

Online Brand Behaviour

By Anne Nicholson

When developing a creative direction based on an online brand strategy, it pays to get up out of your chair and walk around it. And I'm talking the whole 360-degree enchilada, because all too often the approach to brand communication on the web follows the tried and true path of traditional offline models.

Look and feel and tone and voice are obviously essential tools to the online branding equation. But functionality, more often than not, is left out in the cold. (Please note I'm talking about how you creatively express the values of a brand. In other words, don't flood me with emails saying, "A brand is not a logo blah, blah, blah...")

Functionality lies in the realm of behaviour. It's the search engines, the Flash, the calculators, the customised, and the personalised. It is the backbone of a web site and crafts the online experience through its interactivity. But what does this have to do with the emotive characteristics of a brand? Lots. If a brand aims to make an emotional connection to its customers, then the action (read functionality) can only enhance that relationship.

By adding brand behaviour to the creative mix, the connection and depth of the online client and customer relationship can only be strengthened. It assures that customer expectations, which are based on an offline relationship, can be met in an online environment.

If your customers expect reliable and fast service, for instance, does it really make sense to load up your site with Flash? Sure it might look great, but forcing the customer to wait for an intro to load that provides little value to their experience and objectives has, in the end, damaged your brand. The functionality choices made for your site should reflect your core strengths and support your customer's brand experience. On the flip side, waiting for a flash movie to load on an entertainment site might not be such a problem, because your customer is expecting a high-impact experience. There's a payoff at the end that he or she is willing to wait for.

So what is brand behaviour? Lets take a real-life scenario as an example. I have a mate who goes out of his way to be polite— a rare commodity in this day and age. He will offer seats to little old ladies, thank the waiter, and open the door for both sexes. These are all actions that express his identity and the value he places on being a considerate person. Now you can't tell you'd want to take him home to mother by the way he dresses or by the way his voice gets animated when he's had a few beers. But you would take him home for Sunday roast based on the thoughtful things he does.

To borrow from an old cliché - if my friend were a web site what sort of web site would he be (functionally speaking of course)? Well, he'd probably give you an online acknowledgement every time you sent him information. He might also let you customise content or get your permission before sending you information. Or he'd offer product and service suggestions based on your preferences or browsing habits. The possibilities are endless, but the result, once taken through all values, is that the functionality starts to support the brand.

Reaching for the grab bag of functionality tricks is fine if they are relevant and provide ease of use to your customer. But why not make them work harder for you by introducing them to the effective values of your brand?

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