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Forward March: Where We're Headed in 2007 and Beyond
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The end of the year is often a time for reflection. But rather than rehash the past, we decided to reflect on the future. Executives from a quartet of marketing and research firms shared with us their predictions for multichannel commerce in the year ahead. On some points our pundits agree (go East, young marketer); on a few they don't (either eco-awareness is going to increase, or there's going to be an eco backlash). But there's plenty here to mull over as you prepare to ring out the old and ring in the new.

Anyone for tennis and marketing?

BY DREW NEISSER

During Roger Federer's stunning tennis victory at this year's U.S. Open, the camera panned frequently to Tiger Woods, who was there as Federer's guest. There they were, two of the best athletes in the world, possibly the best ever in their respective sports, sharing a cross-border, cross-sport, cross-race moment of mutual admiration.

How quaint, right? Or perhaps this was actually a brilliant product-placement scheme by Nike founder/CEO Phil Knight, ensuring that his brand — which both Woods and Federer endorse — was front and center the entire match.

What does this have to do with the 2007 marketing arena? Think of it as a reminder that when watching trends, we should do so with both wonder and cynicism, cheering greatness and booing duplicity. That said, here are my picks for the trends most worth watching.

INSTANT REPLAY

Just as the new instant replay system at this year's U.S. Open kept the line judges honest, bloggers are bringing a new level of scrutiny to corporations and their marketing activities. Marketers must assume that they live in glass houses and that consumers are armed with some pretty large stones. Spy on other members of your board of directors as Hewlett-Packard allegedly did, and you will be exposed by a blogger. Try to pass off a YouTube video as consumer-generated content, and you will be exposed faster than you can rap “Smirnoff Raw Tea.”

Directness and honesty will not only help you win a lot of points, but they will also allow you to recover from some bad shots. This is exactly what the folks at Facebook discovered when their recent “upgrade” caused an uproar among their stalwarts, who decried a loss of privacy. Bombarded with negative e-mails and postings, Facebook management was quick to respond, first with a “don't panic, we hear you” posting followed by a “you're right, we fixed it” note to all of its loyal users.

SERVICE RETURNS

In a world of glass houses, the winners will be those companies that focus first and foremost on

customer satisfaction. Expect more companies to redouble their efforts to improve customer satisfaction in 2007 at every point of contact. Contact-center response times will be heavily scrutinized with the goal of reducing hold time to seconds instead of minutes. More companies will offer the “push zero” feature providing valuable customers relief from endlessly annoying phone trees. Online customer support will also improve radically as more companies offer “live” support along with improved search functionality enabling customers to find what they seek in a click or two.

NET PROMOTER SCORES BIG

As customer satisfaction moves to the forefront of business strategies, expect more companies to use new metrics such as the net promoter score (NPS) to assess progress and reward performance. Developed by former Bain consultant Fred Reichheld, NPS measures the relative strength of brand promoters vs. brand detractors. Research found that companies with a high NPS consistently outperformed those with a lower rating. NPS requires asking only one question: “On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend brand X to a friend?” Companies such as General Electric have already made NPS ratings an integral part of their business, basing 20% of compensation on NPS scores.

DEFENDING YOUR END WITH BLOG MONITORS

Marketers will be enhancing their ability to defend against potentially ruinous blog attacks by dedicating resources to blog monitoring and blog response. “Blog monitor” will finally become a full-time position in the communications department as opposed to the occasional activity of a lone blog nut. In addition to tracking blog noise, the blog monitor will actively engage other bloggers, correcting mistruths and responding to issues as they arise. Corporate blogs will also be a defensive weapon, assuming that the authors are empowered to tell the truth, even if that means admitting a product shortcoming (as Dell ultimately did with its exploding-battery crisis).

HITTING THE CORNERS

In the 2006 U.S. Open finals, Roger Federer outaced the more powerful Andy Roddick 17-7, trading speed for increased accuracy. Similarly, foresighted marketers will seek out the corners, mining new niches with increasing accuracy and reward.

Case in point: Unilever's All Small & Mighty detergent, which packs a lot of cleaning punch into a small bottle. Targeting city dwellers who hate lugging heavy containers to the laundromat, Small & Mighty is cleaning up.

Another example: Panasonic recently introduced a 103-inch plasma TV that retails for nearly \$75,000 — including, of course, custom installation. Not a product for the masses, but in addition to earning bragging rights for producing the world's largest plasma, Panasonic has ensured that no self-respecting billionaire will want to be left off the waiting list for this “must have.”

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