

1620 words

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header <The Fourth Industrial Revolution: Fifteen years of seismic changes>

It is no understatement to say that the first fifteen years of the Branded Content Marketing Association has encompassed the most significant transformation of mass communications in over a century. This has been, after all, the era when marketing practices were transformed through the maelstrom of innovation, as digital technology shaped its own form of branded content. Database marketing, loyalty cards, brand pages, search optimisation, social media, narrowcast channels, personal media, on demand, User Experience (UX), Virtual, Augmented and Mixed Reality, chat bots, voice search and face recognition – all have been re-appropriated by communications industries and ultimately conquered as branded touch points. In fact the most successful stand-alone social media formats such as Facebook, Youtube and Spotify, were able to absorb branded content as their means of becoming commercially viable on a global scale.

Branded Content has also managed to ripple through a wider variety of communications practices. From lifestyle and leisure to the property industry, the leading brands and celebrities have become a magnet for followers and a lens through which other products and services have benefitted by (third party) association. The personal media channels of sports, music and screen stars in particular became prime branding spaces –which is a far cry from the branded web sites that were prominent when the BCMA was formed. New industries such as social and AdTech have formed to interpret behavioural trends and large data sets and to retarget branded messages. towards the hottest spots for brands within the personal media spaces of music and entertainment celebrities. These developments took shape as distinctions between ‘advertorials’, sponsored content and news stories started to blur.

Sub head <Back then: the view of branded content in 2003>

Several books voiced the view of the communications industries in 2003, of the opportunities and risks posed by digital technologies at the time that BCMA was formed.

Amongst those trumpeting opportunities were Garth Hallberg, then vice-president of marketing firm Ogilvy Direct. His book *All Consumers Are Not Created Equal: Differential Marketing Strategy for Brand Growth and Profits* (1996, J Wiley, NY) suggested that all environments now presented 360° branding opportunities, as did the customer databases that companies held. Hallberg anticipated data being leveraged to target customers who had already registered interest in particular products or services. At the time several automotive brands moved marketing budgets towards relationship marketing. Brands such as Land Rover were hosting members-only 'Adventures' away days for existing and prospective Land Rover owners, while Mini targeted new communication opportunities between the point of purchase, manufacture and delivery so that customers could personalise the spec of their new car. TBWA's President Jean Marie Dru's book *Beyond Disruption* (2002, J Wiley, NY) went further in wrapping a wide spectrum of media, above and below-the-line, around individual consumers so that habits and attention could be first disrupted, then known passion-points could be targeted. The supermarket brand Tesco's Reward Card loyalty scheme epitomised how brands could use purchase data to personalise branded mailshots. The story of this pioneering loyalty scheme was described by its creators Clive Hunby and Terry Hunt in the book *Scoring Points* (2003, Kogan Page London). Christian Mikunda's *Brand Lands, Hot Spots and Cool Spaces* (2002, Redline Wirtschaft bei Ueberreuter, Frankfurt) went further in claiming branded environments as a 'third place' - on and offline - as the venue where emotional bonds are best forged with customers. Marketers, Mikunda observed, have access to the mind and heart – 'Linking the desire for entertainment with emotion and putting the customer in the right mood is the key to attracting sales'.

A different set of publications spelled out the threat of digital communications for established advertising and marketing industries. In particular Al and Laura Ries's *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR* (2002, HarperCollins, NY) and the Chief Marketing Officer of Coca-Cola, Sergio Zyman's *The End of Advertising As We Know It* (2003, HarperCollins NY) both speculated that mass media revenues would transition to more newer targeted communications. Worse still – in *Permission Marketing* (1999, Simon & Schuster, NY) Seth Godin anticipated a digital landscape where viewers would be paid to view advertisements, such was the concern over free online content and adblockers.

Alongside these views of the future digital landscape, there were also new the new branded content roles brought about by digital. The 2003-2018 years saw a new type of brand specialist emerge that was better positioned to exploit closer understandings of customer behaviours, based on data, and new ways of reaching customers through personal media. For instance, the manufacturer Britvic introduced a 'Brand Guardian' for their drinks brand Tango to direct marketing campaigns in a more iterative way, and in real-time. As brands launched their own websites and subscribed to social media sites they communicated peer-to-peer with customers, which required a new breed of specialists whose responsibility it was to nurture the essence of what was often referred to as 'the brand DNA'. Film franchises also employed brand guardians, required to negotiate with brands and collate a network sharing similar values, before commissioning scripts around the partnering brands. Through such roles branded communications has become part of the fabric of mass entertainment.

Sub-head < Key stages in branded content, between 2003-2018 >

It's still hard to fathom the amount of change that has taken place since the BCMA's inception. The timeline of the relationship between brands and consumers below illustrates how the form of branded communication has migrated over years to encompass new technologies and new thinking on effective branded content. These key stages are set against the backdrop of new specialist roles, emerging media and closer understandings of individual purchasing behaviour.

< table 1 timeline of key stages for branded content 2003-2018 >

Year	stage	context	for instance
2003-04	involvement	advertainment, shared content, virals	Burger King's Subservient Chicken
2004	brand sites	branded causes & related services	Dove campaignforrealbeauty.com
2006	advocacy	co-creation, user-generated content	Snakes on A Plane film & promo
2006-7	enablers	tools, branded engines	Nike+ Nike & Apple running network
2009-10	locational	street view and GPS-related interactive video, 'We Used to Wait'	Arcade Fire's Google-supported
2010-11	app space	brand spaces on personal technology	Nike training club
2011	second screen	augmented/mixed reality, layars	Disney AR billboards, Times Square
2012	retarget to social	broadcast events driving social network	Thinkbox and Twitter projects
2013	cause-led	utilising com technologies for causes	Coca-Cola Small world machines, India-Pakistan
2014	programmatic	data informed retargeted coms	Team Sky, retargeted articles via po-st
2015	news content	interactive editorial, advertorial	Wall Street Journal/Netflix for Narcos
2017-18	voice search	brand optimisation partnerships	Amazon echo and Amazon Prime

The series of branded projects above characterise the ways in which branded content has ridden the tide by realising the potential of emerging software. Projects such as Burger King's Subservient Chicken, which was initially a broadcast side project that went on to amass 459 million site hits, demonstrated the importance of brands reaching out to its customers at relevant moments - for Burger King this was snack time - and in relevant online spaces. Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty – the first campaign to feature a URL as its strapline – claimed a cause and supported Dove's synonymous association by connecting networks, events and brand-centred support activity, mostly online. When the film Snakes on A Plane was launched in 2006, its production firm New Line Cinema channelled the spirit of crowd-sourcing by creating a promotional message voiced by the film's star Samuel L Jackson, that could be co-created. Jackson's message could be downloaded, personalised and forwarded, which proved useful in the drive for advocacy and drove audiences to see the film.

The advent of Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and personal mobile technologies enabled online networks to be formed around shared interests and causes. Brands were able to adopt this, and brands such as Nike, Apple

and Google were able to leverage the technology to create brand-supported communities. The potential of augmented reality and second screen viewing habits encouraged advertisers to consider how mixed reality layering, broadcast, social media and gaming formats were relevant spaces for branded content. Media specialists such as Disney embraced the scope for branded engagement through broadcast's new interlinked environments, while broadcast research specialists Thinkbox and Twitter collaborated on reality programming, using what they termed 'lean forward moments' to redirect viewers to branded social sites. Such ventures used the reach of reality shows to drive traffic, and micro sites for extra content which enhanced the viewing experience. Such initiatives prompted other traditional media such as the printed press to rethink how they embraced branded content: Wall Street Journal's creative content for Netflix reality series Narcos proved a powerful point of reference for other mass media in embracing the capabilities of digital news spaces.

Improvements in the management of big data sets presented a new vein of engagement with branded content. AdTech firms such as RhythmOne were able to retarget branded messages in a more informed way, based on click-through expressions of interest, using data accrued through po.st forwarded messaging. The growth potential of branded programmatic content may be held in check by the introduction of General Data Protection Regulations (2018). However data transparency and shifts in attitude to the value of personal data, as notions of owning and leasing music has shifted, may ultimately enhance brand-consumer relationships.

In the BCMA's fifteenth year, voice search has become the latest threshold where the potential for branded content is being realised through innovative projects and partnerships. Just as brands have pivoted to embrace media innovation as an opportunity, the BCMA will continue as a linchpin organisation in championing the practices of communications pioneers.