



Giving Gifts

by Tim Brunelle

Long before Al Gore invented the Internet, I stumbled upon an interview with Amy, a Chicago ad copywriter who extolled “creative” to consider making advertising “gifts;” in other words, to employ novelty, insights and wit as means unto themselves within an ad—to make the viewer’s life better for having viewed the ad.

As an example, Amy pointed to packaging for some brand of cookie she was fond of. On one side of the package, the manufacturers had simply printed an historic woodcut of a man with his top hat and cane, nothing else. Amy noted how the cookie company—confronted with some empty space on their package (imagine that!)—decided against printing words to the effect of how “scrupulously scrupulous” their cookies were. Rather, they gave us a gift, an amusing woodcut.

This story popped back into my head recently. I’ve been considering how powerful it can be, as a marketer, to give—rather than to announce, prod, seduce, or wage war with one’s competitors.

Give the gift of functionality, utility and content.

Nike+ is probably the most obvious example. Granted, one must first own a pair of Nikes and an iPod, but the service itself is a gift. Maybe some of the less demanding campaign websites, ala Burger King’s SubservientChicken.com, are a better point of reference. By “demand,” I mean what the viewer is required to do, to enjoy the gift. Subservient presented no barrier to enjoyment. No log in required, no assets to upload, no pop up requests to spread the word or take a survey. All you had to do was enjoy it. And years later, we continue to recognize Burger King for giving us that gift.

But on that note, one could argue Google search is a gift. We are not required to do anything in return for the service. Granted, there’s plenty to consider in the expectation department (but more on that later).

The late San Francisco ad legend Howard Gossage often created advertising content that came across as a gift. His advertising for the Irish Whiskey Distillers, Scientific American, Fina gasoline, Rainier beer, or Eagle Shirts created forums and conversations that extended out long past the subjects in the ads, yet remained linked to the sponsor. It isn’t enough to just create a clever ad, Gossage argues, since, “*nobody reads ads*. People read what interests them, and sometimes it’s an ad.”

Gift giving is about the receiver.

As Howard puts it, “our first duty is not to the old sales curve, it is to the audience.” In these trying times then, ought we to think (and act) less about what consumers can do *for* marketers—and focus, instead, on how marketers can simply make our lives even a little bit more amusing, insightful, or just plain better?

The real test of gift giving is intent.

Going back to Amy’s cookie company example—in giving the gift of art, what did the cookie company expect in return? I inferred, from Amy’s telling many years ago, that the cookie company expected nothing but your happiness.

And that’s the secret to giving gifts. If by giving you really expect something in return, then you’re really not giving, are you? If we demonstrate we care about you, the consumer, I suspect they will be much more likely to care about us, the marketer.

Giving begets more giving.

In these social networked times, it is in your brand's best interests to give more often. Here's why: Brightening someone's day with content, functionality or utility can and will be reciprocated with sharing, commenting, rating and repurposing.

Do something for a viewer, and they will spread your word.

I'd start with some woodcuts.

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