

Brandweek

Consumer Power? Groovy, Man

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It's been four decades since 1960s counterculture icon Timothy Leary first publicly advised us to "turn on, tune in, drop out." He came up with the phrase at the urging of philosopher/theorist Marshall McLuhan, who famously observed "the medium is the message." The two envisioned a world of introspection—aided, of course, by recreational drugs—and media intrusion. As Leary noted, "Who controls your screen controls the programs in your mind." It was his rant against the evil of politicians, media and marketers controlling the medium.

While some debate whether—and to what extent—such a dystopia has come true in our time, I submit that the burden of paranoia has actually shifted. Today, it's the brand marketer who needs to look inward—and outward. He has to fear not adequately building customer contributions into his marketing and content equations. The balance of control is increasingly in the hands of consumers.

Earlier this fall at the Association of National Advertisers' annual conference, P&G CEO A.G. Lafley observed: "In a very real sense, consumers are beginning to actually own our brands, help us define our brand equities and evolve our brand equities, and participate in our brand messaging. So this is very much a let-go world."

A few marketers have readily embraced this new "let go" world as one with mind-expanding possibilities. For the majority, however, these words offer visions of consumer empowerment as horrifying as any lyric in Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit."

However, there's no need to be talked down. If Leary were still here—and deigning to address an audience of marketers—he'd likely have some sobering words for you. But since he's not, I'll presume to speak for him: Wake up. Your new mantra is "turn on, opt in, work it out."

You might say the '60s are back in more ways than one. Against the backdrop of Worldcom and the Iraq war, cynicism and skepticism again abound. We've lost the flowers in our hair, but people have re-embraced their concerns about Big Brother. And, they're starting to tune out mainstream messaging.

That said, a recent study by the **Keller Fay Group** revealed a mere 15% of the public accounts for 1.5 billion brand impressions per day—that's nearly one-third of all brand discussions in the U.S. These 32 million "Conversation Catalysts" are the few who influence the many—and likely have the greatest impact on whether you're going to buy your son that PS3 or a Wii.

Marketers need to "turn on" these relatively few people who have double the influence than the rest of the populous. They may not be found in a traditional media-mix model, because their conversations often occur outside that realm (person-to-person is still the most trusted pathway). Regardless, their impact is profound.

A whole new generation of digital catalysts is leading this charge. From reinvented boomers using tech to transform their identities to echo debutantes using digital communications and social networking to connect to the real world outside, there is a new landscape of influential consumers that marketers must heed as the new authority figures.

Message delivery, too, has dramatically shifted as a mechanism of control. "Tuning in" in marketers' parlance is an idea whose time has largely passed. Today, it's about choice; it's an "opt in" world. Consumers are going where they want, when they want and will stay as long as they want, thank you very much. Content is the key, and the question has become: Can you pull consumers in to your message and keep them there?

Here's one example. Most guys don't like to talk about grooming. It's even less appealing when they're talking about their own grooming—especially anywhere below the chin. The folks at Philips Norelco understood that when they launched their Bodygroom device (a "manscaping" tool), an initiative my firm assisted them with. Norelco's challenge was getting male consumers to opt in to a message that they'd probably rather avoid.

Norelco created www.shaveeverywhere.com, a clever name that also left little doubt as to the content matter. The site notably featured the "innuendo guy" who sang folk songs about shaving your kiwis. It was enough to land a big segment on Howard Stern's show. Millions of visitors later (and product sales that are many multiples higher than original expectations) there's proof that content is king when it comes to opting in.

Brand managers also have to "work it out" with consumers and feel comfortable with the concept of collaboration. The new norm is about co-creation and the power of listening. Reuters and Yahoo are on the right track with their recent launch of You Witness News. Instead of debunking the credibility of citizen journalists, they've created a venue (and revenue stream) for its expression. Thankfully, while many brand owners fear giving voice to their critics, the vast majority of people want to express their support and loyalty for a brand that demonstrably cares what they think.

If Timothy Leary were alive today, who knows what his take would be? He may have gone the alternate reality route of Dennis Hopper reading the definition of "retirement" in a TV ad. Or, he may have said, "It's time to discover a new realm of consciousness."

Keith Hughes is North American Consumer Practice Director and an svp at MS&L, New York. He can be reached at (212) 468-3747 or keith.hughes@mslpr.com.