Long Tail. Or Short Tail.

The Internet: Promoter of diversity or instrument of uniformity?

Have you heard of the "Long Tail Theory"? First published in Wired magazine in 2004, the theory says that, because the Internet places an almost infinite amount of data at our fingertips, we are bound to expand the range of information we use. The 80/20 rule, which, in this case, means that 20% of the data is used 80% of the time (and that the "tail," 80% of the data, is rarely used at all), would lose some of its meaning. Why limit yourself to the same small portion of data everyone else uses when you have all of it at your disposal?

The theory has something comforting in that it balances the cold blandness of computers and the information age: It posits that computers can help uncover hidden nuggets and thus make the world more diverse. It also promises higher quality: Rather than having to shoehorn an oft-used fact into an argument, one can search for the most appropriate fact, no matter how small or apparently trivial.

The problem is that the nice theory is not supported by the facts.

Most recently, a University of Chicago researcher[1] demonstrated that the sources of citations in recent academic journal articles, rather than coming from a broader range of authors than in pre-Internet days, actually come from a smaller number of sources than before. They even seem to, in confirmation of a trend that is contrary to that of the Long Tail theory, use the same references more frequently. In other words, the tail is getting shorter, not longer. The question is, why?

To date, the most satisfying answer is the loss of "serendipity;" i.e., what occurs when you find something other than what you were looking for. As Pek van Andel[2] defines it, "Serendipity is looking in a haystack for a needle and discovering a farmer's daughter." Old research tools, whether gathering up information from books or by talking to other human beings, made room for serendipity. The only reason, for instance, that I know of the existence of the "ocarina" is the illustration of that odd musical instrument on the same dictionary page as "occlusion," the word I was probably looking up. That knowledge of ocarina did enrich me ever so slightly even if I have never had an opportunity to use it until this day. Research done the traditional way offers many serendipitous events, small opportunities to learn something new, or to make an association that leads to an unexpected and therefore more creative conclusion.

In a way, the Internet makes our research process too efficient because it returns only the precise answers to the questions we pose. And the more adept one is at searching, the narrower the range tends to be. What results is akin to creating intellectually closed communities in which we are next to other people who think like we do, and isolated from those who think otherwise. A kind of gerrymandering

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[1] James Evans, Ph.D., as cited in The Economist, July 17, 2008. His research is reported in the current issue of *Science* magazine.

[2] Ig Nobel Laureate

based on intellectual curiosity. Within those communities all questions are answered using the same research tools leading to the same conclusion. One can imagine consumers all using the same toothpaste, or bar-soap, just because a search engine told them to.

Which brings us to how all of this applies to marketing: We think it more fruitful for a marketer of consumer products to find ways to preserve and nurture serendipity to avoid the trap of "me-too-ism" in product innovation and positioning.

How can one nurture serendipity, the "accidental" discovery of a new product or idea?

A method we practice for our clients is a) to create an environment where the unexpected can happen, and b) to ensure that people with high sagacity are there to observe and draw insightful "learnings" from the event. This means that your consumer research must include a dash of creativity so as to elicit answers you have not heard before. For instance, if working on new shampoo concepts, throw one in the mix that promises to leave some of the natural skin oils on the hair. If working on a pasta sauce, propose one that is bland and contains absolutely no herbs, spices, vegetables or meats. If working on a desktop organizer, offer one that lets your desk look disorganized, and

so on. Good or bad, those ideas will force the consumers reacting to them to think along new, different lines – and perhaps to suggest refinements to these ideas that are the first step in leading you to a truly new and different product.

Then make sure that your research is observed and analyzed by individuals capable of recognizing a good idea when they see it, i.e., who are well versed in the science or in the marketing of your product category and who think conceptually. Those are rare birds, but they exist. For instance, you can even supplement your team by doing what we call "hiring the target." So, if you are working on positioning a product to teens, retain a couple of 15-year olds to attend your meetings, your ideation session and your research as well. Their ideas may spark some in you; they're almost guaranteed to see things in ways you can't.

In a way, the internet's effect on reducing the diversity of the ideas we come across, the shortening of the tail if you will, creates excellent opportunities for those who can think out of the box, for the intellectually-accident-prone who are naturally exposed to serendipity.

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