is because they don’t realize that for analytics to be relevant, organizations must first create and curate data so it can be analyzed and transformed into



insights. A recent survey by *The Register* in the UK found that 78.9% of respondents totally agreed, or agreed, that “big data” is being over hyped. But that doesn’t imply that data, and data design are unimportant. Marketing has traditionally been about art. Art remains important, but those who view their markets quantitatively will gain insights impossible to imagine in the past.

Data is not new. Even AMC’s *Mad Men* includes 1960’s focus groups of a few people giving feedback about products or reacting to ads, but the “ah-ah” idea moment is more mythologized than the data analyst. The show even plays up this dichotomy as science started trying to penetrate advertising and marketing. Well, science has penetrated marketing, however, what shape it will take, and its ultimate influence remains uncertain, but good marketers will inevitably need to know how to challenge data models and understand the analysis that comes

from them. This is a double-edged skill, because on one hand, marketers need to acquiesce to the data when it does reconcile with intuition, but on the other hand, constantly challenge the underlying assumptions, even the data itself, in order to make sure that conclusions are robust and valid.

Search engine optimization (SEO) was not mentioned, nor was social media optimization (SMO). As important as these topics are, they represent singular derivatives of big data and analytics. Social media optimization, for instance, did not exist until a few years ago. Avoid tying marketing intelligence to any one concept, as that will constrain the organization's ability to recognize the next innovation in analytics, and either by fear or inexperience, delay its adoption. Those who understand how to think about data and its impact on marketing results will be better prepared to adapt as one fad overwhelms another.

**Own Brand Management.** Brand management will need to be elevated and infused throughout organizations. It is no longer sufficient for marketing to define the brand—marketers need to connect the brand to the work experience, much as they connect to customer experiences. It is also important to understand how a brand morphs under the undulating forces of social media, and ever-changing customer expectations. Although a brand and its attributes may be somewhat inviolate in the best cases, how to communicate a brand, and how the brand communicates, depends on audience, and audience may depend on channel. Organizations need fluid thinking and agile management in order to adapt to the role brand plays. The traditional view of a brand as the context for customer choice still holds. Although analytics will help sense a shift, it will remain the job of marketers to make choices about how a brand manifests itself across channels and audiences, and how to best infuse it into the organization's internal mythos. The world may be chaotic and uncertain, but that only increases the need for organizations to actively engage and shape the brand-- once it has been delivered to the world.

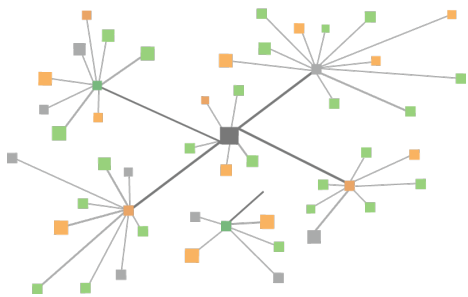
**Embrace Holistic Marketing.** Marketing will likely need more generalists in the future, not specialists. Regardless of how integrated or converged media evolves, integration of messages across a range of media and experiences will be important. How, for instance, does an organization market a thought leadership paper delivered as a website and downloadable PDF? Most likely it is covered by a blog or online media asset, accompanied by targeted advertising and tied to a social conversation—some companies, like IBM and GE, consolidate their thought leadership into apps. Citizenship and investments in various social or political causes close to the organization should also align in a meaningful way to what the company stands for, and therefore, how it is perceived. Likewise, a funny video may be more effective when combined with more thoughtful assets that help ensure that a message reaches across audiences and live longer than a day or two.

Holistic marketing comes to the forefront when considering experiences, especially those that blend the physical with the virtual. Not only do experiences need to positively reflect the brand in their design and execution, but potential customers need to know about the experience, and have a set of expectations about it when it arrives. Holistic marketing means marketers need to understand how to market marketing.

Holistic marketing evolves from the more abstract integration of paid, earned and owned marketing. Three conceptual silos become a plethora of channels in implementation, and those who don't understand how to balance the abstract and the tangible, may find themselves marketing their resumes. Perhaps most importantly, holistic marketing requires that the organization not

speak with one voice, but that it use authentic voices to carry its message across each medium with which it engages. The parts need to align to the whole.

**Be the Voice of the Customer in Enterprise Social Networking.** If marketing is the voice of the customer, then the voice needs a channel people listen to, a platform to shout from. E-mail wasn't and isn't the platform. Websites aren't the platform either. Enterprise social networking may



be the platform. Enterprise social networking acts like selective hearing in a room full of people. But unlike a brain focused on those directly attached to a conversation, enterprise social networking helps people filter relevant conversations out of the cacophony at any point in time. If people interested in hearing the #voiceofthecustomer can filter conversations via a hashtag or other metadata, while category feeds can be pushed into appropriate channels.

With e-mail, if you weren't included, you don't know the information exists, nor who to ask about it. Social media allows for more serendipitous discovery, as well as more active listening. For enterprise social networking to provide value, however, marketing has to actively share insights and feedback that will prove valuable to engineering, operations and finance. Marketing must market the voice of the customer as a meaningful source of insight.

**Learn from External Social Media.** There is only one way to represent the voice of the customer in an authentic manner, and that is to listen. Sentiment analysis and other forms of social analytics may provide some insight into customers at a broad level, but marketers should never forget that customers are individuals that require respect, not abstraction. In order to be the authentic voice of the customer, marketers must reach beyond the statistical representation of customers to hear, sense, even interact, with real customers and understand their wants and needs, desires and disappointments. Social media represents the best of the current technology for listening, for asking questions — if not responding. Responses in social media may be too limited. Retailers have been known to reach out from social media to help customers return or replace items. Social media should be a listening post, but not the only one. As marketers reach across channels to deliver messages, they need to be prepared within those same channels to listen to how customers are responding.

**Rediscover Art, Design and Writing.** Holistic marketing not only requires a solid knowledge of channels, technologies and techniques, it also benefits from marketers who understand the basics of complementary colors and page layouts, user interface and interactive experience design — and how to write cogent 140-character tweets as well as develop ten-page thought leadership papers. Though some marketers think that we have flipped from communications to experiences, the two should complement each other. Awareness still drives engagements. And although the development of an experience will likely go to some outside contractor specializing in experience design, those experiences reflect the brand and need to align with it. Knowing what is possible, what works well in public spaces, as well as how to describe the experience for others, remain the



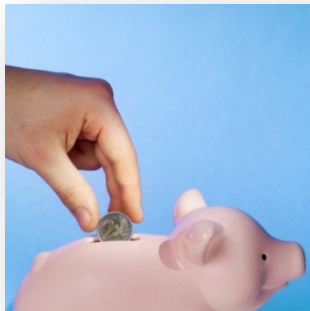
responsibility of the experience owner, not the developer. Marketers should not hire contractors without providing clear guidance about what they hope to achieve—and that means providing artistic, literary, as well as technical specifications.

Some analysts also forecast a transition from illustration and copy, to APIs and bits. Marketers without practical art and writing skills will create websites that look bad and say little. Marketing will best be served by augmenting good art and meaningful copy with technology, not by replacing it completely.



**Nurture Curiosity, Creativity and Science.** Sometimes organizations won't know what they want—or they won't know if what they want is really worth investing in. With all of the uncertainty about platforms, customer wants and needs, new technologies and new social contexts, marketers need to test their intuition, and that testing should be done in a scientific way that provides valid feedback. Marketers should also be curious. Don't let what was learned yesterday determine tomorrow's investments. Be creative. Combine and cobble together ideas and concepts from multiple locations, cultures and technologies. Be scientific. Posit a hypothesis and test it rigorously.

Curious minds remain open to possibilities, and creativity will drive innovation when loaded with all that wonderful sensory and technical data, but only applying science will confirm if a hunch will pay off. Keep the curiosity on overdrive though, because even after testing an idea, markets will remain fickle. Organizations need to know when to pull something that isn't working anymore. Only by paying attention and by being curious about the work, can people recognize when a campaign is stale and ready for the new, new idea.



### **Run Marketing as a Revenue Generating Operation.**

Marketing has traditionally been a cost-center even when tightly aligned with sales. It was very hard to tell how much marketing contributed to sales. Reports reported perceptions and customer conversion rates from interested to committed, but none of that meant the marketing effort generated sales, at least not how much it generated sales. But marketing now has the ability to directly tie digital interactions to buying actions. This means that marketing needs to think of itself as a revenue generating line-of-business and all that that implies, from managing costs to meeting revenue targets. It also means asking for investments in marketing, based on revenue results not on faith that a positive

perception will lead to sales. As many experiences become digitally enabled, there will be even more data, and that data will be more meaningful than a quarterly perception study, because it will tell marketers how the ads, experiences and apps in the market performed based on actions taken, not just minds changed.

## Navigating Marketing's Uncertain Future

Uncertainty abounds in the future of marketing. Ten years ago, social media marketing didn't exist on a deck slide. Cloud marketing is just a couple of years old. No one knows all the ways that marketing will evolve, let alone the permission marketers will receive in various markets as they too shift.

What we do know is that as technology infuses any discipline, specialization occurs. Barber surgeons with leeches and bloodletting eventually turned into real surgeons, but as technology permitted a closer and more detailed analysis, surgeons became specialists in orthopedics, neurosurgery and cardiothoracic surgery. Eventually entire branches of science went inside to study everything from cells to neurons, to synergistic bacteria and lymphocytes. Work at the scale of unaugmented human senses no longer proves sufficient.

The ability to track at the micro and the macro now affects the evolution of marketing. As technology turns up the magnification on the customer and the market, details emerge that weren't visible before. Instead of just seeing customers who buy stuff, we now see customer segments, market segments, and technology-enabled segments, where the technology itself creates not only new details, but new containers. We can see the details of individual customers or aggregate behaviors for millions. For surgeons, the human body was a pretty static evolutionary form that could be studied. For marketers, the discipline is evolving as they execute within their role—and its shifts are much more profound than performing surgery on an *Australopithecus* one month and a *Homo Sapiens* the next. Marketing evolution is akin to focusing on arthropod anatomy and then switching to mammalian anatomy. Until DNA came into focus, commonality defied the observer.

A kind of DNA exists in marketing: the customer relationship. Awareness, trust, respect, buying action, loyalty and every other marketing attribute that can be named or measured, arises from a meaningful and authentic relationship with the customer. Alienate the customer and nothing else—not the cool new app, not the PR stunt, not the rebranding, not the gesture-enabled experience—matters. Actively engage — learn how to listen, and then communicate in a way that the customer wants to hear you. Marketing skills, including the list above, simply offer different approaches to listening or communicating, or both. As the future unfolds, keep the customer relationship at the center, and every other aspect of marketing, from new targets to new technology, will fall into place. The marketing skills discussed here will keep marketers creative, engaged, connected and focused. That's all an organization can hope for when facing an uncertain future.



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Daniel W. Rasmus, the author of *Listening to the Future*, is a strategist and industry analyst who helps clients put their future in context. Rasmus uses scenarios to analyze trends in society, technology, economics, the environment, and politics in order to discover implications used to develop and refine products, services and experiences. His latest book, *Management by Design*, proposes an innovative new methodology for the design workplace experiences. Rasmus's thoughts about the future of work have appeared recently in *Chief Learning Officer Magazine*, *The Financial Times* and *KMWorld*. Rasmus is an internationally recognized speaker. He has addressed audiences at CeBIT, The Front End of Innovation, The National Association of Workforce Boards, ProjectWorld, KMWorld, The CIO Association of Canada and Future Trends. Rasmus has written for

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