HOW WILL DIGITAL PLATFORMS BE HARNESSED IN 2010, AND HOW WILL THEY CHANGE THE WAY PEOPLE INTERACT WITH BRANDS?

Ken Martin and Ivan Todorov

Abstract: A range of new marketing mediums can be leveraged to keep people tuned in and seamlessly integrate brands into their everyday lives. Accordingly, digital platform adoption by brands will continue to grow along with the diverse set of consumer actions unlocked by the introduction of the platforms themselves. In the coming year, savvy chief marketing officers (CMOs) will use digital platforms in new ways to make their brands integral and integrated parts of customers' everyday lives. As digital adoptions continue to skyrocket with the introduction of new platforms, marketers can no longer view these methods as standalone touchpoints but instead must recognize them as seamless engagement opportunities that can keep customers connected to a brand story throughout the day. To be successful in every digital initiative and strengthen the brand-consumer relationship, CMOs should select digital platforms that deliver high engagement value, connect brands with consumers' social networks, and provide value and relevance in the context of each consumer's location and activity.

Keywords: brand, customer-brand relationship, integrated digital platform, touchpoints.

A Day in the Life: Digital Touchpoint Opportunities

In every second of every minute of every day, brands attempt to engage customers and influence purchasing decisions in infinite ways. During the pioneering days of radio and billboards, advertisers employed these new media to reach consumers on the go. The latest digital media instead provide advertisers with custom platforms and interaction models that acknowledge where consumers are and what they are doing at every moment, and then attempt to enhance each and every one of those moments.

The "Day in the Life Continuum" (Figure 1) illustrates the breadth of the touchpoints where brands may interact with consumers, according to the required time, activity, location, and platform. From televisions to game consoles and personal computers to in-store kiosks, mobile devices, and netbooks, a range of new marketing media can be leveraged to keep people tuned in by seamlessly integrating brands into their everyday lives.

The first generation of interactivity focused on developing something that would "live" on a single platform: an interactive Web site, an iPhone application, or a kiosk-like attraction. These individual deployments were designed to fill the vertical gaps where consumers could not previously have been reached. But these novelty engagements inherently face the problem of attention span. Either people lose interest because they already have experienced this type of marketing or the engagement takes too long to attain the perceived value. With the cultural saturation of delivery vehicles and information channels, consumers have become mildly desensitized to the introduction of new products, and entertainment and novelty can only take a message so far, because not all platforms are created equal.

Brands need to make themselves immediately relevant to what consumers do, not just what they like. The next generation of interactivity therefore will not just fill in gaps but create synergy across touchpoints by connecting activities that prolong the experience across the multiple places where the consumer can engage with the brand.

It is imperative that every execution extends beyond a single touchpoint along the continuum, or else the consumer will find other brands to fulfill his or her needs. This consumer cadence must be followed to determine where and how he or she will interact with a brand. When planning an integrated digital deployment strategy, marketers therefore should be sensitive to the rich media capabilities, interaction models (e.g., mouse, handset device, touch, gesture), and ability to link multiple platforms through application program interfaces (APIs) and Web services.

Connecting platforms and touchpoints also is critical for enabling the continuation of the brand story throughout consumers' daily routine. In doing so, marketers can provide more value and relevance in relation to consumers' existing locations and activities. Thus, the most well-adopted digital platforms have shifted, from being disruptive to providing a utility, whether by introducing a new behavior or meeting a perceived "need."
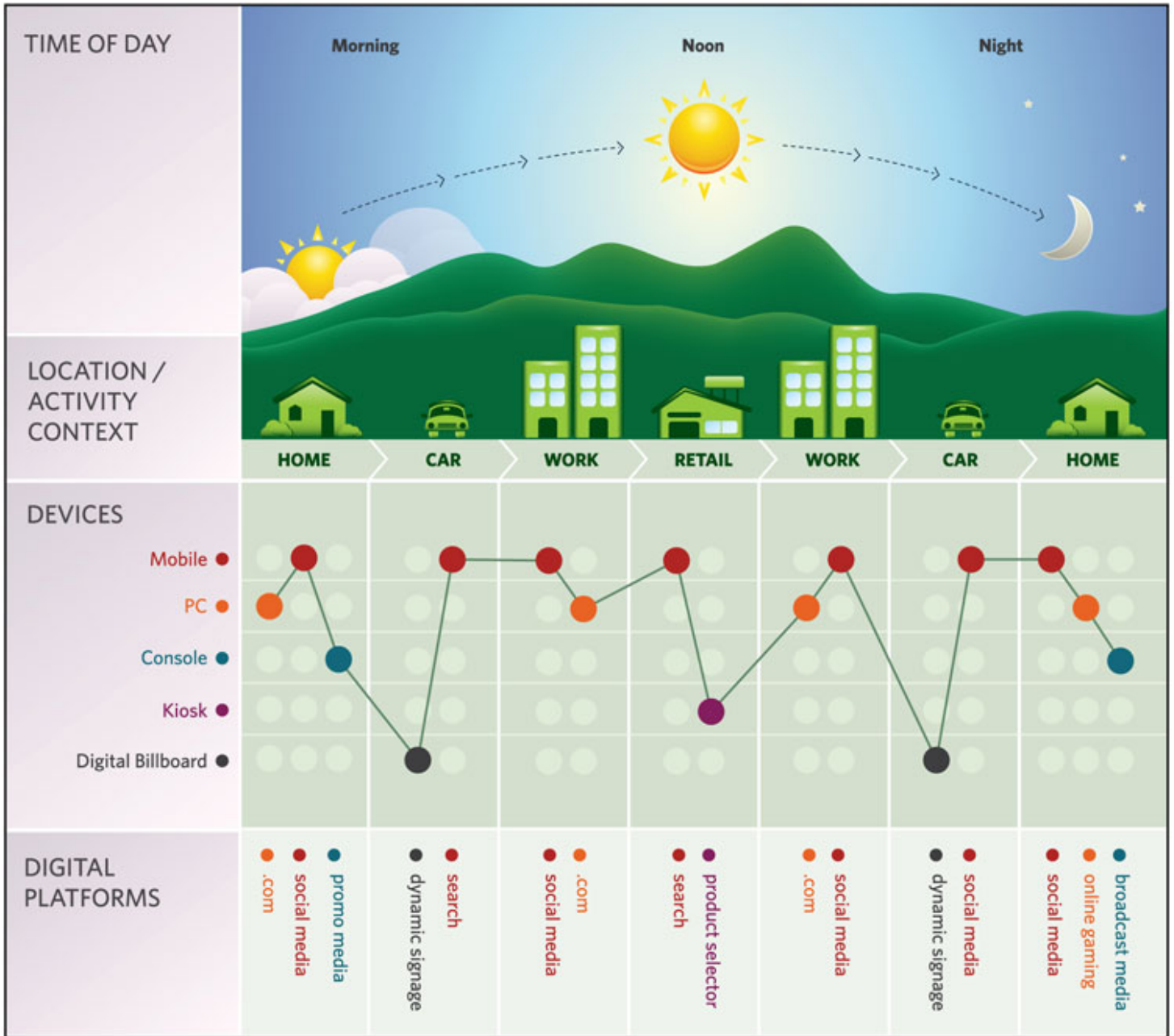
Create Your Share-of-Mind Scorecard

The idea framework should fundamentally change, from "how do we reach our customers?" to "how do we make their lives better?" Interactive agencies and project owners must dive deep into their audience psychographics to develop a lifestyle story that supports platform decisions and ensures they integrate with consumers' digital lives. The idea framework also should be strong enough to persist effectively across a multichannel, integrated environment.

How Frequently Does the Brand Communicate with the Consumer?

In any communication channel, brands must strike a delicate balance with regard to the frequency of communication. Push too little information, and consumers are likely to lose interest. Push too much information, and there is the risk of incurring customer perceptions of spam. The communication also has to happen both ways. The engagements need to give consumers a

voice, both with one another and with the brand directly, to create a digital dialogue.

Is the Brand Adapting to Changes in Consumer Behavior?

Brands must be nimble when using digital platforms. Whether modifying the language or the feel of a campaign to adapt to seasonal changes or adjusting to behavioral trends exhibited by their customer base, brands must ensure that their digital content does not become stale. Moreover, as new platforms emerge or new behaviors are unlocked, brands should address these changes through continual strategic reviews to remain continually relevant to the consumer.

What Are the Qualities of the Selected Touchpoints?

Platforms cannot be chosen simply to fill in an interactivity gap in the Day in the Life Continuum. The engagement has to provoke the consumer to start using it in the moment, while also garnering perceived, real value for their routine. Enticing consumers to try the brand offering stems from the best methods to gain their attention. For example, a slot machine could be sitting on a street corner, without any artwork, blinking lights, or fancy sounds, and it might get one person to take a second look. But add the sensory experience, and it becomes a completely different platform for attracting people.

Utility Versus Relevance: Going Beyond the Desktop, Laptop, Mobile ... and Making It Resonate

Utility in the moment-that is, the utility that fills in the gap on the consumers' continuum-provides only a limited engagement, unlike utility that provides deep integration and interaction. Marketers have quickly moved from an age when access to information was a nice added feature to an era in which it is an absolute necessity because of the widespread desire to be continually connected.

But people cannot handle all of the information that is thrown at them. The excessive noise means brands have to find a way to make themselves more relevant by providing some kind of functionality that can enhance consumers' regular routines. It is becoming ever more important to exploit the potential customer actions that the services and platforms provide intelligently (e.g., making recommendations). An iPhone application does not have to be limited to a novelty game used to kill time. Instead, it could tap into a location-based service (LBS) to recognize the consumer is standing in front of a Gap store and offer a coupon for a new shirt. Or Google Wave promises to enable the signal-to-noise ratio and thus help

consumers identify what is a real value-added service for them, and what is just background buzz.

What's the Engagement Level?

Brands will compete for consumer attention at every touchpoint. One way to capture mindshare is to maximize the level of engagement. The best uses of digital platforms in 2010 will be hybrids of product and service: addressing a need and providing enhanced functionality and access to the better brand offering. These offerings will not only wow consumers but also will follow a social cadence, in terms of how to reach consumers, increase perceived value, and motivate consumers to engage with the brand. The following five levels of engagement determine the impact of a brand engagement:

1. **The Gag.** Usually seen on digital billboards, banners, or simple iPhone applications, gags use a "big-pop" strategy to get attention quickly, disrupt activities, and make the consumer laugh. Essentially, it offers something fun to play with and might even tap into a new behavior that the consumer did not previously have access to or did not know was available. But gags are very short lived, and consumers' attention quickly moves on to the next thing.

2. **Utility.** This form of engagement ordinarily comes in the form of a calculator, recommendation engine, price finder, or similar task-oriented feature. With a utility, it is important to leverage available contextual data and thus provide in-the-moment value.

3. **Social Connectivity.** As brand engagements extend across platforms, the brand starts to connect consumers and allow them to socialize with the brand offering, giving it legs and a viral sensibility. But the organic nature of the engagement also helps convert consumers into brand ambassadors. Simply giving them the tools to help spread the word and influence community opinions across existing social networks, like Facebook or MySpace, is critical, because they begin to fight for brand bragging rights. The fight also might extend to iPhone apps, Web sites, online activities (e.g., completing a shopping experience), Twitter, or digital board short messaging campaigns.

4. **Brand Customization.** The ability to customize and express individuality builds stronger brand affinity and loyalty. Such expressiveness enables the brand to permeate the consumers' psychology and grants personal ownership over the interactions. For maximum impact, customization platforms should be linked to social media

to allow users to flaunt their customized products and influence their peers.

5. **Brand Lifestyle.** The highest engagement level arrives when brands provide everyday services, utilities, customization, and social ecosystems that enable consumers to truly live the brand. The ultimate success comes when the brand can create a movement that unifies the group of consumers around a common goal or feeling. For example, Nike+, which tapped into the mentality of runners, also provided a service that has become a central site for runners worldwide to connect and carry the banner. Nike leveraged its product usage data and integrated them within a social network, creating a nearly cultish community. Clever utility encourages competition; Nike employed this strategy to make the campaign a tremendous success.

APPROACH

To fully harness the digital landscape, brands and agencies must understand the entire connectivity story. First, they must examine the variety of daily touchpoints that consumers experience to determine when, where, and how to solicit the brand. Second, brands and agencies must understand platform utilities and how to leverage them, both independently and through the integrated model. Third, they must distinguish the character of the platforms for connectivity (through APIs or offline groups) to invigorate social movements around the brand.

To create strong connections with consumers, CMOs should look beyond the digital platform itself and examine the demographics and psychographics of the individual consumers who use the products, in the specific context of their lives, locations, and activities. The most effective digital platforms (Figure 2) have shifted from "disruptive" to "productive" by providing a service or utility-whether by introducing a new behavior or meeting a perceived need. The big ideas should be strong enough not only to persist across channels and devices but also to fundamentally change how the brand becomes an integral part of people's lives.

Figure 2. Effective Digital Platforms

Video/convergence platforms	Whether Xbox and Netflix Streaming, Boxee and Hulu, or televisions connected to the Internet by default, the entertainment convergence is opening exciting new avenues for marketers and consumers. The idea of being able to watch full HD resolution at home or on the go, regardless of the device, is exciting; the concept of being able to watch a favorite show regardless of whether it was created on YouTube or by CBS also shows great promise. It is an indicator of things to come, that is, of the convergence of what have previously been two distinct platforms and experiences.
Augmented reality (AR)	Although very early in the lifecycle of AR, new innovations are emerging rapidly. The potential demonstrated by applications such as Layar and its integration with physical entities (e.g., toys) is providing a unique blend of virtual and real worlds.
Mobile	There have been far too many mobile introductions in the past year to count, but the promise surrounding this platform is starting to be realized. Constraints are being replaced by possibilities. Better tools for developers with a much better distribution platform (e.g., app stores for the iPhone, Palm, Nokia, Blackberry, and Android) are creating a rich ecosystem of applications that fit consumers' every need. Faster and better networks (3G, 4G) and better phones in every sense are changing behaviors and pushing innovation. With tools like GPS and AR and services like LBS, phones are getting smarter too.
Using APIs to create platforms/ecosystems	Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Boxee use APIs to harness the power of the community. These APIs help marketers and developers extend a platform and customized it to the needs of consumers.

From Disruptive to Productive

Traditionally, consumers receive their first introduction to an engagement experience through entertainment, whether a game, video, or song. As more features mark the experience, marketers and agencies have the opportunity to deepen the engagement and consumer relationship, such that their offering ultimately takes on the role of a utility. Over time, these utilities are perceived as tools and become necessities in the daily routines of the target audience-as common as a toothbrush or mobile device.

The following steps should lead planning of an integrated digital platform:

1. Lead with Human Truths

   o Establish brand objectives and develop personas for the target demographic.

   o Plan to make consumers stakeholders in the brand.

   o Build a "day in the life of" diagram and visualize what target consumers do and where they do it every ever hour of the day.

2. Conduct a Brand Presence and Touchpoint Effectiveness Analysis

   o Where does the brand sit, and where do its competitors sit, in relation to an element of consumers' life? What is the frequency of the communication?

   o Find the untapped opportunities and needs of the consumer.

   o Is the brand maximizing the effectiveness of every touchpoint throughout the day? What is the engagement level?

3. Design Campaigns and Select the Best Digital Platforms

   o Select platforms that best fit with the various touchpoint opportunities and perform best against competitors, always taking into account the location and activity pros and cons.

   o Have competitors saturated the location? Can the touchpoint be made more effective and engaging to overtake those competitors?

   o Analyze the environment, noise, and distractions-is the installation going to be affected by the weather (e.g., sunlight, rain)? Is the location too noisy for an offer that relies too much on sound? Is the technology affected by light availability (e.g., cameras)?

The Next Digital Horizon

The idea of barriers between people and technology is being debunked as marketers seek to integrate more digital platforms into consumers' lifestyles. Naturally, interactions are quickly becoming more intuitive, intelligent, and human; technologies are starting to seek out consumers, rather than consumers seeking out the technologies. Consumers even have come to expect innovation from their beloved brands, as long as those brands' usage of digital platforms provides them with entertainment value, service, and relevance.

Every brand has the potential to become interwoven into every moment of every day of its consumers' lives. The robustness of the platforms, both independently and in an integrated approach, will continue to give marketers new ways to provide greater connectivity between the brand and the consumer.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ken Martin is Chief Creative Officer and co-founder of BLITZ. A seasoned creative professional and entrepreneur, Ken enjoys solving seemingly impossible challenges with the most engaging, effective solutions. Working collaboratively with business leaders on a day-to-day basis, his focus is on the evolution of brand experiences, interactive marketing, and product development through key insights, strategy, design, and technology. Ken's creative excellence and leadership has been called upon to deliver global interactive marketing campaigns on behalf of Google, Microsoft, Adobe, Activision, Starbucks, Naked Juice, nVidia, Disney, GE, Cisco/Linksys, NBC, FX, Hilton, LucasArts, Warner Brothers, and DirecTV. Ken has been recognized by the industry and received multiple accolades, including awards from the One Show, the London International Advertising Awards, SXSW, FWA, ADDY, the Flash Forward Film Festival, the HBO Comedy Festival, and the Key Art Awards,. He is also a frequent speaker at leading conferences including Adobe MAX, Microsoft MIX, FITC and TV of Tomorrow. He currently serves on the AIGA Visionary Design Council for the "Designer of 2015" Initiative and is a charter member of the Society of Digital Agencies (SoDA). Ken studied at Cogswell College, with an emphasis in 3D animation and computer video imaging.

Ivan Todorov is CEO and co-founder of BLITZ. He drives the growth and strategic vision for BLITZ, evangelizing the promise of bringing brands to life by developing immersive, entertaining, and imaginative digital experiences. He has

proven instrumental in developing relationships with long-term clients such as Adobe, Google, Activision, General Electric, and Microsoft and helping them more effectively utilize technology to build their brands and develop compelling interactive experiences for their customers. Ivan is a highly-sought technology expert, speaker, and educator who frequently presents at Flash Forward, Adobe MAX, and FiTC conferences. His passion and industry experience for interactive technologies continues to fuel BLITZ's reputation as a leader and have resulted in many of the agency's awards and recognitions, including Key Art, Flash Forward, Adobe MAX Award, SXSW, One Show, ADDYs, Web Award, London International Advertising Awards (LIAA), Internet Advertising Competition (IAC), and over 20 FWAs. Ivan attended Cogswell College, where he received his BA degree in Computer Video Imaging, with an emphasis in 3D Character Animation.

ABOUT BLITZ

BLITZ is a leading integrated marketing agency that builds brands and drives engagement by developing results-driven, immersive, and imaginative campaigns and applications. BLITZ reaches target audiences across all relevant touchpoints, social networks, platforms, and devices, so a brand can become a seamless part of customers' everyday lives. The agency constantly invents new ways to excite, inform, entertain, and compel consumers to want to learn more, go deeper, "play" longer, and participate in a more active brand conversation. BLITZ has developed revolutionary experiences and campaigns for some of the world's most exciting brands, including Google, Microsoft, Activision, Adobe, Cisco/Linksys, DIRECTV, FX Networks, Starbucks, and nVidia. Learn more about BLITZ by visiting www.BlitzAgency.com.