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OPEN Digital Experience Design: A Strategic, Trends-Based Approach¹

by Nita Rollins

As the Web has matured, brand relationships have become ever more dynamic. Nita Rollins outlines and illustrates the kinds of digital brand experiences consumers have come to expect—on-demand efficiency and ease-of-use; personalization, including dialogue, customization, and privilege; an engagement characterized by belonging, entertainment, and inspiration; and a networked blend of self-expression, community, and meaningful change.



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Many of today's most successful brands are powered by the technologies, traits, and trends of the digital channel. Increasingly, brands' bottom lines are digitally driven. By 2012, online is predicted to account for roughly 11 percent of total retail sales, but the online channel could *influence* as much as 50 percent of overall sales. Considerably less quantifiable has been the digital channel's impact on what philosopher Jean Baudrillard has called brands' sign-value,² their symbolic meaning(s) within a differential communication economy that marketers and consumers co-perpetuate, and for which consumers ultimately pay more. In 2008, according to Millward Brown Optimor's BRANDZ ranking of the top 100 most powerful brands, nine of the top ten brands whose brand equity

contributed the most to generating earnings are luxury brands,³ whose sign-values typically are lavishly communicated and zealously maintained over generations. (Needless to say, new wealth creation in emerging markets and newly industrialized countries also played a role in the ranking of these luxury brands, as has luxury brands' early focus on innovative digital advertising and website experi-

1. Passages of this article are adapted from *The Open Brand: When Push Comes to Pull in a Web-Made World* (Berkeley: New Riders Press, 2008), by Kelly Mooney and Nita Rollins. All proceeds from the sales of the book go to One Laptop per Child (OLPC).

2. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (New York: Telos Press, 1981).

3. The top 10 were Louis Vuitton, Porsche, Hermès, Gucci, Cartier, Tide, Chanel, Rolex, Hennessy, and Armani.

ences, often not e-commerce-enabled but featuring Flash, video, and audio.) Few would argue that the Web has extended the sign-value of branded products and services beyond the purview of traditional mass marketing where, after marketer-controlled sign production and distribution and the relatively determinate result of consumer exposure to print ads, commercials, and catalogs, the law of diminishing returns applies.

The Web, distinguished by the law of increasing returns, augments brands' sign-value by being a more indeterminate realm of comingled mass and interpersonal communication where consumer-differentiated experiences of active sign appropriation (or what I like to call the co-appearance of consumer and brand) are mostly permanent, often public, and occur at what can only be called an inconceivable rate. This rate, of course, can lead to the much-discussed "network effect," wherein consumers exponentially increase in value that with which they interact in greater numbers, due to a certain socio-cultural susceptibility to the sign. To use marketing parlance, a sign must be on-trend; the market must be receptive. But socio-cultural susceptibility isn't enough to achieve network effects. There must also be a perceived singularity of some sort in the sign-value experience, which the marketer ideally derives from the brand's unique attributes, whether humor, beauty, sensuality, edginess, intelligence, glamour, mystery, fun, social conscience, or something else, and which, over the course of being circulated through the Web's differential communication economy, is continuously affirmed as singular, ironically through reproduction. Its singularity is assimilated by consumers, one by one expressing preference while imparting their uniqueness to the value chain through Web-enhanced social sharing. As Scott Lash writes in *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things*, "Brands work through, not generalized Fordist consumption, but through specialized consumption and the production of many different goods."⁴

Digital differentiation and its potential

Systemic singularities—a paradox, then, drives sign-value creation on the Web. As a result, there

has never been quite so much opportunity—however unwieldy—for the experiential design of (differentiated) brands as there currently is in digital media. Again, as Lash reminds us, "The brand functions as a sign-value through its and my difference..."⁵ But realizing the pure differentiation potential of the digital experience has not until recently been a marketing priority for most, despite the fact that brands are often the most valuable asset on a company's balance sheet, accounting for approximately one-third of the value of the Fortune 500 today, according to the BRANDZ 2008 ranking.

The reasons are manifold, but chief among them has been the need during the commercial Web's early days to standardize certain experiential features that usability research confirms are useful, usable, and desirable, particularly to the shopping process.⁶ Notable early exceptions to this standardization include Burton Snowboards, a brand with 35 percent market share that adopted social web strategies—photo uploads, threaded discussions—a decade before they were known as such.

When digital marketers do support individualized brand experiences, it has until recently been mainly via an e-commerce merchandising strategy (and technology) or, to a lesser degree, as behavioral or contextual advertising. The incorporation of so-called social utilities into branded websites, micro-sites, display advertising, and applications is gradually and dramatically upping the individualized ante (as is, conversely, the incorporation of brands into third-

4. Scott Lash, Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 6.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

6. Drawing the same conclusion is a 2008 research paper by Resource Interactive underwritten by Sterling Commerce, "The Digital Shopping Experience: Today's Emerging Features are Tomorrow's Experiential Essentials": "Those shopping features that consumers generally agreed were not just appealing but important—such as ratings and reviews—demonstrate the rapid rate at which the "appealing" new feature becomes *de rigueur*. But focusing exclusively on providing these features locks retailers into a game of mutual mimicry, wherein the online shopping experience improves across the board but standardizes in the process so that features once considered advanced or enhanced devolve to commodity status—and so do the brand experiences themselves."

party applications and social networking and social commerce sites, with their tentacle feeds). In this blending of commercial and social spheres, there is unprecedented pay dirt: the critical merging of the brand's differences and the consumer's wholly unique appropriation of them.

What we'll explore in this article is a way to overcome perhaps the toughest obstacle to marketers making digital differentiation a priority—finding a strategic approach that would render their brand's relatively fixed attributes truly adaptive to the rapidly evolving commercial, social, and technological properties of the Web. How does a marketer design the brand's digital experiences while assigning priority to the heady influx of new applications; disruptive technologies, such as location-aware mobile phones; and new standards, such as OpenID, not to mention new consumer behaviors and motivations?

Designing in the era of the social web

The OPEN approach to digital experience design is derived from the most salient properties of the Web during the past five years or so, a period during which marketers were slow to leverage the digital channel's potential for brand differentiation, but consumers decidedly were not. As the so-called social web (a.k.a. Web 2.0) began to flower, old mass marketing push tactics were superseded by the pull of an online population prolifically creating, sharing, and influencing each other. Through peer communication and collaboration, the usurpation of institutional power by individuals' networked empowerment—the hallmarks of the social web—consumers displaced brands (and, for that matter, any institution that historically controlled the means of production and distribution, such as Hollywood, the recording and publishing industries, and corporate America) as sign-value systems, as platforms for self-actu-

To appreciate fully the experiential branding potential brought forth by the social web, we have to understand the two main socio-consumer trends that converged in it.

alization and self-display, socializing, and cyber-activism.⁷ The Web 2.0 population has looked less to credentialed experts and celebrities and more to each other to exchange truths and tips, to discover the culturally relevant, to cache, project, and sometimes self-consciously “brand” a life, and of course, to create new sign-value (and if part of the software developer community, use-value, as well).

To appreciate fully the experiential branding potential

brought forth by the social web, we have to understand the two main socio-consumer trends that converged in it. The first is the emergence of consumer notoriety through the increased visibility of individuals—as data, as consumer or social networking profiles, as artists or entrepreneurs no longer reliant upon paid third parties to be known to the world. Emerging from the potent pairing of this digital notoriety with network effects is a bona fide new cultural authority, the i-citizenry. In aggregate, the i-citizenry is powerful enough to marginalize brands' cultural clout. i-Citizens have availed themselves of all manner of digital DIY tools in amassing their own cultural capital, and many have earned some of the other kind of capital along the way. i-Citizens differ greatly from what historically has been relative consumer anonymity vis-à-vis brands and the world. (Notoriety further increases—and anonymity decreases—with the portable personal data and distributed social networks that are distinguishing Web 3.0.)

The second trend is the emergence of amateur creative production, or what futurist Alvin Toffler, in his 1980 best-seller *The Third Wave*, called prosumption—the opposite of simple, uncritical con-

7. Indeed, the social web, deeply indebted to the new media ecosystem that grew out of the Open Source movement and catalyzed by the recent presidential campaigns online, is showing signs of becoming the socially conscious web.

sumption.⁸ According to a March 2008 Digital Ethnography study by Kansas State University, it would take 412.3 years to view all of the material on YouTube. Universal McCann reported in March 2008 that 184 million people worldwide have started a blog. And social networking company Ning reports that consumers created a new social network every 30 seconds in 2008.

A radical business imperative emerges from these two trends: Open up to the increasingly powerful, prominent, participatory, peer-focused, prolific consumer. For i-citizens, interacting with others' digital output (creative, technological, scientific, political, journalistic, social) becomes a kind of existential imperative that they naturally have also applied to brands. Of course, with each individualized and observable interaction between i-citizens and brands, the latter, as we know, become more valuable within the differential system of signs. We aren't simply in the midst of a quantitative change, as brands accrue more content and more personalized iterations, such as a consumer electronics review or a shared photo of how a brand-name garment was worn. This is a qualitative revolution for branding. And to do justice to it, we must remember, "Commodity production is labor-intensive; branded goods production is design-intensive."⁹

The OPEN framework

A strategic framework is required to translate this new open imperative into design priorities that can drive business objective accountability across teams and through project lifecycles. Without such a framework, there is no way to plot priorities across the ever-widening spectrum of consumer experience possibilities. The infinite variability of i-citizen interactions—each with the potential to be a definitive sign-event for a brand—would threaten to overwhelm the brand's symbolic coherence or to remain simply untapped as the differences that make brands work. Likewise, the more standardized experiences of online shopping would remain largely exempt from branding differentiation.

The OPEN strategic framework attempts such a translation. It consists of the two defining socio-consumer trends of Web 2.0 cast as

Cartesian coordinates, and the four experiential quadrants that logically result (Figure 1). It is easy to see how an experience consisting of varying degrees of anonymous and consuming behaviors would be different from one distinguished by amateur production and behaviors related to notoriety. To further develop these quadrants, Resource Interactive researched the chief motivations of the i-citizenry, the group that drives these behaviors. The four motivations uncovered—digital competence, collectivism, celebrity, and cultural change—can be correlated (not in terms of percentage of the online population, but as a way of explaining the dominant behaviors of the current Web) with the four essential experiential types: on-demand, personal, engaging, and networked. Moreover, once the i-citizenry's motivations



Figure 1. Web 2.0's key consumer behavioral attributes underpin the On-demand, Personal, Engaging, and Networked Experiences of an OPEN brand.

8. A hybrid of *producer* and *consumer*, the *prosumer* dates to preindustrial pre-currency times (the first socio-economic wave), when people produced what they consumed out of necessity. Toffler believed the standardized products of mass production (characterizing the Second Wave) would eventually lead to a desire for post-industrial customization (the Third Wave), which meant consumers would once again become involved in production. The social web is more about digital customization—and mass collaboration—than the kind of mass customization Toffler envisioned. Still, Toffler's is an appropriate model for the vast array of homegrown products and creative activities in which the social web's population is investing. Adapted from *The Open Brand: When Push Comes to Pull in a Web-Made World* (Berkeley: New Riders Press, 2008), p. 56.

9. *Global Culture Industry*, p. 6.

were discovered, it became easier to identify each experience by its most important attribute (taking every opportunity to choose attributes that spell “open,” of course, as would any self-respecting marketer.) The i-citizenry’s motivations clarified all the secondary experiential attributes, as well, forming in effect, a compilation of the various critical mass virtues of Webs 1.0 and 2.0 (the World Wide Web, like the search engines that crawl it, doesn’t discard much).

The following is the OPEN framework and brief descriptions of the four experiences:

- The *on-demand experience* is inspired by the digital competence-seeking i-citizen—that time-starved consumer who views the Internet as a life management tool and prefers relative anonymity as she seeks speed to information and task completion. This experience is characterized by efficiency, ease, control, findability, and instantaneousness.
- The *personal experience* takes its inspiration from the more celebrity-minded i-citizen, who would expect a brand to foster a relationship with her. Within this experience, the brand enables individualized interaction, caters to her preferences, and boosts her ability to influence others—and be recognized for doing so. This experience is characterized by acknowledgement, dialogue, customization, privilege, and popularity.
- The *engaging experience* takes its cues from the collectively motivated i-citizens who want to be diverted and engrossed, and who develop an emotional attachment to brands that provide the means and occasions to shore up their social identities. An engaging experience satisfies consumers’ desires to do more than acquire or observe. This experience is characterized by increased participation—belonging, immersion, entertainment, and inspiration.
- The *networked experience* is inspired by i-citizens driven to effect cultural change, and who

would expect a brand to do the same, primarily by engaging the social web’s nodes of sharing and its seemingly limitless, unencumbered, and portable paths to opportunity and innovation. The networked experience is valuable to those seeking creative and influential interactions, and would appeal to both the individual and i-citizen communities. It also recognizes those i-citizens’ sense of entitlement about co-creating the brand’s messages and offerings. The earmarks of the networked experience are self-expression, ego gratification, portability, community, and meaningful change.

The OPEN framework is at once descriptive and prescriptive. With the help of an accompanying audit, it assesses a brand’s current state of openness (in other words, how much it’s leveraging the key properties of the current Web) and then, after a situation analysis of the brand, it provides strategic digital design direction for optimizing a brand’s openness—prioritizing experience types and fine-tuning them in accordance with the brand’s goals; with customers’, prospects’, and relevant online communities’ needs and wants; with the competition’s threats; and with relevant trends. Such a focus on optimization forces a consensus between client and agency on what constitutes success—and encourages ongoing improvements. The OPEN framework has the distinct advantage of an accompanying system of measurement that correlates each of the four experiences with basic business objectives, such as conversion/sales (Figure 2 on next page). It is up to the client’s and agency’s business analysts to match Web and multi-channel metrics (to the extent that they are available) to these business objectives.

Once the OPEN framework is embedded in the complete strategic process, there is another layer of inputs in which creative disruption is systematically embraced. First, up-to-the-minute trends intelligence is incorporated into the situation analysis (modified to include “community,”

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which is a critical component of Web 2.0). Then, the latest Web 3.0 developments or emerging technologies are infused into the prioritized OPEN brand attributes. Trends intelligence helps brands anticipate that socio-cultural susceptibility—to their messages and the sign-values that derive from them—discussed earlier. For instance, the trend of cartocracy—democratized map-making and map usage popularized by the geo-web and location-aware digital devices—could energize the brand’s community initiatives by way of geo-tagging on the brand fan pages of an image and video-hosting website such as Flickr, and the adoption of a mobile geo-application that allows brand fans to find each other in real time. As part of the OPEN process, technological trend spotting specifically prepares brands for new enabling conditions and material requirements for distinctive brand experiences. It also encourages longer-term macro-trend considerations of the world’s underlying network economy—what *Wired* founding executive editor Kevin Kelly over a decade ago¹⁰ described as the “collapsing microcosm of [microprocessor] chips and the exploding telecosm of [computer] connections” (Figure 3).

The *open web* (an expression that yields more than 3 million Google results at the time

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of writing) can be teased apart easily into several concurrently developing Web areas. To the extent that each is able to generate a new consumer value as a compelling experiential attribute, it arguably will do so faster by virtue of the Web’s open ecosystem, with its provision of application programming interfaces (APIs), non-proprietary platforms and frameworks, and Open Source software—hence the adjective *open*. Furthermore, openness (denoting a decentralized exchange of ideas, IP, and

goodwill that defies hierarchy and boundaries and creates value constellations rather than value chains) is a meme and a macro-trend that cuts across social, technological, economic, environmental, and political spheres, and so takes up open branding and the Web’s uniquely open ethos into its larger force field. In the diagram, in figure 4 on the next page, we see five experiential attributes (with consumer expectations for them in various stages) likely to evolve from the mobile, hi-def, geo, semantic, and ambient (a.k.a. ubiquitous) web. The mobile web, globally the most commercially evolved of the five, has already begun to show us how

10. Kevin Kelly, “New Rules for the New Economy: 12 Dependable Principles for Thriving in a Turbulent World,” *Wired*, September 1997.



Figure 2. Each of the four OPEN brand experiences correlates with a consumer motivation and a basic business objective.

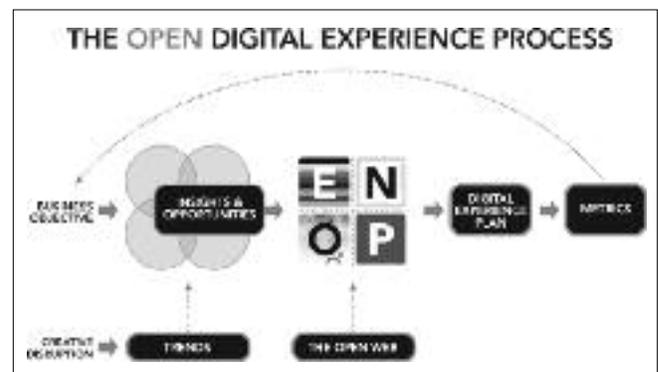


Figure 3. The OPEN framework is part of the larger trend-infused machinery of digital experience design.

essential digital portability (and its coefficient, personalization) is to brand differentiation.

The OPEN framework in action

Resource Interactive employed the OPEN digital experience process with the Scotts Miracle-Gro Company, the world's largest marketer of branded consumer and professional products for lawn and garden care. Their long-term business objective was to deepen the brand's relationship with new and existing consumers in order to improve purchase intent of the Scotts Miracle-Gro products. Already the category leader due to products whose efficacy in growing bigger, healthier plants and gardens is an empirical and marketing-reinforced truth for consumers, the opportunity for an expanded (and more profitable) relationship with consumers likely lay beyond the sign-values (otherwise known as brand equity) linked to various product attributes and benefits. Scotts's and Resource Interactive's own consumer and category research and trend spotting pointed to changing perceptions of gardening (for instance, the "hobby" trend—select chores elevated to the status of hobby) as a pastime that builds social cohesion, spurs creativity, awakens interest in

environmental causes, and provides physical and mental diversions apart from the indoor technocentricity of most of our lives. From these insights, Scotts and partners developed a multi-channel campaign that would include television, radio, promotions, public relations, direct mail, sampling, and digital; the campaign's objective would be to raise awareness of Scotts Miracle-Gro's new gardening lifestyle positioning. As Scotts Miracle-Gro senior vice president Jan Valentic told *The New York Times*: "We're showing how gardening can be an expression of creativity...a new piece of communication for us."¹¹

The centerpiece of Resource Interactive's work would be the redesign of Scotts.com, the development of two micro-sites—itsgro-time.com and miraclegro.com—and several rich media interactive banner ads (the first ever, in fact, to enable consumer photo uploads).

Employing the OPEN framework showed that the Engaging digital experience would be best for giving voice to and supporting consumers with gardening-related interests and values, while supporting the campaign's chief objective of consumer awareness. (ENPO was the full formula,

11. Stuart Elliott, "An Emotional Urge to Get Up and 'Gro,'" *The New York Times*, June 16, 2008.

3.0 THE OPEN WEB

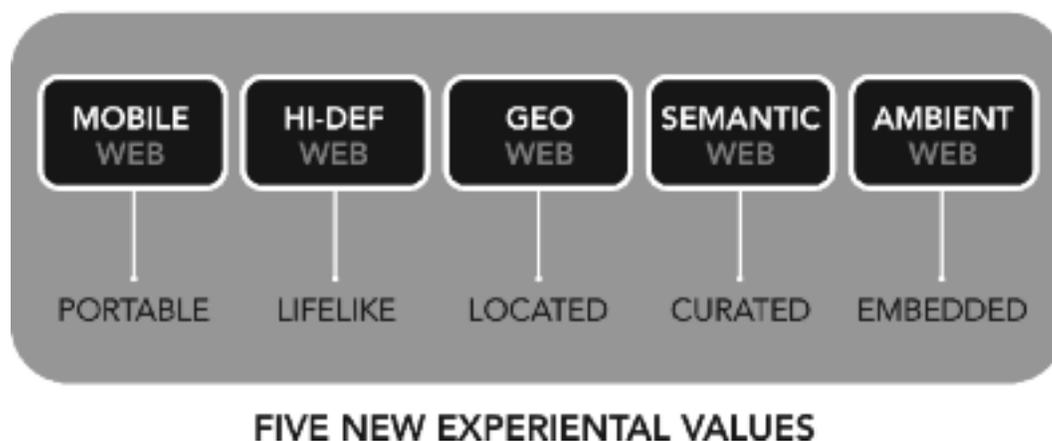


Figure 4. Five aspects of the next Web will give rise to wholly new consumer values, which brands must embrace to innovate.

putting the Networked, Personal, and On-Demand experiences after Engaging in order of descending priority.) The sites and ads should give consumers every opportunity for participation, belonging, immersion, entertainment, and inspiration. The resulting experiential designs did



Figure 5. Scotts Miracle-Gro's former website home page championed products instead of people.



Figure 6. Scotts Miracle-Gro becomes the quintessential OPEN brand online, as part of its new multi-channel campaign celebrating the green-thumb lifestyle.

just that, enabling consumers to share stories and advice, upload photos and videos, seek tips from agronomists and other experts, blog, and browse all the brands on a dynamically customizable content platform. During the first six months of the digital campaign initiatives, Engaging and Networked experience measures were very strong, and included:

- Thousands of consumer registrations immediately after the campaign launch
- More than 4,000 photos uploaded
- 7,920 recommendations for a single product
- More than 10,000 posts to discussion boards at any given time

Landing page images (Figure 5 and Figure 6) show the radical shift from product-centric to customer-centric, gardening-as-great-pastime positioning. Scotts Miracle-Gro has unequivocally built new brand equity through strategic digital experience design.

It remains the opportunity of all marketers, even those with lingering skepticism about the capacity for such a seemingly thin, intangible medium to be meaningfully, memorably experiential at all, to recognize the vast potential of the Web's communication economy to generate the differences that count. As Scott Lash in *Global Culture Industry* once again reminds us:

Use-value and the commodity are qualities of products. Sign-value and the brand are not qualities of products: they are qualities of experience. This experience is situated at the interface—or surface—of communication of the consumer [with other consumers] and the brand.¹² ■

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12. Op. cit., p. 7.