TECHNOLOGY MARKETING GETS A CLUE

Last spring, a strange document appeared on the Web. Ninety-five theses about the Net and business, laced with ironic humor yet harboring deep insights. “Markets are conversations,” the authors declared. “Deal with it.”

The document was called the Cluetrain Manifesto (www.cluetrain.com), written by technology industry veterans Rick Levine, Christopher Locke, Doc Searls and David Weinberger. In earlier times, it would have ended up as a narrowly-circulated piece of samizdat. But online Cluetrain ignited a prairie fire. Hundreds signed the manifesto, major business publications heralded it, the Website became the basis of a hot-selling book and, most important, conversations erupted. A plea for businesses to appreciate the value of stories became a story in itself.

In this issue, one of the Cluetrain authors continues the conversation, focusing on the discipline of marketing. The Net creates incredible mechanisms for companies to communicate with customers and potential customers. It changes expectations about the customer relationship, empowering individuals and small but passionate groups, making traditional approaches fall flat. So far, though, the pinnacle of Internet marketing has been the Superbowl ad -- as traditional and undifferentiated as one could imagine. Chris Locke offers something a bit different...in every sense of the word.

Chris has worked at places such as MCI, IBM and Mecklermedia, and he was writing about e-commerce in the early days of the Mosaic browser. Yet, as you’ll see, he’s always been a non-conformist. Chris doesn’t conform to the belief that, as the Net “grows up” it will lose its wild side. In fact, it’s that uncontrollable, fundamentally human energy that attracts people to the Net and makes it a transformative force.

As consumers become less passive and more jaded, companies must convince them to care. They will succeed only by caring themselves. That’s at the heart of the argument Chris makes in this month’s issue, entitled “Gonzo Marketing: Winning Through Worst Practices.” What follows is often unserious, but it’s intended to make some very serious points. So fasten your seatbelts and enjoy the ride!

-- Kevin Werbach

HAPPY VALENTINE’S DAY!!!
GONZO MARKETING: WINNING THROUGH WORST PRACTICES  
By Christopher Locke

Even after the advent of automobiles, trucks and airplanes, the railroad tycoons remained imperturbably self-confident. If you had told them 60 years before that in 30 years they would be flat on their backs, broke, and pleading for government subsidies, they would have thought you totally demented. Such a future was simply not considered possible. It was not even a discussable subject, or an askable question, or a matter which any sane person would consider worth speculating about.


Control is the enemy of imagination. The two aren't just incompatible; they are inimical. One drives out the other. Deming, the Total Quality guy, said “drive out fear.” Imagine.

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David Weinberger, friend and Cluetrain co-author, defines the Web as “many small pieces loosely joined.” This piece will be like that: an undone puzzle; a bit of sky here, a wisp of cloud, perhaps a shadowed face. This piece is also part of a larger piece. It's a story about stories that start conversations. A story about how conversations lay the groundwork for commerce -- and how sometimes, commerce grounds conversation.

But the story will not be linear. It will jump around. We expect this of fiction, but not of business writing, which should proceed in stately order, from one clear point to the next. However, since the arrival of the tangled higher-order logic of the Web, business has become more dependent on narrative than explication -- and the narrative is no longer straightforward and predictable. It takes odd turns. It turns you on, then turns on you. It leaves you stranded. And then, just as you thought you'd reached a dead end, the road picks up again. The plot thickens.

Welcome to the gonzo

Gonzo marketing is the shorthand I use for the work I do -- work I fell into somewhat accidentally, rather than as a path I set out on knowing in advance where it might lead. At first, I looked for models, guidelines, some sort of framework that would make sense of the business world I suddenly found myself inhabiting. But what I found seemed oddly broken, or ill-conceived from the outset. Perhaps because I came to the computer industry from such a contrasting set of experiences, most of what I saw passing for best practice seemed naive to the point of being ridiculous. Or worse, demeaning.

At first I thought perhaps I'd get the hang of it with time. But I never did. Along the way, I've become less and less professional. To make a living, I had to find something I could do that actually worked. And to work for my company or client, first it had to work for me. Call it a character defect, but I'm just no good at doing anything I can't fully put my heart
into. So I explored and I followed my heart. And I began to discover that many of the things that worked were the diametric opposite of what was normal and expected in business. In fact, the more diametrically opposed, the more contrarian the approach, the more effective it tended to be. I began calling these directions, attitudes and informal rules-of-thumb "worst practices."

They aren't algorithms or recipes. They're not procedures. They're inclinations and actions that flow from a particular state of mind. And states of mind don't lend themselves very well to bullet points. However, they can sometimes be suggested through stories. If they're any good at all, stories don't deal in definitions and formulas. Instead, they convey impressions, colors, connotations. They suggest new ways of looking at problems, and sometimes, imaginative new approaches to solving them.

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Marketing is a black art -- and getting blacker by the minute. In the sense of shrouded, invisible, unknown. In a fit of Amazon.com one-click purchase possession, I recently bought the entire 20-volume *Harvard Business Review* Paperback Series. This collection of books covers more angles of business than you can shake a stick at (future stick-shaking was my motivation for buying them, in fact): management, leadership, governance, performance measurement, information technology, you name it. However, in none of the book titles -- nor in the titles of the 162 included HBR articles -- does the word "marketing" appear. Not once. I find this curious.

It's there in the indices, of course. But the listings say things like: "Marketing strategy. See also brand building; mass media advertising; sales promotions; sponsorships."

So if I do those things, then I'll be marketing, right?

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Gonzo marketing isn't really about marketing at all. At least not the kind that mutters amnesiacally about Product, Place, Price and Promotion. Since the Web came along, place no longer matters, the right price is often zero, and the first rule of promotion is to never talk about the product.

Maybe instead, marketing is about persuading people to listen, just as the goal of fiction is to get readers to willingly suspend disbelief. Hmmm, curious thought. But if that's the point, then "marketing" is probably the wrong word for the program. Which is why I call it gonzo marketing -- a boring, not very friendly concept turned inside out and stuffed full of yarns and fables, myths and sagas, outright fictions: stories. (Not so by the way, the notion of gonzo marketing owes a lot to gonzo journalism. Hold that thought; we'll get there.)

If I set out to tell you about my product, I'm already hosed, right out of the gate. You're not interested. Your eyes glaze over. And I can't make you listen these days -- not with 30 bajillion Weblinks beckoning every second. Certainly not the way I could make you listen with a 30-bajillion-dollar advertising budget and a populace hardwired to The Tube.
Mass marketing is a special case of mass production in which the product is mass-produced commercial “messages.” In the pre-Net heyday of broadcast advertising, these messages had to appeal to the widest possible audience. Therefore they could offend no one. They could have no real personality. They had to be one-size-fits-all, bland, vanilla, preferably humorless. So pervasive was this jargon-ridden communicational “style” that even individuals deployed it in one-to-one business letters wherein they did such things as thank each other in advance for their earliest attention to those important matters impacting mutual concerns in re their earlier communication. Many businesses still think and talk this way.

What the market wants

Twice head marketing honcho at The Coca-Cola Company, Sergio Zyman describes why, under his guidance, things went better with Coke: “We were successful because we never forgot that our goal was to get more people to buy more stuff more often so the company could make more money.”

Stirring words, to be sure. But who cares? Really. While this is certainly what every company hopes to accomplish, are a company’s wish-fulfillment fantasies sufficient in the era of the Internet? Does marketing pivot on a devious remote-control trip -- tricking demographic abstractions into buying more stuff? Or must it instead take into account -- and take seriously -- what the market wants, what real people actually care about? This astonishingly obvious alternative is still seen by many companies as a radical proposition. And in fact, it is.

Even Zyman’s own product -- a book in this case -- is now open to assessment in the networked marketplace, an assessment over which he as producer has no control. On Amazon.com, reader-reviewer Byron Menides, adjunct professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute’s School of Industrial Management, writes: “I was disappointed after reading Sergio Zyman’s book with the provocative title, The End of Marketing as We Know It. Old marketing based on mass merchandising with little attention to customer needs was dead years ago... I am surprised that a book published in 1999 says so little about the impact and influence of the Internet in business to business and consumer marketing.”

But the fact that the Internet is missing from the discussion comes as no real surprise. This is marketing as it was canonized in the age of mass-market broadcast media, the dynamics of which differ deeply from those of the online world. The problem is not that marketing as Sergio Zyman knows it -- manipulative, intrusive, gimmick-ridden and inherently dishonest -- has come to an end. The problem is that this view of marketing remains unquestioned in most corporations and that its techniques are being deployed in a medium to which they have only negative relevance.

With the advent of the Internet, markets have again become open, unconstrained conversations. Free talk. And the best conversations, the ones people gravitate toward, are based on stories. If the pitch is the epitome of broadcast, the story embodies the essential character of the Web.
Stories, like conversations, don't have targets, fixed goals, Q2 objectives. They circumambulate their subjects. They explore. They don’t have mission statements.

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Coca-Cola has been around for a long time. It may be tempting to think that its notions of marketing are typical of older, well-established companies, or only companies that offer commodity consumer products like fizzy brown sugar water. But much younger high-tech companies are prone to the same mentality and make the same mistakes.

In an article titled “Legends in Their Own Minds,” Salon recently looked at two business bestsellers: *High Stakes, No Prisoners* and *Renegades of the Empire*. Reviewer Thomas Scoville called them:

...particularly juicy specimens of the prevailing business rhetoric of the dot-com era. There is a kind of language -- an amalgam of hyperbole, geek-speak, and pop-media code phrases, delivered in a perverse, super-desiccated and emotionally bankrupt tone -- to be found in both of these books, and it is this contemporary mutation of language, rather than the stories themselves, that may ultimately communicate the Zeitgeist most effectively.

To offer more than the facile business pitch, stories alone are not sufficient. What is critical is the intent with which they are told. The best stories arouse curiosity; they invite us to wonder, to suspend our disbelief. They may be captivating, but they aren't about capture and control.

John Borthwick, a vp at AOL's Development Studio in New York, wrote to me after finishing The Cluetrain Manifesto:

You talk about the importance of storytelling within organizations, and how stories humanize information. One reason I think this works is that telling stories encourages speaking from personal experience instead of talk based on corporate abstractions. Even when they're fictional, stories resonate because the back button is shared experience.

While “business rhetoric” so often reflects the soulless quality of mass marketing, stories have a palpable heartbeat. Where the pitch seeks to isolate, reduce, to make us small and fearful, the story includes, expands, encourages. Imagination makes us larger.

MARKETING GOES OPEN SOURCE

Personalization.com

It's Spring '99 and I'm nearly broke. I'm getting worried. My phone rings. It's Steve Larsen, who is now senior vp marketing at Net Perceptions. I've known him since 1994, when he was at Prodigy and I was at Mecklermedia exploring a concept that would later be called e-commerce. Now, he tells me, he's thinking about putting together a Website focusing on personalization. I have to ask what that means. “Don't worry about it,” Larsen
says, “You’ll pick it up real quick.” Oh, so he’s talking about a gig.
Good timing. “Anyway, we were just kicking around who we could get to help
us out with this, and at the same instant several people said ‘Hey! This
is a job for RageBoy!’ So whaddya think? Are you interested?”

Today, I’m editor-in-chief of Personalization.com and Net Perceptions is
my client. Steve and I have been experimenting with an idea suggested by
something Eric Raymond said. Eric is president of the Open Source
Initiative (see Release 1.0, 11-98, 3-99). When he signed the Cluetrain
Manifesto, he wrote: “The cluetrain is to marketing and communications
what the open-source movement is to software development -- anarchic,
messy, rude, and vastly more powerful than the doomed bullshit that con-
ventionally passes for wisdom.”

What a terrific soundbite! But what if I took it seriously? Was it possi-
ble that there could be such a thing as “open-source marketing”? On its
face, the idea seemed absurd. The canonical model for the open source
movement is Linux, the development of which has been collaborative and
widely distributed, percolating good ideas from the bottom up without
explicit direction from any focal control point. How could marketing --
competitive, centralized and highly managed via a top-down chain of com-
mand -- bear any resemblance?

But the more Steve and I talked about it, the more we realized that an
open-source marketing model fit with what we already believed. On the
Personalization.com site, we first banned any form of product promotion.
We set up a forum for anyone who wanted to talk about the subject, pro or
con, and we even published several articles that basically said personal-
ization sucks. Then we decided to invite Net Perceptions’ competitors to
join in.

Steve had seen an early draft of The Cluetrain Manifesto and was interest-
ed in answering the question: If markets are really conversations, how do
you go about starting and sustaining that kind of conversation? We both
felt that the success of the site should be measured on the quality of the
content and the diversity of its sources -- the number and variety of peo-
ple participating -- instead of by the sales leads it generated.

When the site launched, Steve wrote a column explaining what we were up
to. He told the story about how we originally met (and how I got the name
RageBoy from Esther Dyson). He followed with a telling comment: “I knew
Chris would provide the separation from Net Perceptions necessary to the
site being accepted as a legitimate source of high-quality information on
an important topic and not just propaganda from some PR machine.”

Separation as critical prerequisite for legitimacy? Isn’t that kind of a
weird concept for a marketing guy to be entertaining? No weirder, certain-
ly, than putting his company’s core market positioning into the hands of
someone who calls himself RageBoy.

But the response was fantastic. Many people wrote articles for the site
(without pay, so it wasn’t that). Roughly 1000 visitors a month have sub-
scribed to the newsletter I started putting out. The forum immediately
started filling up with substantive discussion and lively debate. Links
from other sites have been plentiful and we’ve gotten some great writeups.
RageBoy, my psycho online alter ego, has definitely put his oar in from time to time. Announcing the first Personalization Summit conference, held last November in San Francisco, he managed to break out of the leg irons, get control of my terminal and write to thousands of “personalization newswire” subscribers:

- **HEAR!**
  [this followed by a list of well-known industry speakers]

- **EXPERIENCE!**
  [followed by a litany of equally well-known companies]

  Steve Larsen, vice president of marketing, Net Perceptions, droning on interminably and telling really bad jokes.

  Christopher Locke, editor of personalization.com (securely restrained in a bamboo cage for your personal protection).

- **SEE!**
  1000 virgins sacrificed to the Great God Baal...

One CEO telephoned me within minutes of this crossing the Net. “I’ve never seen a business newsletter quite like this,” he said. He was clearly perplexed. I tried to be serious. We only live to serve, I told him. But he registered anyway, as did hundreds of others. The conference sold out early. It was a standing-room-only success, exceeding everyone’s expectations. And the newsletter was the only vector we used to flog the thing -- if you don’t count press releases, which are basically worthless.

Did something strange happen to marketing while the world was busy making other plans? Yup. The Web has turned the world upside down and inside out. When paradox becomes paradigm, worst practices work best.

**Harvard Business Review myopia**

I met Theodore Levitt in 1987. Cool guy. After his talk, I handed him a paper I’d written called “Corporate Communications: Telling Stories That Transmit Vision.” I was surprised to get a handwritten note from him a few days later saying he wanted to publish it in the *Harvard Business Review* -- if I’d just make a couple fairly simple changes. Like a jerk, I never modified the piece.

Levitt was then editor-in-chief of HBR. He’d also written an important book called *The Marketing Imagination* -- what a curious juxtaposition of words. Much earlier, in 1960, he published a seminal article in HBR titled “Marketing Myopia.” There he said:

> Marketing is a stepchild. I do not mean that selling is ignored. Far from it. But selling... is not marketing. ...selling concerns itself with the tricks and techniques of getting people to exchange their cash for your product. It is not concerned with the values that the exchange is all about.
In 1975, HBR re-published the article, to which Levitt added a “Retro-
spective Commentary.” Here he speculates as to why the piece was so suc-
cessful, having at that date sold well over a quarter million reprints.

Is it that concrete examples, joined to illustrate a simple idea and
presented with some attention to literacy, communicate better than
massive analytical reasoning that reads as though it were translated
from the German? Is it that provocative assertions are more memo-
rable and more persuasive than restrained and balanced explanations,
no matter who the audience? Is it that the character of the message
is as much the message as its content?

Interesting questions, significant in themselves. In the end, one of the
greatest names in marketing returns to talk about the story and how it’s
told -- and why it might matter how it’s told.

Even more interesting, to me, is that fact that this hugely popular, well
written and entirely accessible article by one of the most frequent con-
tributors to HBR, is not included among the 162 articles in my brand new
20-volume Harvard Business Review Paperback Series. In fact, the set does
not include anything by Levitt.

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If “marketing” is only fully and completely understood by some inner-
sanctum priesthood of MBA-equipped professionals, then why should “the
market” give a damn? If they haven’t explained it to me -- and they
haven’t -- then something is very wrong here. There has been, quoting from
Cool Hand Luke, a failure to communicate. The Big-M Marketing department
behaves as if it isn’t performing in front of a live audience. But today
on the Net, if there is no audience, neither is there a market.

The ancient marketplace revived

In the Cluetrain Manifesto I talk about the ancient marketplace, the
social hub around which civilization emerged. It was a confusing place,
filled with noise, with talk, with song.

Many years ago, I read an interview with Keith Richards in which he said
he saw Mick Jagger and himself as being in direct line of descent from
antique bards and medieval troubadours. In place of “Let It Bleed” and
“Sympathy For the Devil,” I suddenly flashed on the lyric poet-musicians
of the 12th century, on Beowulf, Homer, and even further back to bones and
rattles and skin drums around some Neolithic campfire.

For me, this was a moment of radical reframing. Here was this roughneck
rocker junkie talking about being connected to an authentic human lineage,
which in turn connected him to both his own purpose as a man, and to his
audience. Quite literally, to his market. Suddenly, he wasn’t just a
London punk grabbing for money and fame. He was reenacting and embodying a
ritual that has united people at a primal, atavistic level for thousands
of years -- a powerful communion. Reading his almost throw-away comment
revised my entire outlook on popular music -- and on marketing.

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Advertising shares certain important qualities with the craft of storytelling. Unfortunately, the stories advertising tells are created to please clients, not the audience. That's upside down. Only a live and fully wide-awake audience -- not a “focus group” -- can truly judge a story's value. But instead of asking whether the story was effective, the ad agency today asks the client whether the story sold the product.

Because broadcast is intrusive, it's possible in that model for crappy stories -- in most cases, another way of saying “ads” -- to sell mediocre products. However, the Internet is not broadcast. Broadcast assumptions -- especially the high value advertising places on intrusion and manipulation -- immediately fall apart on the Internet. If the story bombs online, that's the end of the story. If nobody listens, nobody buys.

I am inordinately fond of books. And I spend a lot of money acquiring them. It's a neurosis I've learned to live with. Who gets all this ill-gotten loot? Amazon. Certainly not because they're aiming spam and banner ads at me, but because of the stories and conversations there. “Huh?” you ask. “What stories? What conversations?” Perhaps you're too old, too set in your assumptions to see what's happening. But go to the Harry Potter pages. Slowly, haltingly, the children of the world are beginning to talk to one another. They understand. No one had to explain it to them.

Barnes & Noble and Borders may have the same books, but they haven't yet embedded them in as rich and attractive a context. Not attractive as in pretty. Attractive as in attraction -- as in magnetizing and awakening my full interest. For me anyway, catalogs of bare product listings rarely have that effect, whereas interactions with other people often do.

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New medium or not, companies are always going to try to sell us their stuff. It's what they do. It's what we expect them to do. But the point is no longer just to capture people's attention -- though that remains critical. It's to encourage their goodwill.

From this point forward, companies will never achieve substantial market share without first establishing an elusive quality called “mindshare.” Do I want to obey my thirst and glug down a Sprite? Do I want to take the Pepsi Challenge? Do I care if you got milk? No, no, and no.

But I might care a lot if some company offered to hook me up with a bunch of interesting people who think sorta like I do, and have similar or complementary tastes and interests. People who could tell me stuff I wanted to know. Or even better, people good at telling stories, sharing life experiences, insights, new perspectives. There are many places where that sort of exchange is happening on the Net. But most of them are zines or e-mail lists or personal sites created by talented turned-on individuals.

Very few companies offer anything even remotely close. Sure there are huge chat conglomerates like Mirabilis (ICQ) and Yahoo and AOL, but they're just providing the tools or the pipe, not the juice. To them the stories are just message traffic and page hits. What about companies that sell other things, like cars or shoes or power tools? The sites that all these
trillions of dollars of e-commerce are supposed to be coming from. Maybe I'm blind and I'm missing it. But I just don't see people hanging out at corporate Websites. There's nothing to do there but buy more stuff so the company can make more money. Gosh, that's exciting! Thank you, Sergio.

To capture the interest of online markets, where we have gotten used to talking amongst ourselves in unconstrained, unpremeditated human voices, companies need to tell human stories. Not the smarmy, cloyingly sentimental “human interest” stories businesses are so fond of leveraging in support of some crypto-corporate brand mysticism, but rather, stories that come from having actually grappled with the class of problems the product or service purports to solve. In other words, companies need to tell stories based on genuine understanding, not purposeful misdirection.

However, to tell such human stories, companies need human beings -- a “product” with which they’ve never had much success. It’s not that they lack the raw materials. They start with perfectly good stock. But they consistently turn out androids that sound like Tickle Me Elmo dolls.

GONZO VOICE

Merriam-Webster defines gonzo as “idiosyncratically subjective but engagé.” As dictionary definitions go, this one's delicious. A bit fruity perhaps, but a great nose and a nice finish. It also means “bizarre,” the lexicographers add woodenly, rather ruining the whole effect.

Hunter S. Thompson created gonzo journalism, a genre in which high humor meets bad taste. Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas burst onto the literary scene with tsunami force. Coming from an unknown writer at Rolling Stone magazine, it was shocking in more than one sense. And there’s that unexpected, visceral rock-and-roll connection once again. Who knew? There’s a clue the size of Everest here that remains invisible in plain sight.

But -- and this is vitally important -- gonzo is far more than the shock tactics it employs. “The writer must be a participant in the scene while he's writing it,” Thompson said. Being a full participant in events, having a point of view, a deeply personal perspective: gonzo is about being engaged. It’s not “objective” but it does care about outcomes. When Hunter Thompson wrote about Nixon, he wasn’t just writing about one of two presidential candidates. He was writing about someone he hated -- hated to the point of intimacy, so much that he almost loved the man. When Thompson got done with Nixon, Nixon wasn’t an abstraction. He was as real as a hurricane hitting into the Keys. As concrete as a head-on train wreck.

Gonzo journalism represented a significant shift in media reporting or at least the option of a new direction. It granted other writers the permission to be human, to stop pretending they were automatic cameras recording events about which they had no opinion, in which they had no personal stake. And it granted this permission even to writers who didn’t sprinkle acid on their morning cornflakes.

But of course this did not, could not possibly, apply to the industry trade press. That would be unthinkable. In the realm of technology -- which is after all, the handmaiden of Big Science -- it’s all facts and figures. It’s passionless objectivity all the way down.
I woke up one day and said to myself: Yeah? Well, screw that.

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I was at an AI conference. All these academic researchers were arguing about natural language processing. They were arguing about it as if language was their personal property, something that they'd inherited along with their degrees and official membership in “the discipline.” I remember getting angry. I remember thinking about the cave paintings at Lascaux and Altamira, about dictionaries as a form of lexical archeology, about Indo-European etymologies that went back the steppes of Asia, to people who rode into battle bareback and made up words for the sounds their swords and axes made, for the sounds of love, for the sounds of the night.

And I thought, who do these hosers think they are? These long-winded doctors of philosophy with their anemic propositions and their feeble proofs. I walked away and never looked back.

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I love language. And not just for what it can do. For what it is. But I'm also a working stiff. Somehow, I ended up in high-tech marketing. And for years I asked myself if there might be some way to combine my interest in language with my work in marketing. Could there be some hidden connection?

This is one of those questions that is so profoundly stupid, you actually blush when you finally hear yourself asking it. “Hmmm, let’s see... language, marketing... language, marketing...” And then the light bulb went off. Duh!

Could it be just remotely possible that the articulation -- whether clear or muddled -- of a company’s history, direction and focus, what it cares about and spends it time doing, how it perceives its contribution to the world beyond itself... that all that could have some bearing on things like “management,” “leadership,” “brand,” “positioning,” “value proposition” and suchlike buzzwords? Double-duh!

But companies mostly want to talk about just one thing: the product. And they mostly want to say just one thing about that: buy it! If markets are conversations, this makes for one hell of a dull conversation.

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At its heart, gonzo is animated by an attitude of deeply principled anti-professionalism, in the best sense. Historian and former librarian of Congress Daniel J. Boorstin once wrote: “Democracy is government by amateurs.... The survival of our society depends on the vitality of the amateur spirit.... The representative of the people...must be wary of becoming a professional politician.”

Here, amateur clearly doesn't mean incompetent or unskilled. It doesn't mean unprofessional. But “professional-ism” is something altogether different. Over time, any functional specialization tends to forget its relationship to the larger social context it was created to work within and
serve. Instead, it concentrates on developing an inner-sanctum of specialists who talk among themselves in a private language inaccessible to outsiders. Almost without exception, such professionals despise amateurs.

Related to “amateur” is the even more pejorative term “dilettante” -- someone who practices a craft or studies a field in which he or she is not a “recognized professional.” But the etymological roots of these words tell a different story. Amateurs do what they do for love (from the Latin amare), while dilettantes are not mere casual dabblers, but instead are inspired by delight (from the Italian diletare by way of the Latin delectare). In sharp contrast, delight and passion for the work are qualities professionals often lose.

The opposite of professionalism is what Zen master Shunryu Suzuki called “beginner’s mind” -- an ability to look at the world with fresh eyes and an open spirit.

Note that Boorstin’s observation can be equally applied to the commercial sphere. In marketing, just as in government, professionalism tends to unimaginatively hew to its own timid orthodoxy. It does not provide leadership, enthusiasm or the kind of personal and impassioned engagement Hunter Thompson’s political writing represents. Professionalism tends to be narrowly focused, inward-looking, self-involved, myopic. Ah, there’s a segue! Ted Levitt writes in “Marketing Myopia”:

The reason [the railroads] defined their industry incorrectly was that they were railroad-oriented instead of transportation oriented.... What the railroads lack is not an opportunity but some of the managerial imaginativeness and audacity that made them great.... Even an amateur like Jacques Barzun can see what is lacking when he says: ‘I grieve to see the most advanced physical and social organization of the last century go down in shabby disgrace for lack of the same comprehensive imagination that built it up.’

Note here that Levitt turns to the amateur, and the amateur gets it right. Note also the references to imagination and audacity. Where professionals are cool and analytic, beginners and dilettantes often see things more clearly -- and care more deeply about what they see. The more people care, the more they are willing to risk. Concern, passion, shock, outrage: all tend to inspire engaged, audacious, imaginative speech. And such speech has true “voice,” the power to compel attention because -- are you ready for this? -- it is grounded in love.

Yeah, but what’s love got to do with it?

In an era of networked markets, the love of the amateur, the delight of the dilettante represent a critical new dimension of economic reality, a powerful new market dynamic. The common online rabble, among which I definitely count myself, has no love for “e-commerce” and its convoluted, self-deluded marketing schemes.

Gonzo marketing is about reframing and recontextualization. Re-imagining. So imagine this: gonzo marketing is marketing from the marker’s perspective. It’s not a set of tricks to be used against us -- note the camp that pronoun puts me in. Instead, it’s a set of tools to achieve what we want for a change. At the same time, it holds great promise for business,
because... well, because we believed it all those years when business said
it wanted to know what we really wanted. And for starters, what we want
is for business to leave us the hell alone!

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Fortunately for me, I'm schizophrenic -- a definite plus when attempting
to hold such views and make a living as a business consultant. So I actu-
ally do see the value of gonzo marketing to companies. I see it as a pow-
erful form of market advocacy, which companies sorely need. They need it
because, despite all the lip service, they are incapable of imagining what
is going on in the minds of their own markets.

But the downside of this juggling act -- where the "act" is telling the
truth about things as I perceive them -- is that I can only work for
those rare companies that really want to know what their markets are
thinking, as opposed to the many that merely pretend they want to know.
This market segmentation is OK by me though, really. It prevents me from
having assholes for clients.

You think this is Internet "attitude" talking? Ironic postmodern over-
statement? Forty years ago, Ted Levitt speculated in some amazement about
how the auto industry could have missed the public's clear preference for
smaller, more fuel-efficient cars. "The answer," he wrote, "is that
Detroit never really researched customers' wants. It only researched their
preferences between the kinds of things which it had already decided to
offer them." (Keep this in mind when we get to Ford, below.)

Personalization re-visioned

So-called personalization technologies purport to help companies under-
stand their customers better. And in a way, they do. When Amazon.com tells
you that "customers who bought this book also bought..." and gives you a
list of titles, these are extracted from customer purchase information by
a technique known as "collaborative filtering" (see Release 1.0, 11-96).

However, as used by most companies, personalization is an oxymoron.
Without knowing anything about customers as people, it merely automates
"cross-selling" and "up-selling" opportunities -- a more sophisticated
version of "Would you like fries with that?" Does this sell more fries?
Yeah. But that's an extremely limited view.

Re-visioned from a higher vantage point, the view looks radically differ-
ent. This kind of software works bottom up by feeling out the edges of
emergent micromarkets based on personal tastes and interests -- in effect,
defining potential online communities. This is a powerful capability, much
better suited to a networked medium than the top-down demographic slicing
and dicing typical of broadcast.

Under my gonzo marketing hat, I see this as an opportunity for companies
to stop marketing altogether -- at least in the sense of marketing to and
marketing at. Instead, personalization can be used to get genuinely per-
sonal, connecting members of these emergent micromarkets to each other. Do
that, and -- shazzam! -- something different in kind results. People start
talking, having conversations, telling stories.
Recall all those kids on Amazon vibing back and forth about Harry Potter. This trilogy has so far elicited 4,247 reader reviews -- an incredible number. What's the commercial benefit? It's impossible to measure with scientific accuracy, but here's a clue. The fourth volume in the series won't be published for another five months, yet today it's #1 on Amazon's bestseller list. Is that worth something in cold hard cash? You bet.

Plus, the communities of interest resulting from such facilitation are far more likely to value the facilitator than if the company found a way to "message" at them more efficiently. Efficiency is not effectiveness.

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Talking about MyWidget -- your wonderful product -- is generally boring and tends to quickly turn into gushing, blatherous hype. But talking about the kinds of problems a product was created to solve, the opportunities and obstacles it was created to take advantage of or overcome -- in other words, its larger market context -- can often help people to decide why (and if) they should give a damn about it in the first place -- a significant challenge for many companies these days.

Amazon.com's real innovation was to create a marketplace where customers, not advertisers and marketeers, could assess the value of the products. For years, academic librarians built OPACs -- online patron access catalogs -- but to the best of my knowledge, none ever asked the reader, "so hey, did you like that book?" Back at the beginning, I wrote: "sometimes, commerce grounds conversation." This is a good example. It took a commercial organization, not Yale or Stanford or the Library of Congress, to get ordinary people talking to each other about -- of all things! -- books.

Do site visitors scanning the reader reviews feel they are being advertised to? I don't think so. Especially when they encounter reviews warning off potential buyers: "This book sucks. It was a waste of money. Don't make the same mistake I did!"

Is there slop in Amazon's system? Uh-huh. Are there design flaws? Definitely. Inequities? Possibly; I don't know for sure. But overall it's a great model. And it opens up rich possibilities, of which I suspect we've only seen the surface. The company is enriching its relational space -- both hyperlinked knowledge and person-to-person relationships -- in many ways: through its affiliates program, wish lists, member pages, reviews of reviewers, discussion boards, purchase circles, auctions, and so on.

The really interesting marketing action at Amazon is not how this information is being used to pitch products -- "Would you like War and Peace with that?" -- but in how it's being used to hook people up and get them talking to each other. "Hey, I just read War and Peace, and man, I gotta tell ya, this Tolstoy dood rulez!"

So what's gonzo about that? Easy. It's anti-marketing. To be more precise, it's anti-marketing-as-usual -- it's actually very smart marketing. Because people talking to each other don't sound like marketing droids.
It's not easy being gonzo

Audioactive sells MP3 encoders and related sorts of things. I was impressed by the site when I first went there a couple years ago. It was funny, self-effacing. You could tell the crew was turned on, having fun. One page talked about the technology. This is pretty daunting stuff, it said. And it could be boring. Are you sure you want to wrap your head around the algorithms these wire-head scientists came up with?

The Audioactive site was good looking and conveyed deep competence. But I remember it a million sites later for only one reason: it had voice. I could feel there were real people on the other end.

A couple days ago I went back to Audioactive to grab some examples for this article -- and couldn't find a single one. The site has been sterilized. The edge, the humor, the voice is gone. All the information is still there, and maybe the pages are a little slicker. But now the company sounds like every other e-bozo outfit on the Web.

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One day in June 1997, I hit the Microsoft Website looking for some information now long forgotten. At the top of the main page was a headline about a recent deal: “Microsoft Invests $1 Billion in Comcast.” Nothing very surprising there. What was memorable was the sub-slug: “We found some extra cash lying around in a sock drawer.”

Whoa! What was this? I ripped into the press release, hoping for more, but fell asleep at the terminal halfway through the obligatory Gates quote: “Today's announcement will enhance the integration of broadband pipes and content to expand the services offered to consumers.” ZZZZ...

I went back to the page for weeks afterwards, wondering if there'd be more inspired headlines, captions, further signs of life from whoever had produced the sock drawer line. No dice. Maybe one day I’ll run into this person and hear the story of how she got demoted to Encarta shipping clerk for unauthorized cheek. Too bad. Too sad.

Why do companies insist on being boring and character-free? Moreover, why do startups, those zany hackers with the wild ideas and boundless energy, insist on emulating boring-sounding companies as soon as they land their first-round financing? I imagine an exchange something like this.

VC: “You fellows are bright as a pin and we like your spunk. Otherwise we wouldn't be handing you such a big wad of cash. But you have to realize this isn't a game anymore. No more goofing around. We expect to get a whopping return on this investment, and for that to happen, you're going to have to start acting and sounding like a real company.”

Developer: “How does that work, exactly?”

VC: “Well, look at your Fortune 500 companies out there. You want to join them one day, right? We certainly want you to. You don't see them being funny do you? You don’t see them making cracks about their products or
management team. No, you don't. And you won't. Not ever. You have joined the ranks of serious business, and while you may find it a little plain, I can assure you that this is how it's done."

In a medium well known for sites with names like “The Cathedral of the Hydrogenated Snack Cake,” why would any company assume it needed to sound “businesslike”? Why would it ever write something like this unedited clip from a bona fide IBM press release?

Serving customers in more than 40 countries as the largest IT financier in the world, IBM Global Financing offers businesses of all sizes leasing and financing solutions for hardware, software and services acquired from IBM and other vendors. With approximately $40 billion in annual financing originations, IBM Global Financing also provides flexible commercial financing for inventory, accounts receivable and acquisitions....

I'm snoring over here, guys. I'm cuttin' Z's again.

Gonzo zines

I write a zine called Entropy Gradient Reversals, EGR to its pals. In contrast to the lowest-common-denominator style of mass-market business “communications,” here’s the opening of an EGR issue I sent around a few weeks ago while manfully struggling to avoid writing what you're reading here:

Valued Readers:

Jesus, Mary and Joseph on a porch swing, give me strength! You fuckin people are gonna put me in an early grave, I swear.

The salutation (before the colon, of course) is lifted from many mass mailings, where the sender has little or no idea who the audience is. But they are valued. Isn’t that sweet? Of course, no one buys it for a second. It's like saying “Dear Occupant,” only worse, because of the utterly incredible premise it tries to get away with. Every issue of EGR begins with these words, skewed and recast to mean something like: you know I'm lying, I know you know I'm lying, and I know you know you know you know I'm lying. I generally try to follow this complex moment of deep sharing with some form of ritual abuse, as above, so it doesn't get overly saccharine.

Paradoxically, the effect this has is that readers tend to believe me. Well no... not “believe” exactly, as I'm constantly yanking their chains. More like listen to me. Yeah, that's it, they listen. And I don't just mean they read the stuff; often they don't. But they tune in. Gee, this is hard to describe. It's like trying to tell a stranger about rock and roll. Look, I get the mail, so I know what I'm talking about here. They tune in, OK? You wanna make something of it? Whoops, sorry. Slipped into the mode there for a second...

It's important to note that the zine isn't trying to sell anyone anything. Except maybe the occasional 20-volume unabridged dictionary, or an obscenely expensive English grammar (nobody bought it but me). But selling stuff was never EGR's purpose. I’m still not sure what its purpose is. Cheap psychotherapy maybe.
But it's also interesting that since I quit being anyone's employee a couple years ago, all my consulting work has come through EGR. And that's been worth double what I ever made as a wage slave. Plus, last time I checked, the Cluetrain book was doing pretty well. So it just goes to show that you never can tell about these things. By the way, did I mention how much I value my readers?

Also, did I mention that the companies they come from read like the Fortune 500 list? (See www.rageboy.com/domains.html.) This isn't entirely horn honking. The point is that lots of people from lots of "serious companies" are reading some seriously unserious stuff. Of course, it's also very serious stuff. But disguised, you know? So no one will think it's serious until it's too late. Sorta like the Trojan Horse.

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Steve Larsen -- remember? the senior vp marketing dude? My valued client? -- periodically mails out an informal screed he calls Friends of Net Perceptions. It used to be Friends of Prodigy (which "had fewer friends" he notes), then Friends of CitySearch. He's been doing this for a long time now. In one of these he recapped the inside story of what it was actually like to go public. This was a coffee-out-the-nose-funny look at what most company executives consider a sacred rite of passage into corporationhood. He ends thusly:

In the next bizarre iteration of this newsletter run amok, I'll clue you in on some other interesting stuff. If you are smart and value your sanity, you'll get off this list NOW! As always, getting off requires that you whirl a live chicken around your head three times on the night of a full moon while muttering lyrics from an obscure Doors tune...

He ripped off the chicken-whirling trope from EGR, by the way -- though he tacked on the Doors bit, which I think adds a nice touch. Anyway, you get the idea. This isn't exactly your average business communique. It's solidly in the gonzo camp.

And he sends it out to clients, journalists, industry analysts, even to some of Net Perceptions' (NASDAQ: NETP) primary investors. Yet Steve doesn't hesitate to tell these readers to subscribe to my EGR ravings, where -- trust me on this one -- they are liable to encounter all manner of unseemly and highly unbusinesslike content.

I ask him whether this isn't... uh, just a little risky? “Marketing is about real relationships,” Larsen replies. “I tell my friends about stuff I like, no matter how off-the-wall. They don't always share my tastes, but they end up knowing me better.”

Only in a world gone crazy would that be gonzo. But the business world today is not just crazy. It's headed for the rubber room.

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In 1996, Microsoft was running a thing called “Internet Magazine” on its site. The people responsible for putting it together got wind of EGR
and, going against all reasonable expectations, they evidently liked what they saw. In fact, they said hey, write us some of that gonzo stuff -- none of this crap we get about how wonderful Microsoft's products are.

I was fascinated to say the least, so I tried to get to know the crew a little. One person sent me mail that said: “You wouldn't believe the background of this team: acupuncturist, mfa in poetry, mediaeval vocalist, 60's protestor for civil rights in the south, and many other secrets. Best of all, it's an ego-free-zone!”

And then there was this: “The Black Sabbath line comes from the convicted ex-journalist from S.F. He gets in every day at 7 a.m. and cranks up the volume and the writing. He also understands IE 4 better than most of the entire marketing team.” Remember: we’re talking about the notorious Evil Empire here.

The editor in chief was Emily Warn, a published poet. I bought one of her books, where I came across this: “But the haze in the hills is not fog or smoke from hermit fires. It is America breathing.”

Wow, I thought, there is life in the trenches. Heart is still alive and beating inside the corporate monoliths. But a couple months later, Microsoft shut down the project.

FEAR AND LOATHING

In “Fear and Loathing on the Web” (gonzo ported from Las Vegas to AltaVista), I quoted David Weinberger, who said: “The dogs have it right. Customers want to take a good long whiff. But companies so lobotomized that they can’t speak in a recognizably human voice build sites that smell like death.”

That was one thread, one shared stream of consciousness that led to the Cluetrain Manifesto, where later I would write:

To speak with a human voice, companies must share the concerns of their communities. But first, they must belong to a community. Companies must ask themselves where their corporate cultures end. If their cultures end before the community begins, they will have no market. Human communities are based on discourse -- on human speech about human concerns. The community of discourse is the market. Companies that do not belong to a community of discourse will die.

I'm cautiously edging toward a theory of rhetoric here. Used non-pejoratively, the word rhetoric often causes eyebrows to be raised, and is sometimes even met with alarm. This reaction involves the conflict between these two contradictory sets of semantics:

rhetoric, noun

1. persuasive speech or writing: speech or writing that communicates its point persuasively

2. pretentious words: complex or elaborate language that only succeeds in sounding pretentious

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From ancient times to the present, the study of rhetoric has always focused on effective, persuasive communication. However, lacking a theory of rhetoric -- an informing overall set of communicational principles and a sense of what they are to be used for -- institutional speech has largely been reduced to the second definition.

**Spiritual markets**

Stories often employ figures of speech: similes, metaphors. They use these rhetorical devices to ground abstractions in the familiar -- like the face of a friend emerging from an anonymous crowd.

Where before, companies could get away with making the right noises about flexibility but really remain as rigid as they want to while instead trying to pull political and other strings to control the environment, they can't any more -- trying to do this in the current environment will be akin to bolting the stable door after the horse has fled and is already out there in the wild mounting many mares and making many foals.

The writer's name is Olu Oni. When he wrote this, he was just some guy, one of millions of people posting pages to the Web. However, when the weekend is over and he puts on his shoes and tie and business suit, he is Assistant Vice President for Global Markets Technology at Chase Manhattan Bank. When he writes like this, he isn't speaking on behalf of his company. He is very careful to say so. But when he leaves for work, does he leave the poetry at home? I doubt it.

Consider the metaphor of the horse. Notice that it is drawn from the world of the living. Notice that the horse is wild, that it has broken free. Notice that its first thought is to replicate itself.

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Some metaphors are so powerful they speak directly in the language the collective unconscious. In an e-mail conversation we got into about Cluetrain and his paper, Olu wrote: “Markets have strong supernatural and spiritual bearings in Yoruba culture and indeed the reason for the adage ‘you do not buy from strangers’ is because of the belief that spirits also came to the market to transact in souls... Buy from a stranger and the transaction may cost you more than you bargained for.”

The best stories can become myths that draw people together, create entire cultures. The people within the culture so created are not strangers to each other precisely because they know the old stories. They share and reflect on them. They remember together. This creates powerful cohesion, even identity.

And sometimes the stories are warnings. They persist because they continue to protect the people, often from great harm. Is the notion of a market traffic in souls merely superstition? If it’s “just a metaphor,” what is it a metaphor for? Is it possible that the engine of commerce decoupled and estranged from the concerns of any human society could actually steal people's souls? In some real sense, destroy their life force? Perhaps it’s not a metaphor at all.
If you think deeply about this story, it becomes an allegory -- richer, deeper, entangled with other meanings. You turn it over in your mind. You talk about it and retell it. This is how stories travel through time, as word of mouth from ancient days. This is how stories replicate themselves.

The world has changed

For a long time, all our lives in fact, the engine of commerce roared on, insatiably devouring the 20th century. The deafening sound it made was not only the noise of industrial factories, but also of the mass communication machines that pumped out an endless stream of mesmeric anti-myth -- the empty stories that were advertising.

Then along came the Web and the Thorazine wore off, the hypnotic spell began to break. As networking replaces broadcasting, communication must become richer and more interesting -- not just louder and more insistent. It must have character, invite participation. Must differentiate itself from the plethora of uncommunicative corporate blather, which by its sheer volume -- in both senses -- threatens to drown out all memory of life-before-the-brand.

For purposes of such differentiation, it's a good idea to explore styles and concepts that corporate communications are apparently incapable of even conceiving. Such radical approaches include, but are not limited to:

- being funny
- being playful
- being angry
- using big words
- using bad words
- using parody and satire
- dropping arcane literary allusions
- admitting to heavy use of illegal pharmaceuticals

And, for extra credit, most outrageous of all:

- telling the truth

The challenge today is to engage with people in something larger than yourself. Something you have in common. Something murky and ill-defined that's hovering on the edges, waiting to be discovered. Whatever that something is, it's out there on the Web. Lurking.

The world has changed. Fundamentally and irrevocably. The comforting certainty of the database, the fixed field, the form, is gone forever. Good. The fill-in-the-blanks approach to information and knowledge, to life, is what T.S. Kuhn -- The Paradigm Guy(tm) -- called puzzle solving: the slavish, formulaic rule following that comes between revolutions, scientific or otherwise. It's stupid, stultifying, boring. And on the Internet at least, it's over, finito, dead, kaput. Hail Eris!

Marketing has an agenda, an objective. It wants us to do something, buy something. Now! Stories aren't like that. They suggest, they explore, they imagine. They say, hey take your time. Become larger.

The Web is storyspace. It's its own strange attractor.
myrtle: gonzo advertising

But wait. Doesn't all this reduce to some vague form of muddle-headed Web mysticism? Gonzo or not, shouldn't "marketing" have something to do with making money? Absolutely. The real question is whether Websites emulating the lowest-common-denominator style of mass media will be effective at bringing in new business. Today, it may seem so. But tomorrow, attempting to please everyone is likely to please no one.

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I first heard from Brian Millar soon after the Cluetrain Manifesto appeared on the Web. At the time, he was working at RMG International, which is a subsidiary of The WPP Group. WPP is arguably the world's largest advertising and public relations conglomerate. (By way of disclosure, Esther Dyson recently accepted a seat on the WPP board.) We're talking motels on Boardwalk here.

Brian sent me e-mail that became an article, "Modern Life is Rubbish," which I published on Personalization.com. "We now benefit from economies of scale at the cost of any modicum of humanity creeping into our dealings with brands," he wrote. "But I think that it's a temporary problem, because many of these Industrial Age monoliths are pretty doomed."

He has since left RMG and WPP and started a company of his own, called myrtle. The beta site I looked at says:

   myrtle is a new company which helps brands communicate in an accelerated culture. Yes: people are more contradictory, more aware of choice, more demanding and less ready to be talked down to or imposed upon than ever. No: they can't be bribed, they don't think your ads are entertaining any more and they resent being sneaked up on. Yes: our work starts with consumers. We find patterns in the chaos of their lives.

By the way, myrtle is also his dog's name.

"In a market that's accelerating in incomprehensible ways," Millar explains in e-mail, "doing nothing is the greatest risk of all. And in a market that's a conversation, the winners are going to be the people with something to say. Our Website represents our brand's id. All the sneaky little things we've always wanted to do and say are out there for everybody to see."

Sneaky little things like what, precisely? Well... myrtle imagines "ultra-narrow ultramodern microchannels" offering endless loops of sampled video -- people swearing for hours on end, for instance, or interminably strung-together car chase scenes. "It's a meaner, more lizardsly attitude to our treasured media archives," Millar admits, tongue firmly in cheek. "But then, nothing's sacred."

The message isn't "here's how we'll help you sell." Instead, it's "here's how we think." There's an exuberance to the site that's tangible, infectious. We won't even try to describe the blipvert for "Transparent Boneless Lions" -- except to repeat the tagline claim: "They're educational!"
One gets the feeling myrtle represents a significant departure from the kind of advertising and branding Brian Millar previously did for companies like Compaq, IBM, Mercedes-Benz and British Airways. Call it a wild hunch.

It's the people, stupid

So is gonzo marketing just whacked out, undisciplined indulgence run amok? Partly, yes. But that's not necessarily the point. Nor is there any point at all without some deeper substance -- the dimension of character, of voice. The myrtle site, for instance, is pure voice. Uncut, undiluted. If you become their client, what you see is very likely what you’re going to get. This has manifold ramifications. For one thing, it signals: this is who we are. In the same breath, it gives fair warning: who we are is non-negotiable. If you can’t dig it, just go away.

Gonzo marketing has attitude to spare, but it’s not the attitude of the poseur. Gonzo is not a style that can be faked; sophistry is not an option. We’re not talking about some generic class of “free agent” neuvo-consultants here, or camouflaged faux-hip cyber-alley suits with a fast rap. Instead, what is emerging from the huge new mindspace the Internet has opened up is a new breed of professionals-turned-dilettantes -- who work for delight more than dollars and value the work itself above company or client. These creative ronin first ply their marketing skills by representing the things they passionately care about; their Websites are their resumes, attracting precisely the sorts of people they want to -- and are willing to -- work with.

If you’re a company, you don’t hire such people, you woo them. You don’t control them -- you find the best fit you can, then take the trip.

But why would a company brook such unconscionable independence? Why would it ever agree to such risk? The answer is simple: because the risks of continuing in status-quo mode are infinitely greater. Authentic, engaged voice is precisely what companies desperately need today. Lacking that, they're sunk.

Networked markets are smart markets. To these new audiences, the broadcast pitch is a carrier wave for unadulterated boredom. The faintest hint of hucksterism triggers an inattention so profound it constitutes a form of commercial catatonia. The billions being spent on e-commerce “marketing” of this sort might just as well be flushed down an enormous toilet. If somebody put up a Webcam and streamed the video, it might even draw as big a crowd as the one that thronged the Dancing Hamsters page. Good show. A million laughs. But what can you do for an encore?

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Most companies needn’t look far to find genuine voices within their ranks. All they have to do then is get out of the way. They don’t need “empowerment” programs. Such paternalism is just as stifling as the control it tries to mask. What they need are nonintervention treaties.

A model already exists for this in the publishing world. Without a voice, a newspaper is nothing. So newspaper companies search out voices they respect and make them editors. Then the company stays out of the editor’s face. The publisher -- that is, the business side of the house -- doesn’t
tell the editorial side what to write, or how to write it. Within reason. There are plenty of instances in which this arrangement is honored in the breach, but it exists and it mostly works. It’s referred to metaphorically as Church and State.

Given such a setup, it shouldn’t come as a great surprise that gonzo first emerged in the world of journalism. But nothing inherently limits it to that world. Gonzo marketing simply represents business getting the clue about 30 years late.

Why Ford gets it

And it gets better. Much better. Much broader. On February 3, Ford announced it was giving home PCs and Internet access to all 350,000 of its employees worldwide. The first sentence of the press release said: “Ford Motor Company is taking a step forward to reach its vision of being on the leading edge of technology and connect more closely with its customers.” Emphasis added.

This bold move was reported prominently on the front pages of The Washington Post and The New York Times. However, these articles focused on who would be supplying the computers, how much the program would cost, how the move was good for labor relations, and detailed specs of the hardware.

The Washington Post quoted Jacques Nasser, Ford president and ceo: “We’re committed to serving consumers better by understanding how they think and act. Having a computer and Internet access in the home will accelerate the development of these skills, provide information across our business and offer opportunities to streamline our processes.”

But other than this clip, neither paper said anything about the company connecting more closely with customers. And none of the coverage I saw quoted Nasser’s far more detailed remarks in making the actual announcement (as transcribed from the RealAudio file on the Ford Website):

...we want to be able to improve communications -- two way communications -- and make sure that our employees -- every one of us -- is connected to what’s going on in the marketplace, so that we know where consumers are heading, what’s happening to market trends, what’s happening to product trends, and make it easier for our employees to have a better understanding of the shift that’s happening out there on a competitive basis and also in the marketplace.

Maybe that doesn’t make for such a great sound bite on the six o’clock news, but it’s the heart of the story -- a story the mainstream press utterly missed. The real deal here is that Ford has just unleashed 350,000 independent -- and genuinely intelligent -- agents to fan out online and listen carefully.

And not just listen. These computers and Net connections will not be under corporate control. They will not be monitored in any way. Ford just unleashed 350,000 people to whom it has tacitly granted permission to speak on its behalf. Not in a legal sense, of course, but in a much more powerful way. These are people who will tell their own stories, in their own voices, any way they see fit -- hundreds of thousands of potential
gonzo marketers. Ford not only got out of their way, it provided the tools and the encouragement to use them. That's smart. Replacing paranoia and control with no-strings permission is always smart.

The next day, Delta Air Lines announced a similar offer to its 75,000 employees. And I expect we'll hear many more such announcements before the year is out. This trend alone, if it continues, could revolutionize current notions of marketing. I think it will not only continue, but pick up momentum as the attendant advantages accruing to Ford and Delta become obvious to competitors and industry analysts.

NINE MAXIMS OF GONZO MARKETING

OK, time regroup, mop up and get out. Time to try to reassemble what these many small loosely joined pieces have been intimating, insinuating, hinting at, suggesting.

"Marketing" has become irrelevant. As practiced today, most marketing is dependent on assumptions that may still hold true with respect to broadcast media, but have little relevance to the Internet.

"Best practices" usually aren't. Techniques that have worked in the past tend to be misleading and even dangerous when change is extremely rapid.

Frustration is inspiration. People who work for companies want to believe. They want to engage with each other and with the market, but they're hobbled by functional categories and bureaucratic management that, militate toward group stupidity.

Gonzo is a terminal response. Adopting worst practices is an extreme response to frustration with existing practice. People finally engage because they care. Better engaged than enraged -- though gonzo marketing is often both.

Permission is the critical hurdle. Frustration is not enough. There has to come a moment in which people give themselves permission to speak -- just as gonzo journalism offered new freedom of speech to a whole generation of writers. Inspiration must pass through rationalization and fear. Only then can voice emerge and true words go forth. Such words pass the same permission on to others. Things ignite.

Storytelling is the path. True voice is the articulation of craft, and craft cares about quality. That's what defines it as craft, as art -- "good enough" is not good enough. Storytelling is the path and primary tool of gonzo marketing. It's pragmatic, it's opportunistic, it's about what works. Even if what works breaks all the rules. And it will.

Gonzo marketing is market advocacy. The goal of gonzo marketing is not to better "penetrate" markets, but to better represent the market's interests -- in every possible sense.

Companies aren't real enough to speak. Gonzo speech is what companies need right now, but they can't produce it. By nature, they have no personality, no character, no subjective take, idiosyncratically engaged or otherwise.
Plus, they can't relinquish control, can't loosen up, let go. They are bound by the paranoia they have created.

**Only individuals can be gonzo.** Only people can convey enthusiasm through their stories. The marketing department doesn't have a story. Neither does the company. The discovery of worst practices is imagination replacing control. Worst practices tend to be radically anti-corporate, anti-marketing -- but only because they are unconditionally human.

I opened this article by quoting W. Edwards Deming's dictum: “drive out fear.” Deming also said if you want Quality, shut down the Quality Control department. Make quality everybody's job. Companies that need marketing that actually works could take a tip from Deming. Shut down the marketing department. Then get out of the way. We'll take it from there. Hell, we'll take it anyway.

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What's happening in this medium is crucial, epochal. But what is unique and most consequential about the Net is not what most companies are pursuing. At best, their bread-and-circus sideshows are temporary holding actions. Temporary insanity. I hope so.

Today we need anthems more than analysis. We need to tell new and deeper, larger stories. Stories about ourselves -- the kind of creatures who invent them, and why their creation is so important. Stories about why we can't afford to lose such a precious human legacy in a din of charlatanism and slobbering artless venality.

The promise of the Net is the promise of humanity coming together, seeing itself for the first time as such, as we saw ourselves from the moon more than three decades ago, saw the breathtaking blue planet spinning out there. Out here. But this time it's much more intimate. Maybe we can't see the faces yet, but we can read the words and begin to sense the lives behind them.

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**COMING SOON**

- The Net in the educational process.
- Web aggregators.
- Directories, meta-directories and meta-meta directories.
- Personalization gets personal.
- And much more... (If you know of any good examples of the categories listed above, please let us know.)
RESOURCES & PHONE NUMBERS

Christopher Locke, (303) 413-9583; clocke@panix.com
David Weinberger, (617) 738-8323; self@evident.com; www.hyperorg.com
John Borthwick, AOL, (212) 206-4465; fax, (212) 206-4595;
john@aolstudios.com
Olu Oni, Chase Manhattan Bank, onis@home.com; members.home.net/onis
Brian Millar, myrtle, +44 (7971) 407-951; brian@myrtle.co.uk
Steve Larsen, Net Perceptions, (612) 903-1282; (612) 903-9425;
slarsen@netperceptions.com
Eric Raymond, Open Source Initiative, 610) 296-5718; esr@thyrsus.com

For further reading:

The Cluetrain Manifesto -- www.cluetrain.com
Personalization.com -- www.personalization.com
Entropy Gradient Reversals -- www.rageboy.com


Christopher Locke, “Fear and Loathing on the Web,” The Industry Standard (July 9, 1998) --
www.thestandard.com/article/display/0,1151,1019,00.html

Brian Millar, “Modern Life is Rubbish” --
www.personalization.com/soapbox/contributions/millard.asp

Olu Oni, “Ashby's Law Revisited” --
members.home.net/onis/articles/ashbys_law.htm

Thomas Scoville, “Legends in Their Own Minds” --
www.salon.com/tech/books/1999/12/16/renegades/index.html
**Release 1.0 Calendar**

**2000**


Feb 24 - Mar 1 CeBIT 2000 - Hannover, Germany. World's largest information technology show. Contact Anke Vollmann, anke.vollman@messe.de; +49 (511) 893-1257; fax, +49 (511) 893-1658; www.cebit.de.


March 7-10 *ICANN Open Meeting* - Cairo, Egypt. Hear about domain name policy. For info, see www.icann.org.

March 12-14 Global Internet Summit - Fairfax, VA. Government meets the Net. For more info, (703) 790-0760; fax, (703) 748-0238; verinder@erols.com; www.internetsummit.org.

March 12-15 **PC Forum** - Scottsdale, AZ. Sponsored by EDventure Holdings. You read the newsletter; now attend the conference! Call Daphne Kis, (212) 924-8800; fax, (212) 924-0240; daphne@edventure.com; www.edventure.com.

March 27-30 #Spring 2000 VON - San Jose, CA. It's about convergence! To register, von2000@pulver.com; fax, (516) 293-3996; www.pulver.com/von2000.

April 3-6 The Evolution of Language - Paris, France. The evolution of speech and language. E-mail evolang@infres.enst.fr; www.infres.enst.fr/conf/s/evolang/.


April 17-18 DIMACS Workshop on the Management of Digital IP - Rutgers, NJ. Technical, legal and business aspects of digital intellectual property management. Call (650) 725-3897; fax, (650) 725-4671; dabo@cs.stanford.edu.

May 11 Webby Awards - San Francisco, CA. “The Oscars of the Internet” awards event. For more info, (415) 974-7400; fax, (415) 974-7401; drwatson@webbyawards.com.

May 23-26 #Vortex 2000 - Laguna Migue, CA. Bob Metcalfe's annual convergence fest. For more info, (650) 312-0545; fax, (650) 312-0547; registrar@vortex2000.com.

* Events Esther plans to attend.  # Events Kevin plans to attend.

Lack of a symbol is no indication of lack of merit. The full, current calendar is available on our Website, www.edventure.com. Please contact Joanna Douglas (joanna@edventure.com) to let us know about other events we should include.

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