

From Martial to Marital Marketing

by

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Marketers! You are on the cusp of wasted opportunity. Take heed.

Wireless technology carries with it the chance to evolve the art and science in a fundamental way: from "push" to "pull." For good reasons, marketing has rarely been a true pull activity. The reason is that humans seek control, and we'll gladly convince ourselves that we have it even where none exists. We fear the absence of a guiding hand: the non-linear. And, despite market change and evolution that suggests such a shift, we cling to the notion that we can effectively direct – or push – *the consumer*. With the capability for rich and rapid consumer

feedback, however, wireless telephony provides a meaningful environment for a workable consumer pull framework.

Before we can see the fullness of how the wireless revolution is a rare opportunity that we are apt to confront, corral, and corrupt, we have to first disabuse ourselves of some comforting and misguiding distinctions between marketing “push” and “pull.”

The classic definition taught to the management cadre is that to push is to aggressively force the consumer; to pull is to have the consumer ask for the product or service. Pushing is a supply-side process; pull is demand. And demand, being more intrinsically attached to market needs and desires is, *ipso facto*, more powerful marketing. Which is how we come to expend vast resources on researching and diagnosing for “points of pain” and hidden desires to *drive* demand.

In principal one can have no dispute with any of this. It is universally sensible and founded on the solid psychological and sociological – let alone economic – principals of consumer rationality.

These notions of push and pull permeate marketing theory and practice. We want to do the best thing and, moreover, to see ourselves doing the right thing. So our actions are dressed in the proper language of “pull.” A linguist like

George Lakoff would likely find the imagery of our language obvious: *pushing* people around is bad, but *pulling* them along is good. The former implies coercion, the latter volition.

Even among forms of marketing communications are distinctions founded on these characterizations of push and pull. Brand is *real/pull* because of its subtlety in asking the consumer to buy; direct is more overt in its aim, thus it pushes more. Be all that as it may, it's still hair splitting. Marketing is a push. Everything about it is coercive, from the ideas implanted in consumer minds about their needs/wants to the guiding frameworks of our research to the interruptive and invasive advertising approach to . . .

For the sake of argument, let's accept that the context of the consumer domain has shifted. Much is being written about a power shift to the consumer – as a result of both decades of abuse by marketers and technology-enabled capabilities on our (we're all consumers, after all) part. Searls *et al*/were at the vanguard of this idea with *The Cluetrain Manifesto*. (Too many people still view its ideas and proposition as a product of and for the "dot-com" era, relevant only to those whose business is affected directly by the Web. Re-read it: they take as evident the power shift from marketer to consumer and propose a profound re-addressing of marketing method.) Today, this realization underwrites Madison Avenue gloom.

One reason for advertiser angst is that we have been brought face-to-face with the bankruptcy of the (push) method and the (war) metaphor on which it relies. Consumers are not the enemy to be *identified, assessed, and targeted* for our messages in order to *penetrate* their ranks and *overcome* their objections so that our commercial will to *beat* the competition and *capture* their hearts (and wallets) is done.

Our brains are funny when it comes to subconscious metaphorical consistency. That we refer to the competition as the enemy does nothing to change the fact that it is the consumer who occupies the role of opponent. Look at the language: no army ever “pulled” its way through the lines. The fundamental metaphor precludes “pull.” That’s not good.

In war, the others’ response can be only one of two things: opposition or capitulation. The latter is to be preferred. And so it has been with marketing. But in business we really desire a different type of response from the market: we need the market’s interest, friendship, and – dare I say it – love. These are not typical outcomes of war. Nor are they the typical response from the victim of pushiness. We want consumers to respond with *engagement* not of the martial but the marital kind. Engagement demands response and interaction: a dialog.

I would propose that “pull marketing” is a thinly-disguised euphemism for: the sale without sales. To get there we try to control the preceding process, leaving nothing to chance. We structure surveys and focus groups to identify and isolate unsatisfied consumer “needs,” “problems,” or “challenges.” We run tightly-controlled research loops for validation. From there, the best developments use straw men in yet more tightly-controlled research environments to refine the “solutions” to suit reactions to each offering. Finally, we try by various measures of social proof to convince the market that it needs, wants, and should seek this solution. Note that these steps, in addition to being tightly controlled, are linear: orchestrated to allow the consumer to respond only *when asked as asked*.

Even (perhaps particularly) marketing communications are processed in this way. We still rely on interrupting and lecturing consumers directly to a sale. The goal of marketing is to *push* stimuli at the consumer to elicit the desired end reaction: a purchase.

Messages proven to have the greatest efficacy at generating the *correct* – not just *a* – response from some segment of the market at the appropriate moment are the rational choices to pursue. It is cause and effect, where we try to scientifically isolate the control agents that determine the desired outcome with a

high level of certainty. That is hardly pull in anything but the most generous interpretation. At the broad marketing/business level we are pushers.

Why? We seek certainty. More than that, we believe that through controls we can achieve certainty. True market pull is messy and ambiguous. The consumer as empowered *puller* may have unpredictable input at inconvenient moments because of the naturally, continuously, and subtly shifting context of personal and social life. That scares us because it is inherently uncertain. A quotation posted above my desk, the source of which I long ago lost, reads: "We may come to realize how conventional, analytical predictive techniques can themselves stimulate *a self-defeating, unfulfillable desire to control more of the real world around us than is truly possible* [emphasis mine]." What truth be applied to marketing.

There's another reason we're pushers. Consumers have not been instrumental in real pull activity because the means to do so – to signal and respond; to dialog – has been insufficient and unsustainable. In a culture of ever-narrowing and fleeting attention/interest, the means for consumers to respond and participate in brief, relevant, and impulsive dialog with marketers has been absent. That is, in a world of rapidly shifting attention the demand society that pulls can only exist if those demands can be effected and addressed instantly.

So, they say, consumers are in control. Emboldened first with Web-based technology facilitating interactivity, and then social power – e.g., privacy and other legislation, peer-to-peer information sharing *about* marketers and their wares, etc. – consumers are becoming *aware* of their status and power.

Marketing effectiveness and ROI decline is real and, in this context, whipback from consumers exercising new-found muscle.

Mobile telephony (particularly the data channel) is, to the North American consumer, a virginal interactive channel that satisfies the desire to dialog and demand within the structures of harried everyday lives. It is immediate, untethered, and *under their control*. Be sure, the threshold of tolerance for advertising imposition is very low.

So what's a marketer to do? "Fight back" in traditional martial form? A battle for control will end in the marketer's defeat. Frankly, there may be no right answer. Such is the nature of a non-linear environment. The easier question may be, "What not to do?" Here are a few suggestions.

1. Mobility is a channel not a medium. It presents a "do over" opportunity. Don't pollute and wreck it by pushing little lectures over it. Use it to converse with the consumer.

2. Don't be fooled by "permission." *Every* conversation has to be invited and permitted. Offer to engage the consumer in a dialog and let them initiate the conversation. Make it fast. And when it's over, it's over.
3. Don't try to control the conversation. Nobody likes a bore. Conversations are shared social activities: Be responsive. In Taoist fashion, one may have to give up control to gain it. Let yourself be pulled.
4. Respect the consumer. They are we. Give them the respect deserving of a steadfast mate not of a worthy foe.
5. Mind your language. If it sounds like battle, expect enemies. If it's a lecture, don't anticipate engagement.
6. Invert your perspective on the process. *Return on (marketing) investment* overtly – albeit subconsciously – expects one response: the exchange of money. *Investment on return* implies faith in the consumer. It shows a will and call to dialog and get closer. Be close to the customer.

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