

Rules of the new conversation economy

 By [Chantel Botha](#)

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In mass media the conversation has mostly been one-sided, loud, condescending and sometimes even quite dictatorial. It's been a case of marketers and brands telling consumers what they need, why they need it and what would be a reasonable price to pay to satisfy the need. Sheer arrogance, but it has worked and consumers have listened and products have sold.



Create listening posts

So much of advertising spend is being used to "get the message out" and "create brand awareness", while I think marketers should channel that spend towards listening to consumers - and I don't mean surveying them to death with multiple-option questions! Set up proper listening posts. One of the most important listening posts is consumer complaints. We

shy away from complaints and often employ highly-qualified people with emotional intelligence to appease the complainant, but rarely do we close the loop by listening and fixing the problem at the root.

Social media offer other great listening posts and many corporates I work with still don't get it: you have to listen and understand before you join the conversation. What is great about social media is you can listen in on people talking about you, you can hear the good, the bad and the ugly. You can also learn a lot from consumers defending your brand in public and sometimes they are very clear about why they are behaving like they do. It's almost as if people on Twitter are intoxicated and have lost their inhibitions, since they share their brand sentiments freely and offer advice and recommendations about brands to strangers.

Listening is not hearing

Sometimes, when I am busy and my kids are talking, I will just nod and say "mmm" every now and again so I do not interrupt my train of thought. My four-year-old will then stop me and say, "Mommy, look me in the eyes when you are listening to me". In social media, consumers know when you are not listening to them, and I am not talking about blatantly ignoring them like some brands do. I am talking about the insincere lines your well-paid agency has written for you to fit some response into 140 characters.

I once tweeted about my bank on Twitter, saying I loved them too much to leave them, not expecting to get a reply. My bank, which I consider to be fairly conservative, tweeted back "We love you too". I know they did not really mean it, but it just felt as if they listened and did something I thought they were not capable of, and that is for the brand to be human.

Don't be a bore

When you as a brand finally think you have figured out the two-way conversation and have mastered listening and hearing, please don't be a bore and talk only about yourself and the things you find interesting. Think back to that blind date who talked only about himself, the things he did, liked and cared about, and dominated the conversation. Rather than talk, ask questions. I used to work in the publishing industry and what I learned was that boring articles don't sell ads. If you want an audience, you have to be interesting and entertaining and talk about what they want! Having worked in financial services for most of my career, I constantly have to remind my colleagues that consumers are not necessarily interested in this calculation or the specifications of product features or education on how to save for the future. They are much more interested in how your product can enhance their lifestyle - talk about their lifestyle, the things they love and care about!

Read the signs

If you talk to someone and he or she responds, it is a good sign. When consumers don't reply, or talk to each other about you, it means you are doing something wrong! Whatever you do, just don't talk more and louder - go back to step one, really listen, adapt your style of communication and revise the content.

Here are a couple of questions to guide you on your journey in the world of conversation buzz:

- What are your customers saying about you?
- How can you influence and be part of that conversation?
- What do your customers find interesting?
- If you had to sit face to face, what would an honest, sincere conversation sound like?

- How would you know you are doing it right?

With regard to this last question, I could not help but think about Benjamin Zander saying if you are doing it right you will see the shine in their eyes. What do shiny eyes look like in social media?

ABOUT CHANTEL BOTHA

I'm Chantel Botha, the author of "The Customer Journey Mapping Field Guide" and the founder of BrandLove.

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