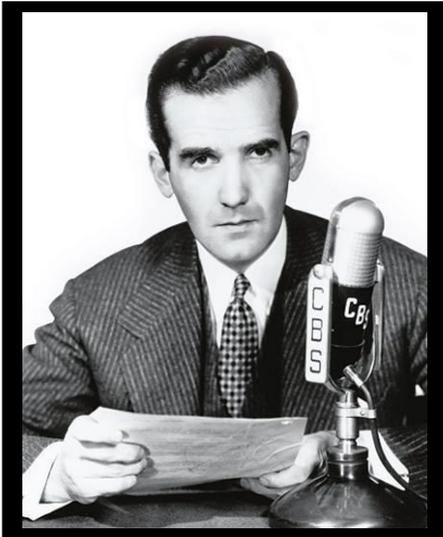


MARKETING POST MORTEM

THE ENGAGEMENT CRISIS AND THE SEARCH FOR EMPATHY

By Trish Mahon



2016 was a year of crisis in Marketing. We put a record number of things 'out there' in the form of posts and tweets, ads and articles, banners and blogs. We used the best headlines and some of the most intriguing visuals we could find. So why didn't we "engage" more? Why didn't more consumers participate in our brand? Why didn't our content translate into leads?

Well, apparently 'the news' was not the only thing that was "fake" last year. Marketing content also took a turn toward the fallacious. How many misleading claims can you pack into a tinyURL? How much 'Sponsored Content' has to fill the bottom of a page before you question everything you read above it? How much 'Native Advertising' does it take for an online publication to lose its credibility?

"But Wait There's More" seemed a bit less dastardly when we could hash it out with a human being on the other end of the phone line. But when we fall for digital bait, we clamp down on a cyber hook that tethers us to every retargeting ad in our waterway. The truth is marketing has become more about luring and catching than about informing and educating. We seem more focused on data logging than customer interaction. We seem more passionate about Business Intelligence than intelligent business.

Just a few years back a Marketing professional could tell you all about their customer --- not necessarily the blogs they read or the searches they keyed but what they wanted and needed. They could not only tell you *where* they lived but *how* they lived. So where has John Smith gone? Has he been reduced to the prevailing smiling emoticon? Is he a bounce rate on an interactive dashboard? Is he the top of a blue chart, the bottom of a red graph, or the far reaches of an orange heat map? Is he the negative correlation of a scatter plot?

Yes, automation has gotten the best of us, but it is actually far deeper than that. We have lost our empathy. Empathy is that innate ability that marketers have always had that helps them understand the motivation of others. It is that 'fellow feeling,' the kinship of circumstance and the mutuality of existence that those who sell for a living have understood for generations. It is the heart of a prospect.

While we operate on the World Wide Web, the reader is not a form of prey to be chased into some sticky trap. While we may auto-schedule our electronic outreach, the recipient is by no means programmed or required to read a single headline. While algorithms may sequence online search preferences, the end-user is not an automaton with fully quantifiable behavior. In a world where everything is predictive --- John Smith is refreshingly random.

In order to relate to him, we must still prove that we know him and care about him. In short, our marketing campaigns must have purpose. Without it, they are the driverless cars of the internet. Our content must reflect those truths that matter to our reader. We must be correspondents, columnists and human reporters. We must be journalists --- Murrow or Cronkite sitting at a 'hot mic' under bright lights telling the world's stories in plain speak.

There's no doubt that technology has transformed marketing into an analytic discipline of ratios, metrics and modeling but for the moment – and perhaps just a moment --- the reader has been unchanged. We must still enchant them. We must still captivate them. We must still appeal to them via the primal whispers of core experience. We must tell good stories.

All those years ago Edward R. Murrow perhaps said it best, "The newest computer can merely compound, at speed, the oldest problem in the relations between human beings, and in the end the communicator will be confronted with the old problem, of what to say and how to say it."