

it's the engagement, stupid

Predicting the future has always been a difficult business. This leaves the modern marketer in something of a pickle. The sheer speed of technological advancement has forced us into almost daily crystal ball gazing. Many grand predictions have been made in a bid to maintain marketing's relevance and credibility in the face of such rampant change.

But before swallowing wholesale any bold theories of the future, one should first take a look at Japan, where digital convergence is at a stage more advanced than perhaps anywhere else.

Because if Japan is anything to go by, then the new media landscape may not be quite the "Brave New World" that many crystal ball gazers have been predicting. In fact, it seems that the converged world may be far more familiar than anyone could have ever imagined.

What's driving this is the fact that although the media landscape is changing seemingly by the second, the basic drivers of consumer behavior remain the same. And so while we run and stumble to keep up with consumers, we should be careful about being too reactionary. Because people are still entertained, engaged, and, moreover, annoyed by the same things as ever—and it doesn't look like this is about to change too fast.

Perhaps the only real change with the past is an ever increasing need for quality. Before marketers could rely on interruptive media to blast their message through. Today there is no replacement for quality. Only quality communications deliver the necessary level of *engagement* to lead to behavioral change and business success.

the revolution is being televised

The end of television, according to many, has been in the cards for sometime now.

But a foreigner who visits Japan in 2006 for the first time may well be tempted to think that this is a country with a spiraling addiction to TV. Spend 24 hours in Tokyo, and you'll be washed away in a wave of televisual content.

TV used to be confined to the home, but now it accompanies city life anytime, anywhere. You'll find people watching it on their iPods, PSPs, and their laptops. And since April 1, you can even find people

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watching digital TV broadcasts on their *keitai*, or mobile phone.

Moreover, you'll find it dominating the big urban meeting points (check Shibuya's resplendent scramble crossing) and following you on almost every journey you take—in cars, taxis, trains, and even elevators.

Gill Scott Heron, the civil rights movement soul singer, once asserted that "the revolution will not be televised." I'm not too sure if he could say that in Japan today, as it is often the television itself which seems to be the heart of the revolution.

What did the now globally infamous Takafumi Horie of Livedoor try to do to expand and accelerate his Internet business, as well as his personal fame and fortune, in 2005? He launched a hostile takeover of Japan's biggest commercial TV station, Fuji TV, of course. The only recent news story to rival this national event was his subsequent arrest and imprisonment.

This ever-growing ubiquity and newsworthiness of TV contradicts much of modern marketing's future predictions. TV's dominance, so the story goes, is coming to an end as channels multiply and fragment and as people use PVRs to watch only the programming they choose, thereby editing out that which is of no interest to them (i.e. commercial messages).

But while there are undoubtedly many new hurdles and pitfalls that marketing will have to learn how to navigate, digital convergence in Japan would seem to suggest that TV's dominance is far from over.

We are well on the way here to becoming a fully screen-based, as opposed to a page-based, society where the opportunities to view TV content increase exponentially. Thus, while we may see a decline in the centrality of the in-home TV, the medium as a whole is experiencing

nothing less than a renaissance. In 2006, TV's influence on Japanese consumer culture is stronger than ever.

Brian L. Roberts, the CEO of Comcast, recently commented, "The computer has crashed into the television set." This does have some pretty scary implications for traditional business models, but it is only good news for consumers. It allows them to watch more of the TV they love, more of the time.

from the age of interruption to the age of ambush

Perhaps the most established orthodoxy of modern crystal ball-gazing marketing is the paramount importance of 360-degree communication. Recently at Adfest in Thailand, Tatsuhiro Sato and Yoko Tanaka of the Japanese agency ADK made a presentation on how Japan is a paradise for 360-degree communications. But away from the grand set, pieces such as scramble crossing the streets of Tokyo rarely feel like a paradise. On the contrary they often feel polluted—and not just with the fumes and the dirt of the metropolis, but also with communication.

Modern Tokyo is polluted with the same old messages hitting you in the same old way wherever you go. As you go through your day, it can often feel like you are being mugged by marketing.

This is the inevitable destination of 360-degree-obsessed thinking. Running scared from the certainty of being able to interrupt consumers while they watch TV at home in the evening, marketers have turned to ambush. The mentality is, "if we can't make them watch this crap at home, then we'll bloody make sure that they simply cannot avoid our message wherever else they go."

This is why we have, unbelievably, a thing called guerrilla marketing—marketing as warfare, looking to assault the consumer on every corner.

As you spend time in the center of modern Tokyo, you inevitably reflect that it's not surprising that so many consumers are so bored of and resistant to so much marketing. They're turning off, not just because new technologies allow them to, but also because so much modern marketing is forged from such a crude and aggressive mentality.

360-degree marketing is, in essence, just a polite way of saying that you'd like to drown your consumer in your message. This kind of attack is very unlikely to elicit behavioral change.

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TV is now dominating big urban meeting points such as Shibuya's resplendent scramble crossing.

If marketing content, such as this highly watched BBH-created commercial for Levi's, is good enough, it is sought out as entertainment by consumers.



the age of engagement

Pop into Tower Records or HMV, however, and you can find a glimpse of a far brighter future for marketing. For a few weeks earlier this year, every HMV in Tokyo was focusing its DVD merchandising on Directors Label. Featuring such names as Michel Gondry, Chris Cunningham, and Jonathan Glazer, these DVDs contain not only music videos, short films, and interviews, but also, revealingly, commercials.

Here we have a pretty remarkable situation—commercials at the top of the paid-for DVD charts. People paying to own and watch commercial messages from the likes of Levi's and PlayStation. This is nothing less than a surprising and radical case for the defense for the blockbuster commercial.

This isn't the world gone mad; this is the reality of an empowered consumer culture—or what we can call the Age of Engagement. If the communication is good enough, or engaging enough, then the consumer will listen, respond, and on some occasions even become a fan. If it's not engaging enough, then the brand doing the communicating will simply be ignored or at worst resented.

The most successful campaigns today are not the ones that are the most 360, but are the ones that engage the consumer best at the most relevant occasion. This doesn't sound like rocket science—that's because it isn't.

The obsession of modern marketers should not be, therefore, new media, or 360-degree communications. Marketing success from here on in, more than ever, will be determined simply by the quality of your marketing.

And so a look at the advanced Japanese market is really a shot in the arm for truly creative companies. Because as media mutates, evolves, and becomes more complex, the need for simple, entertaining, and above all engaging ideas becomes only more and more important.

The rules of the Age of Engagement, therefore, are really not that different from the past. If anything, they're just their logical extension. In a world over-supplied with brands and messages, it's only the truly interesting and engaging marketing that will connect with the consumer, influence their thinking and, ultimately, deliver payback. ●

Jonny Shaw is head of planning at Bartle Bogle Hegarty (Japan).