

Open Up!

BY ALEX DO

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Open source, open access, open standards, open architecture — all are part of why so many have fallen in love with Facebook, Firefox, WordPress, and — I’ll say it because everyone else is saying it — Twitter. They’re all flexible platforms, invite user opinions, and enable co-development and co-creation to varying degrees.

The “open web” and its underlying set of technologies have indeed made a big impact on how we interact and engage with online properties, sites, social networks, and the like.

Okay, “open” may be one of the most overused — if not abused — buzzwords in the digital space right alongside Web 2.0. But few would disagree that it is a catalyst for changing the way businesses think about soliciting feedback, understanding consumers, interacting with users and prospects, collaborating on innovation, and more.

Let’s start with how “open” is defined for the computer software field. From *Wikipedia* in June 2009: “The source code and certain other rights normally reserved for copyright holders are provided to the public, which is permitted to use, change, and improve the software, and to redistribute it in modified or unmodified forms.” For a business, perhaps the proper angle from which to appreciate “open” is either from a technology point of view — what is feasible? Or from an economic point of view — what is made easier, or more affordable?

But what about brands? How about an open brand? It’s hard to imagine how “open” could be applied to the branding world, which is more about centralized control, strict guidelines, and carefully crafted brand communications — far from open.

The challenge for marketers is negotiating the battle between two important and competing advantages: control (traditional methods) and customer participation (open methods).

Can brands be fluid, free-flowing, flexible, and yet still consistently stand for something compelling, differentiated, and relevant — the key tenets of a strong brand as we know it?

Brands can and, in my opinion, should. And I think consumers want to see brands open up and want to participate more actively in user communities. Consumers today are more skeptical and less trusting of corporate businesses and are hungry for personalized experiences.

Inviting them into a community of like-minded individuals is a great way to regain their trust. In other words, to resonate with today’s consumers, marketers can’t rely on the same old tricks.

This wouldn’t be an opinion-piece without a public challenge, so I’m challenging the world’s leading brands to explore various degrees of openness, and how it can offer a more valuable and certainly more provocative platform for interactions, communications, and true relationship building.

Here is a series of what-if statements for you to consider. (Note: “user” is defined in the broadest sense — anyone who has any interaction with a brand, but is not necessarily involved in a transaction.)

WHAT IF brands enabled users to modify a brand, product or service, take it apart, put it back together in unexpected ways, and offer it back up for public consumption?

WHAT IF brands provided for those possibilities above and balanced them with some guardrails — a baseline of parameters, controls, limitations to

Are you up for the challenge of open branding?

account for taste levels, cultural nuances, biases?

WHAT IF brands enabled users to create their own future, describe what cannot be seen, and encouraged them to be active innovators?

WHAT IF brands truly (and I mean, truly) welcomed what users had to say beyond feedback and suggestions, openly inviting user opinions and committing to implementing viable user ideas?

WHAT IF brands respected people and their identities outside of their domain? Said differently, what if you “owned” your profile on Facebook, what if you “owned” the rights to your user credentials on Gmail, and what if you controlled your profile as a Safeway Club cardholder?

THE NEW ROLE FOR MARKETERS

Digital has changed marketing and branding, period. The role of the brand manager has changed, and the role of the brand has changed even more dramatically. Gone are the days when marketers tried to obsess over and micromanage outbound messages in attempts to control perceptions.

Today, to keep pace with consumers, many successful brand managers have shifted the way they engage with consumers—from acting as manager to becoming a facilitator. They see that consumers welcome a world, more specifically a “community,” of participation, co-creation, and constant dialogue—and this is the way of the future.

For brands to facilitate a community of users effectively, it is imperative that companies open themselves up. By that I mean companies need to encourage users to be more actively involved in their business activities—whether helping ideate future offerings, evolve existing ones, or provide feedback across the board.

The key to success is understanding your core users and then arming them with the tools they need to be active. One of the biggest benefits of building a community is that you’ll gain a considerable amount of customer intelligence—from feedback and observed patterns in user behavior to a stockpile of user-generated content and insights.

In fact, some brands have successfully managed to integrate their consumers into their business strategies and activities. No surprise, two types of

web brands are doing this well: Web 2.0 brands like Facebook, Twitter, and Amazon.com, and open-source brands like Linux and Mozilla. And both seem to be more successful and faster growing than their traditional web competitors.

Going forward, marketers need to focus less on who’s in control and more on (1) ways to invite users into a meaningful experience and (2) ways to engage community interactions. But how to do this is the challenge.

While open-source brands and Web 2.0 properties are inclined to facilitate user communities by the very nature of their business models, other companies, such as consumer packaged goods, e-commerce, media/entertainment, and manufacturing, find it more of a challenge to figure out how to build a community of users.

A NEW BRAND MODEL

There is no single model for an open brand. A company’s approach to open branding should be based on its business model, market strategy, and its customers’ appetite for community engagement. Here are a few common approaches that can be found in the marketplace today, though certainly many others exist.

Open to ideas: Soliciting feedback about existing products and services or improvements (future scenarios). For example, Starbucks launched its *Mystarbucksidea.com* site as a virtual suggestion box of sorts.

Users can submit ideas to the Starbucks team but also make their submissions viewable by the community of users. Community members get to rate submissions so the best ideas rise to the top; it’s then Starbucks’ job to ensure top suggestions get implemented.

In many ways, this is a democratic way of innovation and business improvement and has a direct impact on brand perceptions. Most important, it’s a way for companies to listen to the voice of the consumer.

→ *Good for companies that are set up to implement changes and improvements quickly and cost-effectively.*

Open for me: Providing tools for personalization and customization (remixability, open architecture). For example, the *NikeiD* program has given online

An Open Exchange

I recently wrote an entry on Landor's blog titled "Open branding" (www.landor.com/?do=thinking.blog). In it, I discussed how open a brand could be and how effectively a company could integrate customers into its key business activities.

My blog post, similar to this article, encouraged companies of all sizes across various industries, to explore what it would be like to be an open brand. Truthfully, the picture that I painted was utopian and could be somewhat difficult for most brands and businesses to put in place. Readers of my blog echoed similar sentiments.

Comments (3)

■ **Aaron Templar.** This is contextual, no? Great thoughts for some business models and under some strategic contexts, but certainly not all. The first example of this that comes to my mind is a law firm. Opening a brand like that could open doors of misconstrued as solicitation or legal advice proffered from the firm, which could put them out of business. But great thoughts for a Thursday morning!

■ **Annie Smidt.** When it's a brand, I suspect use of "open" paradigms as attempts to sell more rather than playing fair in a give and take exchange. When a sneaker company lets you "design your own" shoe or a company /brand twitters or facebooks to solicit ideas and feedback from customers and potential customers, I don't get the same warm fuzzy feeling that accompanies interacting with individuals (not brands or companies) who blog or tweet or release open source software because they are passionate and authentic.

I feel like, for the most part, companies that open up, and even allow some consumer-driven morphing of their brand, are just doing it for, ultimately, financial

gain and increased brand equity. I don't feel like they REALLY care about their consumers' opinions, except where they can boost the bottom line.

In the service of full disclosure, I must admit this is a skepticism born of being a designer and design strategist and thus part of the industry that creates these open, faux-public-embracing brands.

Business is business, and capitalists want to make money—but I keep getting this sneaking feeling that if they "get their hands on" the lovely idealism of open source ideology, they'll pollute and ruin it.

We're in an exciting and perhaps time-limited period where the people have the power. Open source ideas are vibrant and pushing technology and thought in all sorts of great directions—and for the most part, it's going so far because it's a labor of love for the people involved. I really worry about mixing this with the ulterior motives inherent in old-school, traditional business and branding. Just makes me nervous.

■ **@ryanmilani.** Great overview of the open culture we're moving into. I'd also throw Open Government into the mix as well. It's interesting to see how people talk about brands and how brands are each uniquely adjusting to the open culture.

We've built a twitter app called Openbrands.org that funnels conversations around brands into channels. If you're reading this, then you might find it interesting.

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My simple response to these comments is that I agree. It's a big challenge for all brands out there. But, I'd argue that for most companies, the benefits are too compelling to ignore.

shoppers a way to personalize their athletic sneakers. At the end of the day, it's still a pair of Nikes, but customers can take pride in some customizations that they've made with their purchases.

→ *Good for companies that are willing to modify existing products and services in a modular way.*

Open to collaboration: Inviting users in to help reveal new product or service opportunities (co-creation). For example, IBM has two programs in place that invite users into the innovation and ideation process early on in product development—where ideas are still half-baked, even before a plan is put into place.

IBM ThinkPlace is a site where customers (external to the organization) can generate new ideas, whereas *IBM Innovation Jam* is a destination for employees to participate in the innovation process, irrespective of their roles in the organization.

→ *Good for companies that have a structure in place for taking new ideas from a wide range of sources and seeding them for further consideration.*

Building on open: Enabling a platform for users to drive content creation (prosumer/crowdsourcing). For example, Lego Mindstorms is a community built around creation—that is, the creation of robots.

It encourages its users, either individually or in groups, to create the smartest, strongest, and most advanced Lego robot ever. And, it's less involvement than you might think; the innovation can occur in less than 30 minutes.

→ *Good for companies with high market-share and few competitors that compete directly with existing product lines or service offerings.*

Open book: Being transparent, as much as appropriate, with business plans, processes, and operations. For example, American Apparel has well documented details of its operations and business matters on its site—the good, bad, and not-so-American.

American Apparel provides a glimpse into its manufacturing plants, highlights highly debated topics such as immigration hiring practices, expresses its point of view on gay rights, and more. It even includes links to bad press and offers its own perspective. For the most part, it's an unfiltered and unapologetic look inside the company.

→ *Good for companies that are highly visible in the marketplace and constantly under the microscope. A good way to beat the press, potential critics, and speculators to the punch. Also, a great way to connect with supporters.*

TEN STEPS TO AN OPEN BRAND

If you've got an experienced team, a solid budget, and an appetite for innovation, you can create an open branding program that engages your customers in an entirely new way.

Be aware that implementing an open branding initiative as a standalone project—without mandate, without clear corporate vision, and without a well-defined strategy—will often lead to wasted investments and resources.

Here are ten basic and cost-effective steps to get started—building on existing tools and established best practices.

1. Crystallize your brand positioning and promise (at Landor, we call this the Brand Driver).
2. Get to know the community you want to interact with—who are your supporters and contributors, your influencers, employees, engaged consumers?
3. Agree on an approach to open branding that makes sense for your business.
4. Align strategies and objectives back to your business model—is your program about

monetization, increased efficiencies, higher engagement, etc.?

5. Put into operation your strategy and approach (e.g., get management buy-in, define key program and support teams, document processes).
6. Manage internal adoption, processes, and risks.
7. Create tools for communities to use as they participate in the brand-building process (e.g., enable feedback to be easily submitted, enable customized experiences, provide content and widgets).
8. Use the technology, channels, social media outlets, and custom-built online environments that are right for your approach.
9. Facilitate your community and its ongoing dialogue, which takes significant investment and commitment (e.g., start conversations and facilitate the participation and content, both user-generated and brand-driven).
10. Track, manage, refine, and continue to keep it fresh and lively (listen and learn).

THE CHALLENGE

Businesses need to focus on ways to facilitate the right dialogue and interactions with users to drive business value. If brand managers can focus on developing tools to involve consumers in key business activities instead of focusing on more traditional marketing methods, they will be rewarded with an active community of fans and evangelists.

Open branding programs can be the platform for this community building—and enable brands to truly engage with their best customers.

Most important, if a brand is able to establish a community that draws in users time and time again, it has succeeded in creating the ultimate platform for driving loyalty. And what brand can do without loyalty?

Of course, I'm "open" to thoughts and comments! ■



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