



In 2006, journalist and brand advisor Neil Boorman realised he was addicted to brands. In his book *Bonfire of the Brands*, he said: "I began this journey looking to establish an identity for myself beyond the brands. But I doubt I shall ever be able to discover who I really am. My values and my sense of self are constantly changing over time. What I can be sure of is the person I am not. I am not an especially unique person that deserves the best at all costs. I am not and never will be the successful, contented guy in the adverts. I am not a member of any tribe dreamed up in a focus group. I am not a PC. I am not a Mac. I am just me."

Following the tradition of 15th century Italian priests who would regularly lead large public burnings of objects of vanity, such as mirrors and cosmetics, Boorman decided to burn all his branded worldly goods, from his clothes to his blender. He gave himself 200 days to wind down his consumption and rebuild a brand-free lifestyle.

The politician as marketer

Niall O'Driscoll discusses how digital media has revolutionised how marketers can communicate with the public, and how its power was harnessed in Barack Obama's campaign.



We are in a new world of communication. It is not on its way. It has arrived. The internet has been the great equaliser, where the value of a communication is what decides whether it becomes part of mass consumption or not. The communications' power structure is no longer top-down: the big message from the big brand disseminated to the waiting and primed masses. The power now comes from the bottom up. Could Boorman's statement, following his disengagement with the traditional "branded" world, be seen as the new voice of the consumer?

Consumers now want a say and they have a clear set of values that they want the brand to reflect. They expect companies to

act in a certain way. They understand brands intricately. Many of them are part of a social network, such as Facebook or Bebo, and their profile is their brand. According to Irish blogger Damian Mulley, with over 1 million broadband connections in Ireland and 1 million people on Bebo, this could be seen as 100% penetration. Many of these profiles are migrating to Facebook, which reflects their age and needs more appropriately. But in a space where connectedness is so important, are brands succeeding?

In *The Brand Bubble*, John Gerzema identifies a massive disconnect between the "Wall Street" perception of brands and the consumer's. A brand is the fundamental driver of competitive advantage in most

companies. The brand value today represents almost a third of all value in the average company. They are the driving asset. Yet, brand esteem and awareness are down. Gerzema sampled 2,500 major companies and found a 50% erosion of consumer trust in brands. 85% of brands are stagnant or declining in their differentiation. And it is this differentiation that is their life link to their audience.

In a recent interview with the author on the podcast *Across the Sound Divide*, it was noted that brand values are being inflated and applied to the valuations of companies - brands represent 30% of the market cap in the Standard and Poor's 500 Index, which itself is down 40% this year, signifying another potential bubble for business. This can be seen as a fiscal indicator of the decline of the value of brands.

Most of these brands were built on the back of mass media, which is now causing them to struggle in this new fragmented media landscape. TV no longer attracts the mass audience it once did. The online views of the infamous *Saturday Night Live* Tina Fey parody of Sarah Palin, for example, are about to eclipse the amount of viewers delivered for the same sketch by TV.

Gerzema defines a brand as a promise of future happiness - when you buy your new iPhone, you have invested future happiness in it. An inferior promise or a substandard product will not last. In the age of the brand savvy consumer, it is no longer possible for a company to dazzle or distract with hypnotic images or false promises. People trust each other before they trust a brand. It is far more challenging for the creative to truly engage the consumer and get buy-in to the brand values. These values must be true as measured by the actions of the company. This measurement comes through in the quality of the product, its customer service and the integrity of the company's voice online. The company must build a trusting relationship. It must have a real voice of integrity which is respected in the continuous conversation its chosen community engages in.

Consumers' appetite for connectedness is huge and they have considerably higher expectations of both brands and companies. The consumer now expects innovation, creativity, transparency and trust. An inferior promise or a substandard product does not last. A classic example is the Nike women's soccer site. The

Consumer now expect innovation, creativity, transparency and trust

manufacturer identified the sport as having a huge following with no home. So, the brand built a place online to convene and form a community, with enormous success. However, when the brand started getting accused on the forums for using sweat shops, instead of engaging in a conversation and addressing the issues, it pulled the site. This was a disaster as its detractors became scattered all over the web, and the brand lost the opportunity to manage its reputation and eliminate the negatives. Instead, the negatives gained momentum. Nike had connectedness but with no trust and no transparency.

In *Greater Good - How Good Marketing Makes for Better Democracy*, Quelch and Jocz noted: "Consumers shape the marketplace through the choices they make, the actions they take, and the rights they claim. In competitive markets, consumers' votes at the cash register give them a strong say about the fates of products and services. Many consumers also engage actively with marketers...Consumers want the market to be fair, and they want it to respond to their needs."

It is interesting to note that the language

of both finance and politics have drifted into the conversations about online communications and marketing. Gerzema looked at brands as assets and in terms of their fiscal value within the company, rather than how they are normally examined, as the essence of a company. In their book, Quelch and Jocz have used words such as "rights" and "votes". This is more deliberate within their context, but is still not unfamiliar.

As mentioned earlier, the power structure of communication is changing to a bottom-up model. Online is considered to be more "democratic". People are part of a "community" on Facebook, they are "residents" and "citizens" in Second Life. In this context we all "reserve the right to speak our minds (in forums and on blogs), the right to assemble to petition our government (on www.petitiononline.com), the right to own, buy, and sell property and not have it taken without fair compensation (in Second Life). We consider these rights to be universal, a codification of liberty's meaning... Moreover, we recognise that the very idea of those universal rights presupposes the equal worth of each individual," wrote Barack Obama in *The Audacity of Hope* in 2006.

The presuppositions that exist as the basis of American democracy also exist within the online space, though without a constitution. This language of politics is used by a man who was also named Marketer of the Year by US brand-builders Advertising Age only last October. A man that built his campaign from the ground up, from many small donations and on the basis of the rejection of special (ie corporate) interests.

It is through a clear understanding and identification of the new power model of communication that Obama's team built such a powerful campaign. Every online tool available to them was used to build this bottom-up power surge of good will, climaxing in what was clearly a euphoric moment in history for many in Grant Park.

Obama sent an email to the 4 million supporters who had signed up, just as he was on his way to make his victory speech, stating that he would "be in touch soon about what comes next." If Obama governs the way he ran his campaign, he'll have direct access to a team on the ground of 4 million to help him enact his policies. This is revolutionary, and in no small part due to the flawless execution of a digital and integrated marketing campaign.

Online methods used to access information about brands* according to young adult internet users in the us and worldwide, June-July 2008 (% of respondents)

	US (n=991)	Worldwide (n=12,603)
Search engines	47%	46%
Favourite sites	18%	26%
Personal start page or homepage (Google or similar)	14%	19%
Portal	19%	18%
Friends Via IM conversation or links	13%	17%
Friends Via email conversation or links	13%	17%
Social networks	47%	46%
Don't access this type of content	47%	46%

Note: ages 18-24; *brands, products and services
Source: Synovate, 'young Adults Revealed,' provided to eMarketer, November 2008

So, can the politician be seen as a marketer? When the last vote for the Lisbon Treaty went against the main political parties, there were a lot of surprised faces, there was a lot of finger pointing and blame. This would suggest a major breakdown in the communication lines between what constituents were thinking and what politicians were thinking, not unlike the conflicting view of the value of brands between Wall Street and the consumer. Perhaps having a proper online presence would reconnect Irish politics with Irish people in a more total way. Perhaps the proper use of social networks could help build public support for difficult policies. Or the use of a WebTV platform that people could subscribe to could allow for the dissemination of more information about policy and issues rather than relying on the dull and sidelined Oireachtas report.

Above all, beginning a conversation with the public online would allow more people to vent their frustrations and give the opportunity for the 'wisdom of many' to contribute to some of the more overwhelming issues that still face the country. How about a draft policy document created "by the people, for the people" through a wiki? Or encouraging greater citizen participation through the donation of your Facebook status to a certain cause, perhaps simply to get more people to use their vote?

Online and mobile technology is already converging, as seen by products like the iPhone. Applications such as twitter (or micro-blogging), LinkedIn,

Google talk and Google GPS maps are all readily available for the product, allowing you to stay online while on the go. People can follow your twitter status, wherever you are. The next generation of mobile devices, sometimes referred to as 4G, will have much higher data transfer capabilities. It is envisaged that these devices will eventually become "always-on" devices. The next generation of internet and mobile users is already fully ensconced and in control of their media, as shown in the Daily Social Communication Methods survey.

eMarketer estimates that 82% of US teens aged 12 to 17 and 43.5% of children aged three to 11 will use the internet on a monthly basis in 2009. Comparative data from Nielsen Online indicates that about 19% of active internet users in July 2008 - or 32.4 million people - were under age 18. If this generation adopts the always-on fully mobile internet handset, the possibilities for communicating and activating communities in minutes, if not seconds, are enormous. This, combined with localised digital messaging from shops or institutions (eg as you pass BT2, you will receive a 20% discount coupon on your mobile to entice you to enter the store) will mean that being a part of a constant conversation stream will be essential.

According to the global research director at Microsoft Advertising, Beth Uyenco, "If advertising is done in a relevant and credible way, young adults are actually eager to interact, share opinions and even pass the message on."

The eMarketer survey, released on November 20th, 2008, showed that 62% of respondents were most likely to pass on comedy clips, 40% music clips and 27% clips featuring friends. Almost 10% passed on viral advertising clips.

So video is the primary asset passed on. And search engines such as Google are still the primary way this generation accesses information about brands. These statistics are clearly borne out in the *Saturday Night Live* sketch of Sarah Palin, which was comedy and hugely viral. It also showed how these drivers could be used in a political manner.

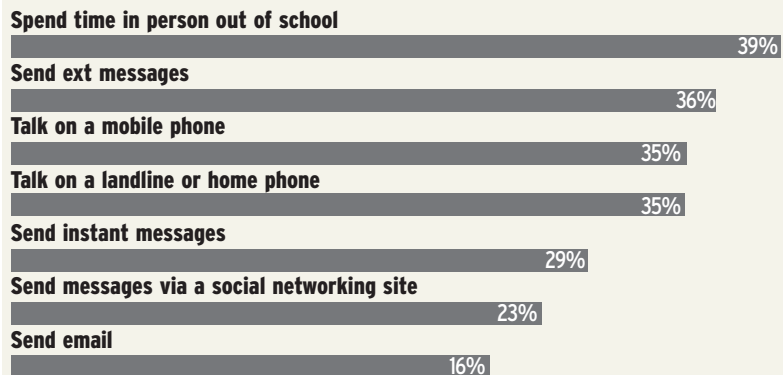
With budgets getting cut back, it is all the more important to get involved in direct communication with the consumer by giving them added-value content: content that is relevant to them, in a format that is easy and enjoyable to consume. Companies that continue to innovate and articulate in a recession have been proven to increase their market share and brand strength.

If the voter of the near future is so fully ensconced in an always-on, mobile environment, with the presupposition of the equal worth of every profile, then it is essential that those who participate in the machinations of real-world democracy understand these channels, engage with this generation and join the flow of conversation. Otherwise the brand values of current political parties may suffer and the online citizen-consumer may disengage like Boomman's bonfire.

Niall O'Driscoll is creative director for vStream Digital Media ■



Daily social communication methods of US teens, September-November 2007 (% of respondents)



Note: n =700
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project and the National Commission on Writing, 'Writing, technology and Teens,' April 24, 2008