BRANDING IN THE INBOUND AGE

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INTRODUCTION

If you're in the marketing business, you might have noticed things have changed in the last few years around the subject of branding. How you brand your clients' business is no longer just a matter of some clever, creative, and timely ad placements.

Let's take the first step of the inbound marketing methodology: getting found by potential customers. These days, a business is one of about 8 gajillion results on a search engine—and if it's not one of the ones on the first page, they're essentially doomed. A building's super sweet sign is just one of thousands of visual cues bombarding overstimulated passersby every day. And the promotional giveaway that once tickled entrants' fancies? Now it looks like nothing more than a spammy banner ad.

Making a brand stand out is, needless to say, no piece of cake. Successfully managing your client's brand in the inbound age is about more than just connecting all the phases on the marketing funnel and creating content that attracts and converts leads. It's about doing all of that—but with pizzazz! Oh, and that pizzazz has to be measurable, somehow. (Because if you input "Pizzazz" into a client's invoice, they might ask you for more details.)

That's ultimately the key: making "branding" into a quantifiable service that you can offer your clients and show them concrete results of. This ebook will show you how to do that in an inbound context and create effective, recognizable brands in the digital age.

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1 - CREATING A BRAND FOR YOUR CLIENTS

INBOUND BRANDING IS A DIFFERENT GAME

Branding in the inbound marketing age means branding on the Internet—and the Internet moves pretty fast. Brands can be built up in an instant, and destroyed just as quickly.

But "overnight success" isn't really a good goal for a brand to have—and it's an even worse one for an agency to offer. A successful brand should be built up over time. A slow, gradual buildup provides the opportunity to reach far more people than some flash in the pan fad, that's here today and gone tomorrow (though keep in mind, even a slowly built-up brand can still fall in an instant, if you're not careful).

The Internet is the great equalizer. It gives small companies the potential to have a big voice. But to accomplish that for your clients, you not only need to be good at getting them found, you need to give them a differentiator.

WHAT DOES A BRAND LOOK LIKE ONLINE?

Once a brand finds that differentiator, it becomes their calling card. It's how everyone recognizes them and the first thing everyone judges them by. So it needs to be consistent. No matter which channels your customers choose to interact with your brand—website, blog, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, or whatever tomorrow's technology may bring—they should all demonstrate the unique experience that your brand represents.

For example, Southwest Airlines built a large part of its brand experience around those signature packets of peanuts that they serve on flights, with amusing little slogans on them. It may seem trivial, but it's a large part of who they are and what they represent to their customer base. Part of their brand is their reputation for being a little "nuts," from flight attendants singing about how to buckle your seatbelt to a contest-winning photo of smooching manatees on the Southwest Facebook page (the airline is, after all, headquartered at Dallas' Love Field).

All of Southwest's branding, from their flights to their social media, is designed around that basic premise. When creating branding for your clients, you should strive for that same consistency. Visually, a brand should include the same elements across all channels, such as logo, color, fonts, etc. But design consistency is just the first step. The most important thing is to brand the experience that customers have with your client's brand online. It should transcend each channel and be instantly recognizable as their brand.

ACHIEVING BRAND CONSISTENCY

What should brand consistency include? Here are some of the basic elements that should remain the same for all your client's online content, whether it's their website, their blog, e-mail, social media, or some other platform, so that their audience can have the same experience no matter where they go.

Tone and Voice – What does your client's brand sound like? Are they irreverent? Silly? Professional? Academic? All of the above? This may actually fluctuate somewhat between channels. E-mails may be more formal, and social media may be more casual. That's fine. But there should still be a unifying factor: a blanket mission statement or mantra that all content adheres to.

Font – Font is very important to a brand. People recognize things far more by the way they're written than what they actually say. When people scroll past a meme on Facebook that's written in a specific font, they should know immediately that that post is from your client. Just make sure the font isn't Comic Sans.

Colors – Harvard's color is crimson. Gryffindor's colors are scarlet and gold. Seeing certain colors immediately calls to mind a particular brand, even if the brand name is nowhere near them. Therefore, a good color scheme for your client's brand can go a long way.

Design Elements – This is especially important online, as web design has become an essential part of branding. Do you design your clients' websites yourself, or do you outsource it? Either way, it's something you need to have a measure of control in. Will the site be part of Web 2.0—fluid and interactive? Will it be simple and understated, with good use of white space? Will there be a logo, banner, or image that goes across each page? Those design elements are an essential part of the brand services you offer.

Positioning – How should your client address controversial or otherwise difficult issues? They likely already hold certain viewpoints as part of their mission statement. It's up to you to determine how to incorporate those viewpoints into their branding.

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OFFERING BRANDING SERVICES

As we said earlier, somewhat jokingly, you can't include "Pizzazz" as an item on an invoice. But to a lot of clients, offering "Branding" as one of your services may seem almost as ridiculous. It's such a vague, generic term that, when you get down to it, can mean just about anything an agency chooses it to mean. How do you quantify branding services enough to fit them into an inbound marketing retainer?

The problem is, branding encompasses just about everything you do for your clients, to some degree. Even metrics and analytics are about understanding how a brand is performing, so that you can improve it. However, here are a few specific branding services that you can offer to clients, that are essential for the inbound age:

Website Design – The client's website is the face of their company. While it's true that every public mention or appearance of your client has an impact on their brand, their website is what they're specifically showing to people. If their brand is a house, the website is the front room, where company gathers. It's your job to make sure that room is clean and neat, visually appealing, and comfortable for them.

Content Creation – Content is what you use to show what your client is like, and what they're actually capable of. It can include things like blogs, videos, white papers, ebooks, case studies, and much more. Your client's content allows their customers to get to know them. It can offer advice on an issue, provide commentary on recent news events, give a step-by-step guide to solving a particular problem, or just tell an anecdote that their customers will find interesting. But however you choose to present your client's content, there are a few things it needs to do: it establishes your client's personality, provides value to the customer, and helps build up the customer's trust in the client's brand.

Social Media – One of the things that sets online marketing apart is the opportunity to create a two-way conversation with the customer. You can actually connect with them, respond to feedback, answer a question, help them resolve an issue, or just check in and let them know that your brand values what they have to say. This is what social media is for. It allows you to communicate directly with your audience and establish your client's brand in their minds, creating an impression that will define how they think of them in the future.

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VALUE PROPOSITIONS

“In space, no one can hear you scream.” No, this isn’t the start of a lesson on instantly identifiable branding, though it could be. Chances are, you immediately recognized that statement as the tagline to the 1979 movie Alien—even if you’ve never seen the movie. But our focus here is on the statement itself. The vacuum that is outer space silences everything.

> “To make your clients heard above the online cacophony, your agency needs to provide them with the strongest, clearest voice.”

In Cyberspace, on the other hand, the problem is just the opposite. Everyone is screaming. It’s almost impossible for anyone to make their voice heard. To make your clients heard above the online cacophony, your agency needs to provide them with the strongest, clearest voice.

At its core, that voice is your client’s value proposition: the thing that makes them unique and better qualified than the competition. Your client’s value proposition is the most important thing people will take with them in considering their brand. Therefore, it’s essential to get it right. It needs to be woven into their website, social media, paid campaigns, and of course, the value add that every business provides their customers and clients.

WHAT IS A VALUE PROPOSITION?

What You Do – Define, in very clear terms, what your client's business does. For example, if you were doing this for your own agency, you might say, "Our agency develops marketing campaigns to improve SEO, generate leads, increase brand awareness, and drive traffic to your business."

How You Do It – Describe exactly how you do what you do. Carrying on the example of your own agency, you might say, "Our agency uses deep industry knowledge and cutting edge methodologies such as blogging, e-mail, and social media marketing, combined with state of the art analytics to ensure your business is search engine optimized and gets you found online."

For Whom You Do It – This is just as important for you as for your clients. Many agencies will represent any client, regardless of what field they're in. But your agency will be much more effective if you practice verticalization: establish a niche, and become an expert in it. Your clients want to know that you understand their specific business and its challenges.

For example, maybe your niche is retail. You've handled dozens of retail clients and helped them build up great brands and increase sales. So when a small retail website comes along and wants to hire your agency, you know exactly where to start. When they tell you about their business and the challenges they face, you know what they need and how to help them. You know what their ultimate goals are, and how they can be achieved.

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But then another client comes along: this one a travel website. On the surface, it seems similar. You're promoting a product and trying to get customers to make an online purchase. So you take them on—and it's a disaster. The way they do business is completely different. You try to get into the technical ins and outs of their company, but you don't really understand what it is they're dealing with. Or, worse yet, you think you do, but it's actually a very different situation. You try to approach them the same way you do with your retail clients, and end up failing.

Every industry is different. Your clients want to know that you understand theirs. Rather than being a jack of all trades and master of none, it's better to find one industry to specialize in, and become as much an expert in it as your clients are. The better you know your niche, the better you'll be able to promote your clients within it.

> "Rather than being a jack of all trades and master of none, it's better to find one industry to specialize in, and become as much an expert in it as your clients are. "

It's also important to apply this concept to your clients. They're more likely to find success by focusing on just one thing and doing it better than anyone else. Specialization is what the Internet is all about. It's not a coincidence that businesses are reaping huge benefits from long-tail keyword optimization. So it's critical that, for any company trying to be found on the Internet, their specialty stands out.

What Makes You Different – A couple of hamburger patties and a slice of cheese on a bun are just that—until you add "special sauce." Then suddenly it's a Big Mac: the biggest, best-selling juggernaut in fast food history. So what's your client's special sauce? In a world of Whoppers, what makes them a Big Mac? Identifying the "special sauce factor" for each of your clients is the key to building their brand.

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HOW TO DETERMINE YOUR CLIENTS' VALUE PROPOSITION

So HOW do you identify that "special sauce factor"? How do you figure out what to focus on when promoting your clients? Here are a few things you need to do:

- Have a deep understanding of who your client's customers are.
- Understand the customer's needs and goals.
- Position their brand as the one best qualified to meet the needs of its target market.

Let's go through a little exercise to determine a value proposition. We'll use your own agency as an example again—since if you can't determine your own value proposition, how can you expect to determine your client's?

WHO IS YOUR CUSTOMER?

This brings us back to verticalization. Prospective clients want to know that the agency they hire understands their business. A building contractor, for example, wants to know that the agency he selects understands the process and subtleties that their customers go through when selecting a builder. You need to know that there will be a bidding process, and that homeowners are anxious about the enormous expense, disruption, and time commitment that a building project requires. Be prepared to speak a contractor's language to gain their trust—and their business.

WHAT DOES YOUR CUSTOMER WANT?

Every prospective client wants you to do one thing for them: improve their bottom line. But how will you do that? You need to show them using the metrics that they are most likely to care about when it comes to inbound marketing:

- Increased traffic to their website.
- More high quality leads from that traffic.
- Increased conversion of those leads.
- Overall improvement over time of your marketing endeavors, through evaluation and analytics.

If the niche you specialize in has other metrics that they're looking to move, it's important to be aware of what they are and how to move them. This is just one more way to show your prospects that you speak their language.

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WHY IS YOUR BUSINESS BEST FOR THE JOB?

Little else matters if you can't convince your clients that your agency will outperform the competition. Anyone can say that they're the best. Instead, use case studies to show them. By demonstrating a successful track record for your own agency, and the successes of your existing clients, you will have irrefutable evidence that you can get the job done.

Show clients how you've improved results in the SERPs, increased your clients' conversion rates, or how their engagement has increased on social media.

Now that we've answered all of these questions for your agency, it's time to answer them for your clients. Who are they trying to target? What is their target market looking for, and how does your client provide it? And what makes what they do superior to what the competition does? Once you've determined that, you have your client's value proposition, and you're ready to start crafting a brand that targets their ideal customers.

CREATING A BUYER PERSONA

We've covered determining who the client's customer is in a general way: what industry they're in and what kind of product or service they're looking for. But to target them effectively, you need to know who they are as people. What kind of person is your client's ideal target customer? To determine that, you need a buyer persona.

A buyer persona is like a character profile of the customer: who they are, what they want, and what their life is like. It expands on the generic "what they want to buy" info and puts a name and a face to it (buyer personas tend to have clever, alliterative names like "Marketing Mandy" or "CEO Cy"). All blogs, white papers, and other inbound content should be written as if addressing this buyer persona. This makes it easier to target and connect with customers on a more personal, individual level, without having to tailor a different approach for every single customer. A buyer persona should include…

Demographics – By understanding some of the key demographics for your client's target market—e.g. gender, marital status, age range, or income level—you begin to get a sense of who their customers might be, and narrow down their range of interests.

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Job Level/Seniority – This is particularly important for B2B clients. Even though they're selling to a business, they're still dealing with a person within that business. Who are they in the company? What are their responsibilities? What authority do they have in the decision-making process with regards to making this purchase? The CEO of a small business thinks and acts differently than the marketing manager at a mid-sized enterprise. Of course, identifying the customer's job is important for B2C companies as well. A homemaker is looking for something different than a young whippersnapper salesperson straight out of college. Which leads us to our next piece of critical intelligence…

Typical Day – If you can piece together a customer's routine on a typical day, you'll understand many of the things that occupy their time, and what is and isn't important to them. This is one of the most critical items to "nail" in a client's branding strategy, because it gives you insight into what their customers actually care about. If you can align your client's value proposition with what their customers care about and figure out how to communicate that value proposition to the customer, then you're a branding rock star.

Pain Points – What keeps the buyer up at night? What problems do they need the most help solving? If you can get a handle on that, then you'll be even better prepared to position your client as the brand that will help them solve those problems, so that they can rest easy day and night.

Information Sources – How is the buyer researching their problem? Where do they get their news? What do they read? Do they consume blogs? White papers? Infographics? What social media do they use, and how do they use it? Once you know where the buyer is going for information, you can put your client's information there for them to find.

Objections – No need to sugarcoat things. There are always objections. You know that your client is the best company for the job, and your client knows it, but the customer isn't convinced yet. Why not? Forewarned is forearmed. Figure out the reasons why the buyer is still hesitant to make a purchase, and why they might opt not to make the purchase from your client. Arm your clients with answers to these objections that will alleviate their prospects' concerns—communicated in a fashion that will appeal to the specific persona you've created. That includes the right phrasing and format of delivery.

2 - PUTTING THE BRAND INTO PLAY

WHAT TO DO WITH BUYER PERSONAS

Once you've identified your client's buyer personas, use them to position their company, website, and social media presence to:

- Develop highly targeted content that appeals to buyers' needs, goals, and interests.
- Place content in the channels where prospective buyers will most likely see them.
- Attract better, more qualified leads that maximize ROI.
- Provide customer insight across business teams so that everyone understands the lead's needs, goals, and interests.
- Improve your analytics by correlating buyer personas to actual leads, conversions, and sales.
- Design products and services that are better-suited to the target persona.

SEGMENTING AND PERSONALIZING A BRAND EXPERIENCE

Online, a brand has the ability—nay, the obligation—to know enough about their customer's history that they can automatically create segmented, personalized experiences for them. If, for example, a customer bought three fly fishing rods from a sporting goods website, that should determine from then on out which content you provide, which pages and products you show them, and which special offers you e-mail them.

This is why it's so important, when creating an inbound marketing campaign, to make sure that your client's site provides 1.) lots of content, and 2.) targeted content. Providing content on a wide variety of different niche topics that apply to your client's industry gives you greater opportunity to figure out what their potential customers are interested in, based on the content that they express interest in.

Continuing with our sporting goods website example, say that, rather than buying fly fishing rods, the customer downloads a video that demonstrates the best casting techniques. You can then send them another video on the best baits to use, or the types of fish they might expect to catch. Whereas if they downloaded a video on baseball equipment, you might send them one profiling famous baseball players. The more content you provide, the easier it is to establish the customer's interest and nurture that interest.

And as a result, their engagement will increase! As you target customers more effectively, they'll take more actions, share more readily with their social networks, and engage with the client's brand in a more cohesive experience.

BRAND = CONTENT & CONTENT = BRAND

In every way, a company's content is their brand online. It's their salesperson, their store, and their marketing department. It's their story. Every piece of content you publish online defines your brand.

So, great content, great brand. Boring content, boring brand.

And it's more than just what's great and what's boring. Often, what you choose not to publish says more about your brand than some really snappy copy. When developing a client's content strategy, ask yourself:

- Is this topic interesting to the brand's target persona?
- Does this piece of content address their pain points?
- Is this the format in which they like to consume their content?
- Is this tone appropriate for the subject matter and reader of this content?
- Does this content have a purpose? Or is it just wasted space?

You should be answering "Yes" to all of those questions (except that whole "wasted space" part) before you publish any piece of content on behalf of your client. Otherwise, you're just diluting their brand with content that's unnecessary. That's right, even if a piece of content isn't directly harmful to their brand from a PR perspective, it can still be harmful from a brand dilution perspective.

So ask these questions about every single piece of content you develop: white papers, social media updates, webinars, podcasts, blog posts, ebooks, FAQs, videos, social media photos—even that silly cat meme you're posting to your client's Facebook page. Everything you release under a particular brand contributes to the audience's overall view of that brand, and will affect it either positively or negatively. Therefore, every single piece of content needs to be vetted in this way before it goes live.

SOCIAL PRESENCE

A social presence for your client's brand is essential in the inbound age. But not every social channel is right for every brand. Different target demographics frequent different social sites, and use them for different things. Since maintaining an effective presence on every single social platform simultaneously is impossible, it's important to determine which ones will best help you reach your client's target persona, and focus your efforts on building up their brand and presence on those specific channels. You're no doubt familiar with the most prominent social media sites, but here's a basic rundown on how best to use them in targeting customers.

Facebook – The King Kong of social media, with 1 billion users and counting, establishing a Facebook page for your clients will help them develop and foster a sense of community between them and their customers. It's best used for visual content, as well as links. Practically speaking, no brand, no matter what their business, can afford to be without a Facebook page.

> "Great tweets for a brand are things that are humorous, celebrate your clients or customers, or offer tips that will help them with their pain points. "

Twitter – Twitter keeps users connected in real time, with short bursts of information, in 140 characters or less. This bite-sized format gives Twitter a more casual tone, so it's important to communicate in more of a social way, even if that's not usually how your brand operates. Great tweets for a brand are things that are humorous, celebrate your clients or customers, or offer tips that will help them with their pain points. Hashtags are also useful for branding. Creating a hashtag specific to your brand, or an event or product associated with it, allows you to group all of the conversation about it together on a single, easy-to-find page, and helps you spread the word about your brand by tagging certain tweets with it, and encouraging your followers to do the same.

Instagram – You might not think of this image hosting site as an effective branding tool, but it can be. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and some well-placed visual content can work wonders. Particularly since the introduction of Instagram Video, which allows you to post video clips up to 15 seconds, Instagram fosters branding creativity, and can be useful in grabbing users' attention, connecting with them, and even encouraging them to post content of their own related to your brand. And, like Twitter, it also uses hashtags to identify and group together content on a particular topic.

LinkedIn – For any B2B business, LinkedIn is important, not just as a tool to forge connections, but also as a lead generator, and—most important for brand managers—a place to assert your company's thought leadership position. Showcase, through sharing content and participating in relevant discussions, what your brand has to offer about the topics that are important to your target audience. The bonds you form here between your brand and LinkedIn members will pay dividends down the road.

YouTube – Is YouTube a social media site, or a content platform? It's both. This Google-owned video sharing service is a valuable place to share content that is best demonstrated visually. Use YouTube for everything from broadcasting one-on-one interviews or roundtable discussions, to product demonstrations, to behind-the-scenes glimpses into your client's company and its inner workings, to short films, to entertaining newsjacks of pop culture events that will help elevate a client's brand.

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VOICE

The voice or tone that a company applies across all their content—or indeed, their entire brand—is the equivalent of their brand's personality. The voice you establish for your client is an integral part of their website, blog, social media presence, e-mail campaigns, and everything else. It's baked into everything that's done in the name of their brand.

Things like striking the right balance between casual and serious, helpful and intrusive, or educational or haranguing, will determine whether people find a brand appealing or abrasive. So how will you know when you've struck the right balance? Start with the buyer persona, and mix their expectations with your client's "special sauce." Then adjust over time based on feedback and results, just like any recipe from your kitchen.

> "Things like striking the right balance between casual and serious, helpful and intrusive, or educational or haranguing, will determine whether people find a brand appealing or abrasive. "

The voice in your content should reflect how you want your client's brand to be perceived. If their brand's voice is similar to Groupon, for example, the blog might take on a light, snappy tone. If it's more socially conscientious, like Starbucks, then the voice might be a bit more serious.

Your voice and its cadence may also vary slightly from one medium to another. We already covered how Twitter calls for a more casual tone, even if you're more formal on other platforms. For a more comprehensive example, let's look at Progressive Insurance. In their television commercials and homepage, both of which tend to interface with customers at or near the top of the funnel, Progressive's tone is light and playful. Their spokescharacter, Flo, is hyper, bright, and cheery.

On Progressive's blog, however, the tone—while not heavy—is much more serious. Here, the company is getting into the nuts and bolts of shopping for insurance, offering safety tips for boating or bad weather, and the humor is scaled back in this channel geared towards the middle or bottom of the funnel.

Finally, on Progressive's Facebook page, the insurance carrier is a little bit of both serious and playful, the way any community might be. On Christmas Eve, Progressive ran a poll: "Christmas candy or Christmas cookies?" Just before New Year's Eve, the page offered a gentle reminder about the increase in auto accidents caused by drinking and driving.

The voice of your client's brand should naturally adjust to suit the medium in which the content is being published, as well as to the people you are attracting to those particular media.

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SITE STRUCTURE AND APPEARANCE

A grocer will place food staples such as milk and produce at the back of the store, so that customers will have to pass by and view a myriad of other items before they get to what they need. High profit impulse items such as candy and snacks, however, are placed in the checkout line for easy access while you wait. Likewise, your client's website is their store, and their content is the inventory. It needs to be structured for maximum impact.

Getting the right structure and appearance for a brand's content—from Call To Action (CTA) buttons to ebooks—plays a significant role in determining that brand's success. For instance, at Hubspot, we actually style our ebooks differently depending on who is receiving them. Certain personas prefer text-heavy content, while others prefer images and visuals, and still others like shorter content, that doesn't exceed 5 pages. These are the same considerations you should have when structuring a website around a brand. Keep these tips in mind when structuring websites and digital content to support a brand strategy:

- Do your research. Perform A/B testing to see how prospects will actually use the site and content, and structure them that way. The content and the links between them should flow organically from Point A to Point B to Point C.

- Prominent placement on webpages of content explaining higher margin products and services will result in more leads for those products and services.

- Placing a CTA button middle-of-the-funnel for premium content alongside content for higher margin services will increase qualified leads and move them one step further along the sales cycle.

- Be certain that the value proposition is clear on every page, and in all the content offered for download.

- Look in the bottom left-hand corner of this page. Notice where it says "Share This Ebook!" with buttons beneath it to share it on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Including links like that on all of a client's blog posts, videos, etc. and within premium content (such as this ebook) helps you to spread the word about your client's brand and content, so that you can reach other, like-minded people who would also enjoy their brand.

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3 - MONITORING THE BRAND

THE WEB IS THE WORLD

People are talking about your client's brand beyond the pages for which you alone develop content. They're blogging about your client. They're mentioning their experience with your client on their own Facebook pages. They're discussing your client's brand in groups on LinkedIn and posting videos about it to YouTube. In short, there's a whole lot of conversation going on about your client's brand, that you have no control over.

Some of this conversation may be good, and some of it may be bad. Some of it may even be outright lies. But for better or for worse, it will live in cyberspace forever. What you can do, however, is to monitor the conversation. Obviously, you can't catch every comment out there, but you can keep an eye on the larger and more obvious channels.

Create Google Alerts for your client's brand and words associated with it. Search Twitter for certain keywords pertaining to the brand, to see what people are saying. We'll talk more about what kinds of terms to search for later on. But there are all sorts of tools you can use to keep track of what people are saying about a particular brand online. Then, you can implement damage control when needed, or extend the reach of people's positive experience into your own channels.

SOCIAL TRACKING

Watch any detective show on TV, and you know that the easiest part of solving the crime is what's most evident when the detective arrives: the victim was shot, the safe was broken into, the money was missing. Think of that as the last-touch (AKA last-click) attribution. What we then want to know is, how did he get there? What was the "first-touch" attribution? To monitor a brand effectively in the inbound age, you need the first-touch attribution, the last-touch attribution, and everything in between. In other words, you need closed-loop analytics.

It's helpful to know that a particular customer closed after converting on an e-mail offer. But where did the customer come from originally? Your blog? How did they find it? Social media? What network? Which content did they read? How long did it take them to convert? What other content did they download while they were a lead?

For all of this, you'll need multi-channel, closed-loop analytics, with in-depth reports—like Hubspot's Conversion Assists, for instance—to give you the full view of what efforts are supporting your branding initiatives and, most importantly, that your branding initiatives are driving real business results.

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BRAND MONITORING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

You might think monitoring every mention of your client's brand online is a Herculean task. And you would be right. As we mentioned already, it's literally impossible to cover everything being said about a brand. However, we also mentioned that there are tools to help you. Google has super-Herculean servers and web crawlers, which make keeping tabs on your client's brand online much simpler, with tools like Google Alerts or even Hubspot's social monitoring software.

Input terms you need to track that are important for brand management. These are the terms that encompass:

- Company name
- Names of key executives, public-facing employees, or other prominent people connected with your client's company
- Branded names of products, services, or features

Voila! You now have a good handle on how, when, and where your brand is mentioned online!

BONUS TIP: You can set up Alerts to monitor competitors' mentions, too. Enter their brand name, product names, and key executives. Who knows, you might even be able to exploit any knowledge you accrue this way before they do!

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RESPONDING WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

In social media, as in life (and movies), there are three ways a brand can be mentioned: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Be prepared for all three. Decide ahead of time which types of incidents constitute a crisis for your client, and which are just bumps in the road. Then, develop a response plan and assign teams to handle each outcome. Which types of crises will your agency handle, and which can your client handle themselves? For instance, a technical glitch would probably go to their IT department, whereas an unsatisfied customer might go to customer service.

Being prepared for these instances is critical for maintaining the good brand you've built up for your clients. But the key is timeliness. Any crisis or PR disaster can be smoothed over, but the longer you wait to respond, the longer the negative press has a chance to spread, with nothing to quench the flames. They say there's no such thing as bad publicity, but some events and situations can seriously, even permanently damage your client's reputation (and yours, as the one in charge of their brand) if not dealt with properly.

So, prepare a "holding statement" ahead of time for any major event. This is a brief statement that you can post online or on social media that explains that you're aware of the situation (whatever it may be), and you will respond in greater detail as soon as possible. Fill in the statement with a few specifics of the situation in question, and include a time estimate of when further information might be coming, so it doesn't sound like you're just giving people a recorded message. Then, direct people to other channels where those announcements will be made. Twitter is particularly suited to real-time updates like this.

Think about how the target persona would want to be treated, and how they'd want to be talked to in these circumstances. For instance, some audiences may find that a light-hearted, slightly self-deprecating tone endearing. For others, it will come off as dismissive. Knowing the audience and what they expect from your client's brand will help you respond appropriately.

Don't Forget: It's better to be right than fast. Time is of the essence, but not at the expense of accuracy. That's what the holding statement is for—to buy you the time to get things right and respond in the best possible way, without making it seem like you're ignoring what's going on.

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RESPONDING TO THE GOOD

The web is as neutral a territory as you're likely to find. It presents as many opportunities for good publicity as it does for, well, less-good publicity.

Use social media monitoring to take life's lemons and make some cool, refreshing lemonade. They don't even have to be your lemons. Look for opportunities to turn someone else's loss into your client's gain (tactfully, of course), and shine the spotlight on your marketing savvy.

For instance, if your client is a taxi company, and mass transit just went down, post from your client's Twitter account that cab rides are half off. Then use your agency to promote the heck out of their generosity to every media outlet you can think of. Hey, it's a PSA! News networks would eat it right up!

If your client is a spa, and your town is hosting a marathon, have them set up a chair massage station for the runners and crew members, and give free 5-minute massages along the route. Get lots of photos and videos of smiling, blissful faces (preferably that include the brand in there somewhere) and post them on social media—and for any other outlets who might want to pick up the story.

4 - MEASURING THE BRAND

CLOSING THE LOOP — THE ROI OF BRANDING IN THE INBOUND AGE

If someone Likes your client's Facebook page, how much revenue does it translate into? If someone retweets their brand's tweet, does that make the cash register ring? When someone visits their website, reads their blog, and downloads their ebook, do you know if they ultimately bought what your client is selling?

Without closed-loop marketing metrics, you cannot know the answers to any of these questions. They are isolated incidents which may be related, or they may not. Closed-loop marketing lets you see what happened from the first click at the top of the funnel to the Buy Now click at the bottom of the funnel, and everything in between. It tells you how your inbound branding and marketing efforts are paying off!

If you've ever asked yourself (or, worse yet, if your executives or clients have asked you), "What's the return on investment for these branding efforts?" and you were unsure of the answer, or said something like, "To increase awareness," then you're not alone.

But awareness is not enough. You may be aware of the Rolls Royce brand, but chances are you haven't bought one. So how valuable is that brand awareness to Rolls Royce or its marketers? Zero. Zip. Nada. Awareness, unless followed at some point by consideration, intention, and purchase (the typical sales funnel model), is worthless.

Unless you can correlate the awareness you create to purchases people make, you will never understand the ROI of your branding initiatives. And if you don't understand the ROI of your own branding initiatives, you'll never be able to demonstrate their value to clients and potential clients.

NOTE: This is not to say that every Like needs to translate into a sale in order to matter. A large social reach means larger social amplification, which gets your content out there to the people who will eventually contribute to your bottom line. Additionally, maintaining an e-mail list of evangelists—people who love your client's brand, will forward your content, but will never buy it—is similarly valuable.

Faced with the same challenges most marketers face, we developed our own tool to help marketers gauge thevalue of those seemingly fluffy social media actions, that don't directly result in leads and customers. Visit Valueofalike.com to assess what your social media presence is worth and put actual dollar amounts to fluffy social sentiments like "awareness" and "engagement," that we all know matter for branding, but which might not always make its presence known in a business's bottom line.

ATTRIBUTION

Understanding last-touch attributions is especially useful in optimizing landing pages, fine-tuning e-mail campaigns, or any other content source that helped put the ball over the goal line to convert a prospect into a customer. It's great bottom-of-the-funnel information.

In contrast, understanding first-touch attributions is extremely useful in improving your top-of-the-funnel marketing efforts. Knowing whether a lead came to your client's website as the result of an organic search (and for what term) or because they were tipped off to one of your Facebook posts by a colleague will help you concentrate your marketing and its messaging where it will resonate best.

Finally, Hubspot's Conversion Assists tool is excellent for measuring the overall impact of branding campaigns, letting you analyze:

- How the lead first found your client
- What the critical touch points were that led to conversions
- Which marketing campaigns generated the most sales
- What actions generated the highest quality leads

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WHAT TO MEASURE AND ANALYZE

Here are some specific metrics you can use to measure individual aspects of your branding efforts.

• Determine which keywords, short and/or long-tail, result in the most click throughs to your client's landing pages. If you're running paid campaigns, these are excellent venues to experiment with new brand elements, such as a new tagline, or a new value proposition, to see if it resonates and drives revenue.

• See which blog content drives the most comments, social shares, and inbound links. While leads are great, the content that is commented on and shared the most is often an indicator of success.

• Find out which e-mail content drives the most forwards and reconversions, and to what segment of your list that content goes, so you can better align future e-mail campaigns with other content that elevates your brand.

• Learn which landing pages result in the highest purchase volumes, and most lucrative average sales per customer.

• Determine the correlation between the number of Likes you generate for your client's Facebook page during a given campaign and their sales results for the same time period—or subsequent months, in the case of businesses with long sales cycles.

• Find the type of social media content which results in the most engagement, and track whether that engagement ever leads to revenue-driving behavior in the future, and at what rate.

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CONCLUSION

Everything you know about brands and brand management in the real world holds true in the inbound age. What's different is that now your brand extends far beyond the world over which agencies have traditionally had control. Before, when a customer had a complaint about your brand, only you, they, and perhaps a small circle of their friends and family knew about it. Now, anybody with an Internet connection knows how to find—or memorialize—that complaint forever.

In the inbound age, there are so many moving pieces to managing a brand, from the website to the call center to the Facebook page, to the LinkedIn group, to whatever that brings. As a result, you need to be more active, more vigilant, and more knowledgeable than ever to realize and prove maximum return on the investment of establishing a knockout brand.

Closed-loop marketing software, mixed with excellent branding created to drive the results you want, is the magic combination to show off your agency's branding chops to clients.

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