What drives online marketing, hype or culture?

Dr. Mike Molesworth of the Southampton Management School says digital marketing is all about understanding consumer behaviour online.

Instead of burying their heads in books or articles on effective marketing techniques, advertising executives may want to sit back, relax and surf the web once in a while. What does viewing the new viral video on Youtube or trending topics on Facebook and Twitter have to do with business and marketing? Well, it may provide clues on how to best approach consumers online. "The Internet lets organizations know more about their customers and other stakeholders than they ever have before," Dr. Mike Molesworth of the Southampton Management School says.

He points out that target audiences online are not just segmented by age or demographics, but also by behaviours, purchase and browsing history. "So behavioural targeting, based on small segments, even of just one, is now possible. The result is a dynamic and complex set of challenges to understand what motivates consumers and how to drive them from search or enquiry to purchase and re-purchase," he says.

Trend vs hype

Molesworth, Southampton's programme director for MSc Digital Marketing, cautions, however, of distinguishing trends from hype. "You have to separate excitement over the latest platform from the transformed cultures that sustain it. It's a problem that things can seem to move so fast that in trying to keep up you can lose time to reflect on both the bigger changes in consumer practices that marketing might inform and respond to,

"The Southampton Management School is one of UK's leading management schools and its research findings inform their teaching. The School's Master of Science in Digital Marketing programme is offered in Singapore via SIM Global Education."

and the aspects of marketing that are more constant," he explains.

An example he gives is the preference of consumers to "rent" instead of owning resources online. This is the case of those paying a fee to have access to online or cloud data such as music and films. "You might sum up these trends as relating to new cultures of consumption. Online imagined community, social media, videogames and the like all offer new ways for consumers to build meaning and identity and the contribution of marketing to this process is changing in ways that make them more like valuable members of these group than remote and external product and service providers," he says.

The Internet is a treasure trove of marketing data. "There is considerable data available to companies from which they can attempt to extract data. This is almost an opposing trend. Behavioural targeting, automated customization and sophisticated eCRM are becoming important issues for marketing departments," Molesworth says.

The problem now is how to deal with so much data. "Organizations may quickly find they have more data than they can deal with in an effective way. And again, where consumer practices change fast, monitoring and responding to the trends that data makes transparent becomes more complex," he adds.

He points out the interesting characteristics of digital marketing, which "becoming potentially more human, intimate and cultural, as well as algorithmic, automated and machine-generated."

Demographics matter less now as opposed to online behaviour since many trends have become global. "Information, memes, and critical comments can circulate globally and instantly. This requires more complex co-ordination for international marketing," he says.

Social media

On the other hand, social media help creates virtual or imagined communities. And while they are rich in data and "consumer meaning-making processes," it is also a venue that allows hostility against brands and marketing,

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Molesworth says.

He warns, "Audiences on social media can be fickle and savvy. They can adjust quickly to changes in taste not just in consumer goods, but in the platforms themselves. There is plenty of buzz about social marketing and no shortage of companies willing to offer all-to-frequently tactical campaigns, but the longer-term and more strategic co-ordination of social media remains to be realized, as does successful integration with other platforms."

Prospects

The adoption of smartphones has helped a lot, creating opportunities for complex marketing. "This is a crowded market. Marketers must quickly move move beyond simple and derivative app offerings into experiences that cut through clutter of the small and short small-screen user experience," advises Molesworth. In the end, education is the key. "Success in digital media seldom comes from simply knowing how to do the latest online marketing, so the focus of education now needs to be critical intellectual skills for developments that are yet to happen," he says.