

# Disrupting the Conversation

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**W**hen it comes to the question about who owns the brand and who is responsible for managing the brand relationship, the debate is as circular as it comes. However, with today's technology, informed audiences, enabled customers and peer-to-peer marketing models, it might be more useful if we ask: "In a world in which the audience has as much—if not more—power than the brand, how can brand identity help drive success?"

Today's marketing publications are filled with cases in which brands have been brought to their knees by individuals or consumer groups that expose either a lack of quality in their products or services, or a lack of integrity in their communications and advertising. While there

are some exceptions, the dynamic—or powerbase—of consumer-generated content casts the brand or company in a role as potential violator, and the consumer as the watchdog. The net-effect is a conversation that is highly transactional, often reduced to grades, ratings, survey soundbites and negative testimonials posted on community web pages.

To gain an advantage in this new era, brands should start by asking different questions, such as: "What would it take to task the audience with nurturing a brand's success? What would need to happen to shift the roles beyond policing or transactional feedback? What would it take for brand owners to "hand over" the care and feeding of their brands—confidently giving the audience full reign?"

*SK Telecom invited its audience to contribute content to a book about their "mobile episodes."*



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## *12 things in Common between cell phone and girlfriend*

1. Cannot help falling in love with at the first sight. But it becomes usual as time goes by.
2. It looks much prettier, with many accessories on it.
3. Tiny and Slim one is better than Big and thick one.
4. Your attention always goes to a newer one.
5. Inconvenient without it. Annoying with it.
6. If it looks good, it works bad. If it works good, it looks bad.
7. Good looking and good working cost a lot of money.
8. An abled man gets one with good looking and good working.
9. An abled man can even afford many.
10. Sometimes it becomes weapon.
11. Using a lot, costs a lot.
12. Feels really bad, if others use mine.

## SK Mobile and Sony PlayStation thrive in an era of consumer-generated content.

The answer is simple, but not easy. Success begins with a clear brand identity, grounded in a relevant core competency and a thorough understanding of the role that the brand plays in the lives of its audiences. Armed with this understanding, a brand can engage its audiences in a more emotional and participative conversation, even to the point of developing new products and co-creating its communications.

Let's look at two examples.

The first comes from South Korea, also known as the most wired country in the world. South Korea's environment offers high levels of technological and content convergence, as well as significant and true 3G telecommunications capabilities. This is a nation in which the lead-

ing newspaper, *OMyNews*, is written and produced daily by more than 260 citizen journalists rather than a media company. Brand audiences in South Korea are not only accustomed to being involved with a brand's story, they actually *expect* to have a hand in it.

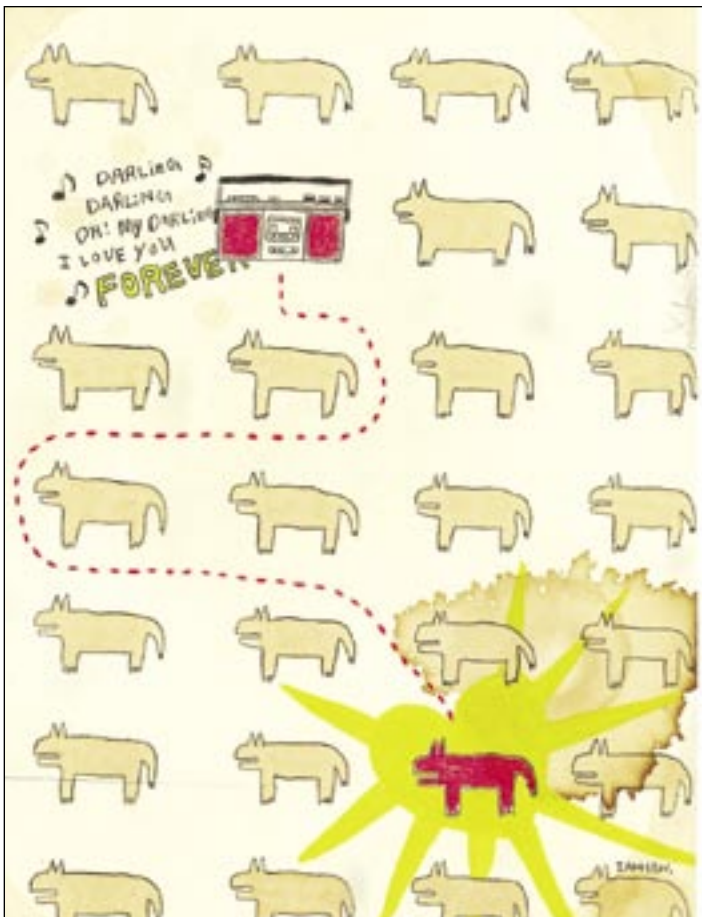
SK Telecom is the number-one mobile communication service with 52 percent of total subscribers in Korea. If you ask a Korean, "What will you carry with you when you go to a deserted island?" you will typically get the answer "My cell phone." SK Telecom had grown a loyal franchise and its brand identity was personified by its commitment to state-of-the-art networks, fast and flawlessly clear connections, and national ubiquity.

In 2005, competition in the market

was increasing and newcomers were focusing their communications on sexier, high-end, convergence offerings, including entertainment. As a result, SK Telecom was experiencing a drop in brand preference among an important audience: Young, contemporary adults.

Of course, SK Telecom also offered these services, but knew they only made up a small portion of subscribers' actual usage. Additionally, SK Telecom had a brand heritage of "keeping its eye on the ball" and not compromising core services for new-and-sexy "fringe" services. It would be necessary to ignite the audience to help tell the story that while the competition focused on the "fluff of life," SK Telecom was at the "center of life."

The objective was to drive preference →



**Pavlov's dog**  
Whenever you hear the same ring  
as your ex's cell phone,  
You think of him automatically.

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PlayStation's goal was to plant the clues of a puzzle and then get players to solve it.



A blog about "giants" was the hub of Sony's campaign.



Major news outlets requested interviews with Sony's fictitious "giantologist."

← for SK Telecom by reasserting SK Telecom's leadership position in a way that was fresh and engaging. At the heart of the effort was an invitation to the audience to contribute content to a book entitled the *Modern Life White Paper*.

The *Modern Life White Paper* featured the "mobile episodes" of 360 SK Telecom customers, who shared their stories:

- They told of how they wake up with the sound of their phone alarms both at home and on the subway—to avoid missing their stops.
- They told how they listen to music and use call screening to avoid talking to their bosses or parents.
- They told about a character defined as "the princess," who uses her camera phone to check that her smile is perfect and her teeth clean of food particles. She also insists on checking out potential blind dates with her VOD mail.
- They told how the hearing-impaired use text-messaging to communicate with others, and how the forgetful take pictures of the insides of their fridges to remind them what to shop for on the way home from work.

The campaign relied on both the loy-

alty of the SK Telecom audience and on their empathy—namely the ability to see themselves in another's story. Fueled by the initial 360 episodes in the book, the audience then took responsibility for creating and sharing their episodes on the web—and with each other—by phone. This fueled a wave of content, all of which made it clear that SK Telecom was not merely a *tool*, but quite literally at the *center* of modern life.

The results of the first phase of the campaign also guaranteed the campaign's extended life. The audience has now contributed more than 4,600 new episodes that will be published in *Modern Life White Paper Volume 2*, and has produced 160 commercials of their very own, some of which are already scheduled to air. New fringe episodes are regularly parodied on comedy and talk shows, cementing SK Telecom's role in popular culture. However the most compelling success metric, in addition to higher sales, is the brand preference increase from 56.1% to 96.3% in just four months.

In a second example, this one for Sony PlayStation's "Shadow of Colossus" game, the role of consumer-generated content was central to the entire strategy. Scheduled to launch in late 2005,

SK Telecom's "princess" checks her smile.





To fuel the game, Sony created thousands of touchpoints.

"Shadow of Colossus" was an adventure title—a gaming genre that had lost most of its audience over the years. Significant promotion of the game title did not provide a good R.O.I., and the idea of any support for the launch was all but abandoned.

However, insight revealed that this audience was small but mighty, and that the audience's dedication to this genre was driven by its pathological attraction to solving puzzles. If PlayStation were willing to break the conventions of traditional videogame advertising—which is largely a spectator sport—the brand could then engage the audience in a "campaign as adventure game." This meant that the advertising had to be as compelling and as interactive as the game itself.

The overall campaign objective was to generate conversation, controversy and create momentum before the launch, and drive the game's desirability with the core audience. Success would require the audience to be *participants* in the game, not spectators. In order for that level of participation to occur, the Sony PlayStation brand had to be willing to surrender any influence over the audience, their behavior and their conversations, during the entire game. Anything less would not be authentic, and would taint the Sony Play-

Station brand as a fraud.

The campaign began when evidence of "giants" was seemingly being discovered around the world and one man, Eric Belson, was cataloging it all on his blog—*giantology.net*. This self-titled "giantologist" and his blog were the hub of an incredible and immersive on-line puzzle in which the gigantic characters of the videogame were seamlessly and organically woven into the story.

PlayStation's goal was to plant the clues of the puzzle and then get players to solve it. Of course, to be authentic the campaign had to be blind—no logos, no game footage, no mention of features, and certainly no mention of PlayStation.

The campaign began online with multiple episodes of so-called "citizen media"—each passing on news footage and evidence of a giant skeleton that had been uncovered by the devastating Tsunami along India's coast. To fuel the game, PlayStation created thousands of touchpoints—faux websites, blogs, press releases, working international phone numbers and emails, experts at obscure universities, viral videos and photographs—all being refreshed and responding to the puzzle, 24/7, and in real time.

In the end, more than 2.6 million participants from 110 countries visited the sites and played the game. The fictitious "giantologist," Eric Belson, received genuine publishing deals, offers of grants for future research and an array of interview requests from major, legitimate news outlets. The level of online buzz exploded from just 50 returns on a Google keyword search to more than a million at the campaign's height. That means that at its peak, there were more than one million websites carrying on the "giantology" conversation.

In just six weeks, PlayStation reached its 12-month sales volume goal of 160,000 units, and to date, sales volume has surpassed 279,303 units. The ultimate sign of success was that when the game was eventually exposed, the audience was not irritated, but gave PlayStation enormous credit for designing a puzzle that was worth their time and effort to solve.

Both SK Telecom and Sony PlayStation demonstrate that those brands with a clear identity, based on a relevant core competency, and a thorough understanding of their relationships with their audience, have everything to gain and nothing to fear in an era of consumer-generated media.

The brands that will thrive in this era will be those that are willing to challenge the conventions and truly invite their audiences to participate in new and disruptive engagements. ■

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