

The New Pop Culture

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The first I heard of the Pepsi Refresh Project was last November, when an Associated Press reporter called to ask my opinion of it.

The news was that Pepsi was going to spend \$20 million to fund local, community projects created and voted on by Pepsi drinkers. My opinion was—and still is—that Pepsi was leading the way into a new era of brands as something more than just symbols.

“They need to be showing that they care and they need to be visible and they need to be authentic in the neighborhood,” I told the reporter. “It’s not just allocating several million dollars and writing a check.”

To be honest, I had been critical of Pepsi prior to this. When they launched their new ad campaign last year, I was leery because it seemed like they had adopted the style of social responsibility but not the substance.

Pepsi’s new logo—and their messaging—looked a lot like the Obama campaign’s and it appeared that maybe they were just trying to catch his wave for as long as they could. It all looked a bit shallow.

Six months later, it’s clear that Pepsi is, in fact, walking the talk. Not only are they funding community projects, but they are also actively working with winners of their grants to bring the winning projects to life. The Pepsi Refresh Project

is no short-term promotion; it is part of a long-range corporate strategy that CEO Indra Nooyi calls “Performance with Purpose.”

It is also the best example I’ve found to date of my own mantra of “me, we, higher purpose.” This is the idea that the strongest brands connect not only with their consumers as individuals, but also as communities who work together to make the world a better place. (see: “*The We Decade*,” *The Hub*, January/February 2010).

Optimism is the pulse of the next Pepsi generation.

I’m not talking about the “cause-marketing” overlay of promotions past but rather the dirt-under-the-fingernails hard work of collaborating with consumers to make good things happen. At the moment, when it comes to “me, we, higher purpose,” Pepsi is unquestionably the choice of a new generation!

It comes as little surprise that Pepsi is leading the way here. Pepsi has always been at the center of popular culture. They have always worked to understand the culture, the sentiment, and how to capture the emotional space within that.

Nor is it surprising that the Pepsi Refresh Project began with consumer research on cultural attitudes—three surveys, to be exact, the first conducted in late 2008 and the two other follow-up surveys last year.

The first of these surveys was fielded shortly after the economic collapse. What Pepsi found was that, despite all of the doom and gloom of the present,

consumers overwhelmingly felt optimistic about the future. Pepsi also discovered that people felt more optimistic if they were supporting a cause they cared about.

In fact, 97 percent of Pepsi's survey respondents said it's important to have a positive outlook on the future (women are more optimistic about the next decade than men, 60 percent versus 54 percent). Ninety-four percent said that they thought optimism was important to creating new ideas that can have a positive impact on the world. Sixty-six percent said that the best ideas come from regular people and 74 percent said they thought there were more opportunities than ever before to share new ideas.

Pepsi got a pulse on the attitude, the soul and the culture. Based on that, they said, hey, if we want to be aligned with the mindset of our consumers and be culturally relevant, then we need to support our consumers with their ideas and their passions. The Pepsi Refresh Project was born out of that—out of digging for that single key insight, which wasn't at the surface.

A SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT PLATFORM

The way Pepsi went about bringing this insight to life is just as impressive as the way it arrived at the insight itself. The brand first made a big splash by announcing that, for the first time in 23 years, it would not be advertising on the Super Bowl.

As Pepsi's CMO, Jill Beraud, notes in her cover story interview in this issue of the *Hub* (see page 30), they got more buzz for *not* advertising in the Super Bowl than any other brand did for advertising in it.

Pepsi's Super Bowl move certainly made a big statement about where it is taking its brand, but it was about much more than creating buzz. The real play was to create a lasting platform for social engagement with its consumers.

However, this is quite different from simply engaging in social media campaigns, as so many other brands are doing. It isn't just a tactical move like setting up a Twitter feed or Facebook page. It takes the power of digital media and the promise of social networking and places it at the very heart and soul of the Pepsi brand identity.

When I talked with Bonin Bough, Pepsi's director of digital and social media, he said that the Pepsi Refresh Project is "about building a social engagement platform that can take the brand beyond one that you know

Pepsi Hits Refresh

- RefreshEverything.com has generated more than three million unique visitors, one million registrations and more than five million votes since its launch in January.
- More than 141,000 votes were cast in the first three days on ideas to refresh the world in six categories: health, arts & culture, food & shelter, the planet, neighborhoods and education.
- The volume of online conversation has been exceptional, with more than 31,000 Tweets since launch.
- To date, @Pepsi has more than 24,000 Twitter followers and received more than 120 million Twitter impressions (the impressions number is not related to @Pepsi Tweets, it's all Tweets regarding the project).
- Pepsi has more than doubled Facebook fans since the program started.
- Pepsi has received idea submissions from every state with a good mix of Boomers, Gen-X and Millennials.
- Submissions are almost evenly split among categories with a light skew towards education and neighborhoods.
- The last three submission windows closed in less than 24 hours.

SOURCE: PepsiCo

and love to being the brand that is aligned with your passions and enabling you to move the world forward."

"It's not only funding passions and projects," says Bonin. "It's created a forum where people are coming together, sharing ideas and letting their voices be heard on a broader platform."

He adds, "We could have done a social media program off to the side. But this isn't a social media program. It's more of a social ideas program but it

does use social media as a core catalyst for connecting and campaigning.”

The Pepsi Refresh Project also recognizes, as Bonin points out, that “digital is culture.” As he puts it, “Digital is not only just a great representation of where we are culturally, but it is also setting who we are culturally. Digital is now becoming this representation and this driver of culture.”

While there can be no question but that Pepsi’s insight into its consumers’ optimism and strong desire to create a better world is the absolute foundation of this initiative, it is just as true that digital culture is turning those elusive desires into tangible results.

Some of those results can be measured in conventional ways (*see sidebar*). But, as Bonin observes, the most important measure is the extent to which the Pepsi Refresh Project aligns with the passions of its consumers and the degree to which the brand is culturally relevant.

“It’s not just ‘I love Pepsi,’” says Bonin. “It’s, ‘I love that Pepsi has also helped me bring my passions to life,’” adding, “What drives us to continue to move the program forward is how passionate people are about the fact that our brand is aligned with their passions.”

A SHIFT IN BRAND BEHAVIOR

The Pepsi Refresh Project really represents both a platform for success and a change in brand behavior for Pepsi. This is not limited to Pepsi’s relationship with its consumers, but also extends to its bottlers, its retailers, and most important, its own employees.

Bonin says that the value system that brought Pepsi Refresh to life has manifested itself across the entire organization. He told me a story about a “town hall” meeting at Pepsi, when the program was first introduced.

Before announcing anything to the public, Pepsi first invited its own people to pick a cause and campaign for a small grant. At this town hall meeting, the winners were announced and then the big program was presented.

“After we ran the highlights of what each program would be, people stood up and were hugging and crying in the middle of the auditorium,” says Bonin. “More than anything else, it was an amazing feeling to be part of a brand that’s doing so much good, in the right way. And it has left a mark on my soul, which is, hey, I know that what we’re doing is awesome and pretty great. I know that every single other person across the organization looks at it in the same way,

and that’s really exciting stuff to be a part of.”

This is so important. A year ago, I wrote about how corporate culture generally is not keeping pace with consumer culture (*“The Big Shift,” The Hub, May/June 2009*). Pepsi is not just keeping pace with consumer culture; they are living it within their own walls, and reflecting it back out into the marketplace. This is “me, we, higher purpose” at its very best.

ME, WE, HIGHER PURPOSE

The “me” for Pepsi is optimism, and fulfilling a deep, aspirational desire within its consumers. They are enriching lives, showing people that they matter and creating deep, meaningful brand relationships.

It’s about the power of the individual. It’s about getting consumers to question themselves and recognize that as individuals they have the opportunity to make an impact. Pepsi has become a platform for putting our ideas into action. In three short months, they’ve created a movement fueled by the cultural desire for optimism.

The “we” is the collective spirit and the democratic nature of the Pepsi Refresh Project. It’s the people’s project, and Pepsi is enabling people to create and vote on ideas (either individually or in groups) and in the process build and improve their communities. Pepsi is bringing people together in a way that’s very rare—if not unprecedented—in brand marketing.

The “higher purpose” is Pepsi’s determination to help people turn their passions into positive change in their communities and the world. Pepsi is now the brand that brings people’s passions to life. They help spur ideas, fund and guide them, and help make them happen. They are turning people’s passions and ideas into action, and that is huge.

The Pepsi Refresh Project represents a new era in brand behavior, implemented brilliantly by a company that truly walks the talk when it comes to consumer insight and turning that into an engine of optimism that touches our lives. ■



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