



Consumers as Marketing Co-Creators

Chick-fil-A builds engagement with customers who feel a sense of brand ownership through co-creation of content.

"The overwhelming reality of our time is not how much is changing—it is the extraordinary pace of change itself," writes Stan Rapp in *Reinventing Interactive and Direct Marketing*. Marketing is one discipline experiencing those rapid changes in a way that has many marketers rethinking the practice itself.

Reinventing Interactive and Direct Marketing introduces two new concepts: iDirect marketing and iBranding. Rapp describes iDirect as "interactive, information-driven, individualize, insightful, and iterative" marketing that harnesses and benefits from the Internet in ways never before possible. iBranding relates to consumers' co-creation of the branding experience online. "The consumer pecking away at the computer keyboard takes over ownership of his or her personal Internet iBrand with its own distinctive set of components," Rapp writes.

In the following excerpt, Chick-fil-A's Michael McCathren discusses how iBranding engages the fast-food chain's customer—and how iBranding is helping to deepen customer relationships in a whole new way:

iBrands Create Content

There's something in human nature that drives us to create. Individuals from every walk of life from our first kindergarten crayon-drawing experience into our adult years enjoy self-expression. Whether something tangible is created or it's an innovative way to get something done or simply sharing a point of view, there's satisfaction in making a statement that enlarges a person's sphere of influence. This basic human attribute now intersects with the extraordinary interactive iBrand opportunities made possible by the new social media and advanced digital technology.

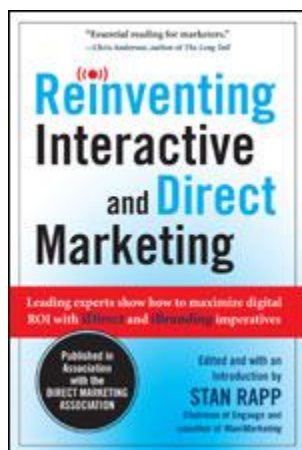
One way to help consumers build their iBrands as producers is to give them the right raw materials. Just as manufacturers need a supply chain, consumer iBrands require raw materials to spark the motivation to create. At Chick-fil-A, we have been, and continue to be, the beneficiaries of a brilliant, once-in-a-brand's-lifetime advertising phenomenon. The cow campaign, which began as a billboard program over 12 years ago, has evolved into a hotbed of iBranding activities to spark the creativity of Chick-fil-A believers. They print their own online messages on the cow's sandwich board, put cow spots on just about anything, collect one-of-a-kind Chick-fil-A plush cows, including outfits and accessories for the cuddly toys. They'll stand in line under a hot sun to get their picture taken with the cow and share the photos with friends and family on Flickr.

For our iBranding consumers, the cow campaign provides raw materials on which they can put their own personal stamp of ownership. Then they share this creation with their marketsphere hoping for positive comments or, better yet, reuse as recycled raw material for other people to invent their own iBrands. When that happens, the originator's personal iBrand equity gets a huge boost. As a result, the Chick-fil-A brand also does well because the more we increase our customer's iBrand equity, the deeper our heritage becomes embedded at the top of that person's share of mind.

Beyond what the marketer can achieve with awareness advertising, the face-to-face experience provides what only an iBrand can do for you. This is where most of today's brand marketers fall flat. In recent years marketing executives have slowly poisoned their own brand identity by forgetting that in this digital age it's the experience that defines brand value far more than the advertising. Today more than ever, marketers need to realize that the shortest route to building the business lies in building value for each consumer's iBrand in cyberspace. It means giving consumers something special to talk about through a one-of-a-kind product-related or service-related experience. When product parity in almost every industry is at an all-time high, it's unique, caring surprises worthy of a tweet, a blog mention, or a text message that earn iBranding points for your brand.

About six years ago Chick-fil-A founder, Truett S. Cathy (<http://www.truettcathy.com>), began a new movement within Chick-fil-A that was unheard of in the fast food industry (fast "rude" industry in some circles at that time). He set an example for his employees by showing every customer how genuinely appreciative he was that customers would select Chick-fil-A over all the other choices out there. He conveyed that serving them was sincerely a pleasure by replying to every "thank you" with a "my pleasure." Truett believed that all people should be treated with honor, dignity, and respect no matter who they are, what they do, where they come from, or where they choose to eat. It didn't take long before the customer stories began to spread about what an impression just the simple act of saying "my pleasure" was making on a customer's fast food experience. Comments such as "It made my day," "What a pleasant surprise," and "I truly felt appreciated" came streaming in. Nowadays, our brand benefits by the speed with which such positive comments travels on the Internet.

Chick-fil-A has won many awards for its customer service including "Customer Service Champs"¹ and the "Choice in Chains" Customer Satisfaction Award (chicken category) for 14 out of the last 15 years. Although these accolades are a nice confirmation that our service philosophy has gained tangible results, what's most important is how this has transformed the customer experience. There is a big social media payoff in today's Internet-dependant world: Offline experiences have become a gold mine of raw material that consumers draw upon in producing online content that adds value to their iBrand equity and, at the same time, to our own.



It is much easier nowadays for stories of amazing service to contribute to your brand equity because sharing those experiences is now intrinsic to the i-life of the consumer's own brand. When an interesting, out-of-context experience is shared online, members of a cyberspace subculture community become aware of something the general public doesn't get yet. You have conveyed what it feels like to be truly appreciated as a customer, the warm feeling you have when a stranger (a teenage stranger at that—with no obligation to do anything for you beyond what the hourly position requires), honestly wants to do everything for you. It's a sad commentary on society when experience s like these are more the exception than the rule. But a service renaissance is brewing, and its source is the small bits of raw material that consumer iBrands experience and call to the attention of others. Some company brands will see the light at the end of these customer service dark ages and become the DaVincis of customer satisfaction. Others will attempt to contribute to the ongoing digital conversation—only to become the victim of their own heritage

of poor service as Web 2.0 consumers build their iBrands by tearing down those product and service companies that disappoint.

Another way the marketer's brand can support the consumer's iBrand content production is to provide a marketsphere for what is being produced. How can a brand create such a market? First, you need a clear picture of just what the consumer's iBrand is busily establishing about itself. Understanding attitudes and behaviors of customers doesn't necessarily require an expensive research project. It could be as simple as becoming a follower of your most influential iBranded customers and observing what they produce. It may be an active blog, a streaming Twitter, or great Facebook page. As these cyber citizens create, they reveal a great deal about themselves.

Say a customer Tweets about her experiences with your brand, and her current marketsphere is 20 followers. If a brand responded by inviting her to visit its branded online space, such as its Facebook fans page, where a marketsphere of tens of thousands of like-minded users congregate, she would likely find people interested in reading what she has to say. It could represent a sizable contribution to her iBrand equity and the number of followers attracted to her digital identity.

It's an interesting example of the "content product" coming from one iBrand becoming the raw material of another. Let's say a blogger with a couple of hundred subscribers reads the Twitter post mentioned above. That Twitter post (her product, the blogger's raw material) sparks a new blog post that leads to hundreds of people learning about her amazing customer service experience. That's the beauty of iBranding and word-of-mouth marketing in the new millennium; something traditional advertising will never do.

To grow your brand, give your iBrand followers something positive, unique, and interesting to talk about and an expanded marketsphere with which to share it, and they'll keep coming back to you for more raw material.

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About the Authors: Stan Rapp is chairman of [Engauge](#), coauthor of six books, and a member of the DMA Hall of Fame. Michael McCathren, conversation catalyst at [Chick-fil-A](#), is responsible for the brand's digital marketing strategy and dramatically increased the brand's presence online with outreach to millions of Chick-fil-A fans.

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