

# Marketing in the Age of the Individual



By  
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**T**hroughout his career, Fairfax Cone, a founder of Foote, Cone & Belding, adhered to five principles — and two of them had to do with keeping marketing personal. One was that “the value of the offering must be expressed in personal terms,” and the other was that “the ad must express the personality of the advertiser.” The other three were that the “ad must make clear the basic business proposition”; “the basic proposition must express a well-defined value”; and “the ad must demand action.”

Without a doubt, Mr. Cone would be fascinated — and energized — by today’s vastly changed marketing and media landscape. He would also be gratified to know that his five basic principles have not only held up amid a hurricane of changes in consumer attitudes, behavior, and the media that carry marketing’s messages, but also that they have become more potent than ever.

Fairfax Cone would have loved to have seen what’s happening right now with Kentucky Fried Chicken, for example. After many quarters of sales declines, the chain has reversed its decline with a new ad campaign that goes back to its roots and speaks directly to its consumers.

“We took KFC back to its core, the people who wear their opinions on their sleeves and have bumper stickers on their cars and are pro NRA,” says Jamie Shuttleworth of FCB Chicago. “They are proud of who they are, and likewise, we are proud of who KFC is. That’s what makes it authentic, and getting deeper with those

who care about the brand is what makes the magic.”

The transformation back to its future was not limited to the brand’s advertising. The menu was re-vamped to include authentic Southern favorites like candied yams, seasoned collard greens, and sweet-potato pie. The restaurants themselves are also poised for a roots re-invention. The first of 49 newly designed stores is up and running in Louisville, and the feel is pure Southern comfort, complete with overstuffed chairs and ottomans.

“It was right under our noses,” said KFC’s Michelle Wickman, as quoted in *USA Today*. “We started in the South. Fried chicken is Southern-inspired. So who has more right to be

Southern than us?” So far, the numbers validate the strategy. Year over year sales grew after just one month of the new campaign and sustained through the third quarter of 2004.

Clearly, consumers respond when they feel they are being spoken to, and Kentucky Fried Chicken has found its voice again.

**“Good advertising is always written from one person to another. When it is aimed at millions, it rarely moves anyone.”**

— Fairfax Cone

The current ad campaign for Creme Savers, similarly speaks to its consumers only after listening to them first. Taglined “Girly and Swirly,” the print ads, which launched in April, are geared to women at mid-life — once called empty nesters — who are re-inventing themselves.

As Tony Scopelitto, EVP, Group Management Director at FCB NY, explains it: “The campaign is all about today’s liberated, female boomer. They are rediscovering themselves, because they have been a wife and a mother for so long. But now it’s all about them, and they are not afraid of little, personal, indulgences, whether it is a nice pair of shoes or a day trip with their friends — or Creme Savers, which is a very pretty and feminine candy.”

Other brands are conversing with the consumers by giving them more control over the conversation itself. In the past, when media were predominantly one-way channels, it was enough for a brand simply to deliver a message that would be heard as intended by the consumer. Today, with emerging technologies giving consumers the opportunity to respond to brand messages, marketers have far greater opportunities to establish progressively more vibrant conversations with them.

### Personal Media

In some cases, that relationship-building opportunity is inherent in the medium itself — as evidenced by the rapid convergence of ‘blogging and branding. All of the major airlines, for example, have quickly discovered how essential it is to interact with their most valuable customers via online communities like FlyerTalk.com.

Continental Airlines ceo Lawrence Kellner actually had dinner with a FlyerTalk ‘blogger, taking the meaning of “getting personal” with his customers to a whole new level. That encounter led to another one — this time a get-together with 274 FlyerTalk ‘bloggers, including a rather spirited question-and-answer session.

Maria Bailey of BlueSuitMom.com, an online resource dedicated to work-life balance issues, confirms the potency of that kind of give-and-take: “Consumers want a real experience through advertisers and companies that are marketing to them,”

she says. “They want a relationship with those companies, and for them to be a true member of their communities. To do that you need to enter through their communities — a virtual community, a peer group, or it could be their own neighborhoods.”

A trio of economists underscored the importance of that sense of community (and the opportunity for marketers to join it with their consumers) in a recent study. The economists found that most consumers tended to buy the same products as their neighbors — not because they envied them, but because they *trusted* them.

So, it seems that what people covet is not so much their neighbor’s car, *per se*, as it is their advice. Indeed, as reported by David Leonhardt in *The New York Times*, surveys have shown that “as people get closer to buying a car, they switch from paying attention to television and magazine ads to newspaper ads and the internet... But the opinions of their friends and colleagues remain a crucial influence at every stage.”

As Mr. Leonhardt notes, the opportunity is for the taking for car companies — as well as other brands — to break through consumer skepticism by becoming a part of their conversations, and their communities.

Naturally, marketers have to be very careful about how they go about doing that. Starwood Hotels & Resorts, for example, has hired its own ‘blogger who posts on FlyerTalk.com under the screen name, “Starwood Lurker.” Sometimes he responds directly to other ‘bloggers’ questions about Starwood’s points program or other frequent-traveler matters.

He’s careful not to be too heavy-handed about it, however. “Starwood Lurker” also takes the time to become involved in online conversations that are unrelated to Starwood — commenting on favorite movies, for instance. In so doing, he (and by extension, Starwood) builds credibility as a *bona-fide* member of the community.



Innovation often is a result of such conversations. Continental says it has introduced a number of changes based on ‘blogger comments. That’s a smart approach: “If you want people to use your brand to express themselves and be creative about self expression, then you have got to help them find it,” observes Pele Cortizo-Burgess, SVP, Account Planning Director of FCB NY.

### Consumer Creativity

Scion, the Toyota line of cars, is playing that card by making “personalization” the centerpiece of a marketing campaign that highlights the many ways in which the cars can be customized. Nike is on a similar page with its NikeID.com website, where consumers can design their own shoes. In a slightly different twist, *ReadyMade* magazine sponsored a contest in which consumers could design new uses for the Altoids tin. Turns out they make a nifty MP3 player, among other things.

General Electric has gone as far as developing a panel of customers it calls “luminaries,” which it convenes regularly to discuss GE’s latest technologies and how to turn them into products. Staples, the office supplies retailer, applies a similar concept but in a different way. It staged a competition among its customers to come up with new ideas — and got 8,300 submissions. Among the winning entries was the “wordlock,” a new kind of padlock that uses letters instead of numbers in its combinations.

According to Eric Von Hippel, author of a book called *Democratizing Innovation*, giving consumers a voice in new →

← product development not only leads to breakthrough creative concepts, but also doesn't cost much because many customers consider being "listened to" compensation enough.

### TV's Future

Given the many new ways in which brands can connect with their consumers, it's fair to ask whether older media (*i.e.*, television) will be able to maintain its relevance.

Of course it will, and in some cases it doesn't even have to change all that much. Consider, for example, the runaway popularity of *American Idol*. In some ways it's a concept as old as *Ted Mack's Amateur Hour*. But its success has more to do with the premise that the show's viewers decide who gets to appear on the program each week, and ultimately who is chosen as the competition's winner.

Then there's the growing use of direct response channels, such as infomercials, to provide more and more relevant information, give guidance on product usage, offer comparisons to other products as well as credible expert recommendations. Direct response is indeed growing on national television: 3.99% to 4.75% between March 2004 and March 2005.

Reckitt Benkiser, the household products company, is among those parlaying

the power of infomercials to soaring profitability. "We try to convince rather than tell consumers," said Elio Leoni Scott, the company's chief marketing officer, in *The Wall Street Journal*. "The whole idea is to show something that works before your eyes." For example, to demonstrate the "speed of death" of a cockroach spray, Reckitt's infomercial demonstrates how its victims lose a footrace against bugs sprayed with a rival product.

Then there are the many ways in which television can be combined with other media to impressive effect. Over in the U.K., the Sky television network added a new kind of interactivity—and utility—to traditional television with the launch of the world's first interactive credit card.

Sky reconfigured its set-tops so that they could process the card, which also can be used to purchase products at retail. Key is that consumers earn points for their purchases, and can then use those points to purchase sky interactive services, purchase directly with the card, and manage their account via the television.

In short, Sky has created a television-based "loyalty program," turbo-charged by technology. That's just one of a number of ways in which television will converge with other technologies to personalize communications between brands and consumers. As recently reported by Jef-

erson Graham in *USA Today*, the race is on between Yahoo, Google, AOL and MSN to find the sweet spot between television and the internet—all in the name of customizing entertainment as well as the ads that support it.

"In 20 years, the idea of having a broadcaster decide what we're going to watch will be passé," says Phil Leigh, an industry consultant. "Everything will be delivered by the internet, on demand," he adds. Charlene Li of Forrester Research envisions an even more rapid shift, predicting that within five years, programming will be media agnostic, saying that "programming will be programming, whether it comes from the PC, TV set or some other delivery medium."

### Conversation and Accountability

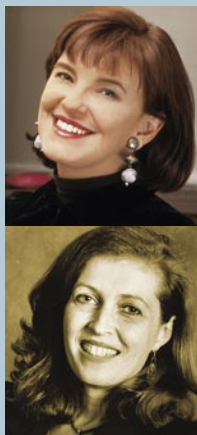
No one has figured out exactly how all of that will work, but it's a safe bet that it will bring tantalizing avenues to create conversations with consumers. It will also bring new levels of accountability to marketing. John Battelle, editor of *Searchblog*, says the efficiency and effectiveness of marketing activities will be unprecedented: "It's the game of intention, trying to serve up the appropriate ad," he comments, adding: "The big TV networks can't do that—but the internet can."

Regardless of when that kind of television-internet convergence happens, one thing is for sure—the principles set forth by Fairfax Cone will be as true 50 years from now as they were 50 years ago:

- ▶ The ad must make clear the basic business proposition.
- ▶ The basic proposition must express a well-defined value.
- ▶ The value of the offering must be expressed in personal terms.
- ▶ The ad must express the personality of the advertiser.
- ▶ The ad must demand action.

Those certainly are words to live by, in this age of the individual—and of accountability—in marketing. ■

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