

Customer Engagement: Using Technology to Build Relationships

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Engagement marketing is a new approach to brand development that builds on the time-honored notion of listening to customers and keeping them for life. The difference is that engagement uses interactive technology to reach and communicate continually with all stakeholders—customers, other trading partners, shareholders and anyone else who determines the brand's success. It builds relationships by being immediately attentive and responsive to stakeholder needs and opinions, 365/24/7.

It also provides a means of tracking word-of-mouth attitudes toward a brand and gathering feedback from the marketplace in ways that were inconceivable with traditional media.

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In fact, engagement is coming into its own as a result of powerful forces reshaping the way traditional marketing and communications work:

- Traditional mass-media outlets such as newspapers, and magazines and network news broadcasts are diminishing in reach and effectiveness. People, including stakeholders in practically all market and business segments, seek information from specialty media such as cable TV, satellite radio and, especially, the Internet. Successful bloggers and other web-based experts are rising above the noise of the Internet crowd, gaining audiences and clout in their specialties. This media fragmentation poses a significant challenge to traditional shout-from-the-mountaintop marketing, advertising and communications.
- People are more connected than ever, thanks to the web and other interactive tools such as chat and text messaging. One consequence is that people rely more than ever on the advice of people they know and trust to make brand and product recommendations. Word of mouth no longer requires a face-to-face conversation, or even a phone call; discussions of brands and products are shifting to message boards, discussion groups and social networking sites.
- Unlike fleeting “real world” conversations, these discussions don't end when the participants stop typing. They stick around. They become discoverable by search engines. Visitors can view them and even add to them, hours, days or months after they are created.

Engagement taps into this online conversation and reaches out to stakeholders without talking *at* them. It makes useful, relevant information accessible to stakeholders via whichever technologies and online locations they prefer—cell phone text messages, web-based chat, social networks such as LinkedIn and Facebook and so on. Engagement is fast becoming an essential approach to marketing, as a complement to traditional “megaphone” approaches such as display ads, banner ads and email.

Engagement is so new that different experts define it slightly differently. This is our definition: Engagement is the cultivation of meaningful, long-term relationships between a brand and its stakeholders, by means of continuous, two-way communications.

The difference between traditional campaign-based marketing and engagement marketing is the difference between selling a product or service and making a customer believe in it; between a one-off transaction and long-term loyalty. You might even say it’s the difference between a one-hit wonder like Vanilla Ice and a perennial hit maker like U2.

The American Idol Effect

The music business provides a great illustration of customer engagement’s potential, despite its well-publicized woes. CD sales are in a tailspin, traditional record retailers are shutting their doors, and illegal file-swapping continues to erode industry profits, but a massive customer-engagement campaign has produced a major exception to the overall industry downturn. This engagement effort is so hugely successful in its own right that it’s easy to forget what it is: The show-business juggernaut known as *American Idol* is, in a very real sense, a brilliant engagement campaign designed to sell music. (*AI*’s inventors may have never heard of engagement marketing when they created the show, but they implemented it brilliantly.)

While *American Idol* obviously has become an entertainment phenomenon in itself, it was conceived by recording industry executives as a vehicle for selling music. And it succeeds at that goal above all else, by combining a tried-and-true show-business staple, the talent show, with technology-fueled customer engagement. The ostensible goal of each season of *American Idol* is winnowing a field of hundreds of plucky hopefuls to identify the most talented (or at least most popular) among them. But the true accomplishment of each season is fostering relationships between the *AI* finalists and their fans—relationships that yield huge music and concert ticket sales.

American Idol builds those relationships using engagement-marketing techniques, in addition to giving viewers at home a rooting interest in their favorite contestants. *AI* embraces and cleverly deploys an array of social technologies that connect with fans in a variety of ways. It gives fans a chance to participate in an *American Idol* experience far richer than just watching a weekly show. Instead of relying on the audience’s passive absorption of one-way messaging, *American Idol* reaches out across multiple media and entices viewers to participate in the *American Idol* process.

Viewers are invited to vote for their favorite performers after each broadcast, and they are also encouraged by the AmericanIdol.com website to stay connected and involved with the show between broadcasts.

The *American Idol* website is loaded up following each week's broadcast with downloadable video clips and artist photos, which fans can view and share through YouTube and their own blogs and websites. Downloadable widgets further enable bloggers and fan-site owners to provide direct access to content at AmericanIdol.com from within their own sites. A vibrant community section of the website lets fans share opinions, annotate videos, identify and send messages to like-minded fellow fans. Beyond the web, American Idol also embraces cell phone text messaging, both as the vehicle for audience voting and a distribution platform for musical ringtones starring its artists-in-development.

American Idol uses engagement to:

- Bring fans closer to its brand, the contestants;
- Solicit audience opinion through cell phone voting and favorite artists discussions in its website community; and (via occasional online chats);
- Encourage conversation, not just between fans and performers but also among fans themselves, both at AmericanIdol.com and through independent fan blogs and websites.

This fan-to-fan dialogue, through which *AI* viewers support and debate their allegiance to various contestants, sustains interest in the contest and contestants without any direct involvement by program staff—but the savvy *AI* marketers no doubt monitor it to gauge which performers are garnering support and loyalty. (*American Idol* winners aren't the only contestants who release hit records, and choosing which also-rans to back is part of the show's genius.)

B2B Engagement

All this clever engagement stuff is great for selling music to teens, but how does it relate to the more prosaic world of business-to-business marketing? What can a channel marketer or distributor learn from *American Idol*? Here are a few lessons:

Use the communications platforms your customers use. Teenagers love text messaging, so *AI* is there. Knowing the way customers prefer to be reached is a good start on becoming relevant and accessible to them. Is email the most effective medium? Fax? Text message? Are customers viewing information on devices that show images? If so, can photos and illustrations enhance outreach?

Reach out to customers continually, in a variety of ways. The *American Idol* juggernaut touches audiences in its twice-weekly nightly broadcasts, with daily “behind the scenes” videos and with message boards fans update themselves around the clock. Providing customers many opportunities to connect and interact boosts the odds of being accessible when needed.

Follow the conversation. Just as *AI* solicits fans' votes and monitors their online discussions, brand stewards should scan the Internet, including blogs and community sites, to learn what's being said about their brand. Word of mouth has gone digital, and there's a good chance folks somewhere are sharing opinions on any given company or product. Knowing what's being said can be an instructive "reality check." If discussion isn't favorable, a response plan is warranted.

Participate in, and facilitate, conversation. After gauging the tenor of online discussion, and deciding on communication goals for the brand, get inserted into the dialogue. Have a designated "brand ambassador" comment on blogs that contain misstatements or confusion and join in forum discussions. The ambassador should set the record straight as needed, but also ask follow-up questions, offer to provide additional information and freely supply contact information for use with future inquiries. Consider creating online forums and a company blog, with a public comment area, to enable conversation between the "brand" and its customers, and among customers themselves. This provides a wealth of information that can be used to inform brand messaging. Even complaints can offer valuable lessons.

Explore social technologies. MySpace, the online "club" where members of the *American Idol* teen audience swap messages, photos, videos and music recommendations, isn't much of a B2B gathering place, but other social communities are. LinkedIn, a social network designed for business professionals, has focused interest groups for a wide variety of professional disciplines, such as supply chain management, construction and a variety of financial services. Members' conversations cover best practices, vendor and product referrals and industry trends. For many industries and market segments, LinkedIn is a good listening post and a promising platform for discussion. Facebook, another social network, which began as a bastion of college and high school students, is also attracting a growing number of professionals.

These lessons, gleaned from the star makers at *American Idol*, may not make a B2B brand a household name, but they could make it more accessible, responsive and relevant to its customers.

Marketers who follow them might just become rock stars.

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