

THE BIG PICTURE:*The Network of Me*

by Scott Hornstein

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The tectonic plates of the marketplace are slowly and inexorably altering the landscape. Customers' sense of individuality, demand for privacy and technological empowerment are the driving forces, and they are unstoppable. It's time to build a house where the new coastline will be.

The poster child for this change is the mobile phone. I hold one and I feel the ground shaking... or is that the vibrate mode? No one, but no one, leaves home without it. For the 18 to 34 age group, the mobile device is becoming a remote control for their lives—a tool that links the physical and digital worlds, giving each of them the power to turn on or off their own private network of information. They have created “the network of me.”

The network of me is, by definition, idiosyncratic. Who do I want to connect with? To whom do I make myself available? Do I want to be entertained? Do I have commerce on my mind? To state the obvious, it's all about me. How do you get invited to be part of the network of me?

I've got two big ideas: Trust and respect.

1. Build trust. The customer is in complete control. The most powerful competitive differentiator is for your customers to trust that you will always treat them well. Not just adequately, mind you, but well. Customers expect to be treated poorly. I think they'll be pleased to tell us how they want to be treated. We've got to value the answers, because as we know, happier customers stay longer and buy more.

The above sounds very logical: Trust = a preference for our brand = long-term profitability. But the only way the development of trust can become a corporate strategy is if there is a corresponding system of measurement and reward. Until that time, we're whistling while the barn burns.

2. Respect customers' privacy. Let's pretend I am the customer: I want a sturdy fence around my privacy. I think opt-in is respectful and opt-out is disrespectful. If I give a company any personal information, I want them to use it for the purpose I intended. It's okay for them to use it to treat me better, but that's it. Many of the privacy policies I read are based on opt-out—that's where the company retains the right to do just about anything they want, unless I holler for them to stop.

There are powerful forces at work here, and that can become enormous opportunity. The choice is ours—we can adapt or die. The allegory is the music industry. Confronted with the network of me, they chose to fight. We might as well turn, draw our swords and march to do battle with the tide. ■

**HORNSTEIN ASSOCIATES**

Scott Hornstein is principal at Hornstein Associates, a direct marketing consultancy in Redding, Conn. Clients include Microsoft, HP, The Phoenician. He is the co-author of *Opt-In Marketing: Increase Sales Exponentially with Consensual Marketing* (McGraw-Hill). Contact: (203) 938-8715; scott@hornsteinassociates.com.