Younger heads will prevail in digital and social media

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.

Citation: SAKER, J.M., 2014. Younger heads will prevail in digital and social media. Automotive Management, December, pp. 38.

Additional Information:

- This paper was accepted for publication in the magazine Automotive Management and appears here with the kind permission of the publisher.

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/25562

Version: Published

Publisher: Bauer Media

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Younger heads will prevail in digital and social media

By Professor Jim Saker

I am not young enough to know everything.” So wrote J.M. Barrie, referring to the arrogance of youth. How many of us thought we knew it all when we were young, but over the years our views have been shaped by experience?

In most areas of business, I believe that experience counts for a lot. If we are sensible, we learn as much from our mistakes as from our successes. In many sporting teams, the blend of experience and youth is critical and managers deliberately set out to get that combination.

There is, however, one area in which I am increasingly convinced the tables have been turned and the agenda is being set by the young. In the world of digital and social media, it is the grey heads struggling to follow.

From a personal perspective, this realisation started when my daughter, who is spending a year studying at the University of Michigan, called requesting a ‘Skype interview’ as part of an assignment. She needed to interview a ‘baby boomer’ i.e. someone born in the aftermath of the Second World War, and then compare their views and attitudes with her own peer group, the millennials.

I did my best to talk about the ideals that baby boomers held, the protests, the Sorbonne riots, the swinging sixties and the idealism of the counter-culture. One of the problems with Skype is that you soon become aware when the person on the other end is getting bored.

However, it was when the topic turned to describing the ‘millennials’ that the real differences started to emerge. This group are digital natives, brought up being able to type on a keyboard. Their use of the web, for both communication and identity, is very different to how someone my age uses it. They document their lives online and expect communication to be fast and relevant. The agenda for the use of social media is being set by the under-30s and I believe many of us are struggling to keep up.

The search for a sophisticated approach to millennials

The challenge is that these young people are part of our marketplace and some of our attempts at the use of social media to communicate with them lack both sophistication and credibility.

The Guardian in a recent article used the example of video bloggers. They quoted the example of Alfie Deyes, a 21-year-old ‘vlogger’ from Brighton who films his thoughts and views and posts them on a range of social media platforms.

Deyes is reported to have 2.9 million subscribers and 136m views on YouTube. He has more than 1m followers on Twitter and Instagram. Earlier this year, he published The Pointless Book, which attracted 8,000 people to its launch and ended up in the Amazon best-seller list. The strength of what people such as Deyes can do is to create engaging content for their peers to consume and share. The problem is that as a sector and an industry we like control.

The millennials like to co-create the content as it evolves. They are part of the communication process and to some extent shape its content and style. In so doing, they have ownership and this develops a loyalty and a following.

The key to co-branding has to be to allow the audience to feel part of the campaign while retaining some control. By being directly involved with a brand they gain a sense of loyalty and attachment.

At motor shows over recent years companies have started to get visitors to paint or design cars virtually and then have the picture sent to them electronically or in a form that they can tweet. Mini has done this a number of times and Toyota in Paris exhibited the ‘Art Car’, where people could add to the appearance of the vehicle in a form of what usually resembled graffiti.

How do you engage millennials, but retain brand control?

Millennials present a different challenge to our industry. Unlike previous generations, who accepted that they were being marketed at or to, the millennials are less passive and want to be involved in the process. For years, we have fought shy of user-generated content, but companies such as Kia and BMW have led the way in openly sharing feedback from customers. Although this is still a fairly linear communication process, there have been examples of customer groups sharing information, often of a technical nature about a product or service.

The millennials present us with a challenge that at the moment we haven’t cracked. How do you get engagement and involvement without losing control of the brand message you are trying to get across?

One possible solution is Apple’s approach, where they encourage comment online but have young staff in their stores who are not paid on commission and are simply there to engage, chat and pass the time of day with customers. Or it may simply be that we start to listen to young people and learn from them. Maybe it is time for the students to teach the professors.

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