

Will Technology Create a “Humanless Society”? Or the Opposite?

By Mark Niehaus

Remember the dot-com boom when everyone talked about how the Internet and technology would create a paperless society? A funny thing happened along the way. A *ton* of paper now sits on our desks. Yes, that’s right, we actually consume nearly twice as much paper as we did before the advent of computers.

But we’re talking here about a humanless society, not a paperless one. The \$10 million question of the moment is, “Will technology reduce the need for human interaction or will it create even more of a need for it?”

And regardless of the outcome, what does it mean for marketers?

Human-free

Let’s take the first scenario: *no human interaction*.

While most people are still scurrying around trying to find a business model for the likes of Twitter, I see a frightening trend taking shape. People are Twittering live events such as religious services, sporting events and conferences. So even if you don’t attend, you can still get the benefit of the 10 or 20 most valuable nuggets that made the whole event worth attending. And you get your day or week back (plus thousands of dollars in the case of the Twittered conference).

This has broad-reaching implications for us marketers and event planners.

What if people stopped showing up for sporting events because of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and, to a lesser extent, ESPN Sports packages through home entertainment providers? Why would I pay \$1,000 for a weekend trek back to my alma mater just to see the game that I could keep track of via Twitter and watch the highlights on YouTube?

If people expect to get the value of big events by lurking on social media and not paying for the content, events could go the way of newspapers and become a surefire way to lose money.

Human-need

OK, now for the reverse scenario: *desperate for human interaction*.

It’s obvious that humans are social creatures. Put 50 people on a football field and they don’t spread out evenly, they clump together and start trying to figure out how they

suddenly appeared on a football field. People have a strong desire to interact with others face to face.

The same technologies that could drive us to the point where we don't have to interact at all could actually drive us to do the opposite. They could spark a pent-up demand for human interaction.

Sure, in small doses it can be nice to hide behind the monitor, but at some point enough is enough, and the desire to look somebody in the eye kicks in. Social media just won't do it anymore.

Which way to market?

So what does this mean for marketers trying to get a message into a customer's head?

I think it means we'll end up having to accommodate more of both ends of the spectrum. Just as we make more paper printouts as we've gone paperless, I predict we'll see more personal interaction as we engage in more social media.

When email arrived, for instance, it didn't cut out telephone calls. People started doing more of both. When movies became available on VHS, people didn't stop going to theaters. The box office is still booming. Even when one disruptive technology takes over, it can take many years to dominate (the automobile, the cell phone, the digital camera).

It's our job as marketers to stay on the ball, try new channels as they gain currency, use new messages to stay relevant, and constantly measure so we'll know what works and what doesn't. It's also our job to realize that not all of our targets are on the same part of the continuum between extremes. Regardless of where you want them to be, individually they will be their own person.

Our challenge is to keep using all the media in our marketing tool belt. And that means balance. If our clients want to shift their entire budget to interactive, we've got to point out that they're likely missing a big chunk of their audience. Just as the world won't go to the extremes of *human-free* versus *human-need*, neither should our marketing budgets.

How to survive as marketers

We can all learn a final lesson by thinking about ... potato chips.

If the trend does in fact turn us into drones that abhor human contact, then there'll be a huge market for easy-to-use nutritional devices that provide fuel for those exhausted thumbs and fingers.



But if the opposite happens, then the potato chip will become the glue that holds any party together when your long-lost friends come out of hibernation with their inevitable munchies.

Either way, it's the same chip marketed to the same people, just through different channels and using vastly different messaging.

Now that we know we can adapt to any extreme (and even a balanced middle), stop sitting in front of your computer with all those piles of paper on your desk. Go out there and see a human (be sure to tweet them first). You can even grab a bag of potato chips on your way out.

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