Moonlit and Dream Visited Worlds

Interactive Marketing, from ones and zeroes to Subservient Chickens

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This is not about The Internet

I want to make one thing very, very clear: what you are about to read is not about The Internet, primarily because "The Internet" (with capital letters) doesn't *actually* exist. Really, specifically, there are lots and lots of computers which are connected to one another in a network, and many of these networks are connected to one another in a common way, allowing you to send those photos, read that blog, IM that buddy and one-click-order that book.

In fact, a couple years ago, *Wired Magazine*—that consistent (albeit weathered) standards bearer of the language of the connected—decided to decapitalize "The Internet" in its articles. I loved the move. It seemed to me evidence of a new pragmatic way of thinking about this pervasive, connected technology. It was a signal that it was time to stop thinking mythically about a seemingly magic cloud that would shatter every business it touched and change the way we did everything. Clearly that ended up not being the case—at least in terms of buying groceries and ordering dog food.

But, my point is a little different. I don't think it makes much sense to have an internet strategy for your business. I think it makes sense to have an interactive strategy. An interactive strategy is about how you are going to exchange content, products and currency with your customers, hopefully on an ongoing basis. If you use the internet to do this, that's great. In fact, it is probably the only real way to do this. But, if you figure out some way to do this with carrier pigeons, smoke signals and decoder rings, congratulations. Your goal (and mine as well, in writing this) is to think about interactions, not technologies.

That said…I am now going to talk completely and deeply about the internet and computers in general. Sorry about that. But the fact is, computer technology has very deeply woven itself into our lives, and it has—in fact—changed the way we many things. To some degree, technology has made it possible for people to interact and communicate in ways that feel very natural. I am going to talk about computers, the promise they bring, and how we relate to them, because understanding that is going to help you figure out how to meet your customers on a common ground, ready to fulfill their expectations and interact with them in a way that brings value for everyone involved in each transaction.

Cool? OK. Get ready to go deep. We're going to talk about computers not as devices—laptops and cell phones and whatever. Rather, we're going down to the atomic level: ones and zeros.

Counting: the only thing that counts

What, exactly does a computer *do*? I don't mean what we use it for. There are infinite uses. I'm using one to write this essay right now (as well as chatting with my IM buddies and listening to music). But what does this sleek little box of wires actually *do*? The answer is pretty mundane (and its been the same since the beginning). A computer tells the difference between ones and zeros.

Actually, it's not even as exciting as that. A computer actually, really only knows about ones. It doesn't have a sense of zero[1]. Even referring to "one" and "zero" is giving the computer a lot of credit that it doesn't necessarily deserve. A computer is a collection of circuits, through which electric pulses travel. A pulse of electricity signifies a "one". The lack of a pulse signifies a "zero". Big deal, right? Well, actually, being abel to differentiate between ones and zeros is pretty good, as a basic skill goes. For instance, you can use it to count. To any number (not just to one). The secret lies in the notion of base-number systems.

The numbering system that we all use and are most familiar with is known as "base ten", because it is a counting system that uses ten numerals: 0,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8 and 9. We use a base ten system for no particular reason. Most likely, base ten was adopted because we have ten fingers, so it is pretty practical. But the decision to use base ten is totally arbitrary. We could have a base three system or a base 43 system. Numbers are abstract concepts. Numerals are just the way we decide to note these numbers.

The way we do this number notation with base ten is the same way we would do it with base 43 (or, as we'll see in a moment, how computers do it with base two). When you write a number, let's say on a check to pay your credit card bill, you use some of those ten numerals, in a *particular order*. That is, if your bill is four-hundred thirty two dollars, you write the numbers 4, 3 and 2, *in that order*. You write "$432". You'd probably like to write "$234" or even "$342", but that wouldn't quite do would it?

That's because not only do we need numerals to communicate numbers, but we also need their position. It's the position of the numbers that give them their importance and their ultimate utility. In the base ten system, we understand that the position all the way to the right connotes how many ones we mean. The next says how many tens; the one after that the number of hundreds, then thousands and so on. We have this spreadsheet in our minds:

Value	100	10	1
Count	4	3	2

If you slowed the process of writing out that check way down, you'd see a short math equation took place: (4 X 100) + (3 X 10) + (2 X 1) = (400) + (30) + (2) = 432.

That's why position is so important. The numeral is really only the multiplier. We need the position to know the constant with which we can multiply the count. But the values are constant, only because we say they are. That's why the decision to use base ten is really an arbitrary one. We can change the system, as long as we all agree on the value-constants for each position.

So, let's do that for base two, the system used by computers. Base two means there are only two numerals: 1 and 0. All you have to do to make this system work is change the

[1] Actually, the notion of "zero" is pretty deep, reserved for human brains. If you want to go deeper into the world of the zero, check out Charles Seife's book *Zero*.

value-constants for each position. Clearly the ones, tens, hundreds, thousands system won't work, so instead you use one that does: a system where the first position is one, and you just keep doubling the value. The base two spreadsheet would look like this:

Value	1	2	4	8	16	32	64	128	256
Count									

If we only had two fingers, maybe this would be our system. And you would write your check to the credit card company with a) a really odd pen and b) the number: 011001011. In the spreadsheet, this number probably makes more sense:

Value	1	2	4	8	16	32	64	128	256
Count	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1

The process of doing the math equation is precisely the same, but you may not be able to do this one in your head. But here it is:

$$(1 \times 0) + (2 \times 1) + (4 \times 1) + (9 \times 0) + (16 \times 0) + (32 \times 1) + (64 \times 0) + (128 \times 1) + (256 \times 1)$$

Which goes down to:

$$(2) + (4) + (32) + (128) + (256) = 432$$

Same number, just noted in a different way. As counterintuitive as it may seem, you can express any number using ones and zeros. This is just what computers do. In fact, the most advanced, experimental computers out there simply connote ones and zeros in a different way (atom position, for example, rather than electric pulses). The interesting thing, of course, is what a computer does with these ones and zeros. Like play games.

Would you like to play a game?

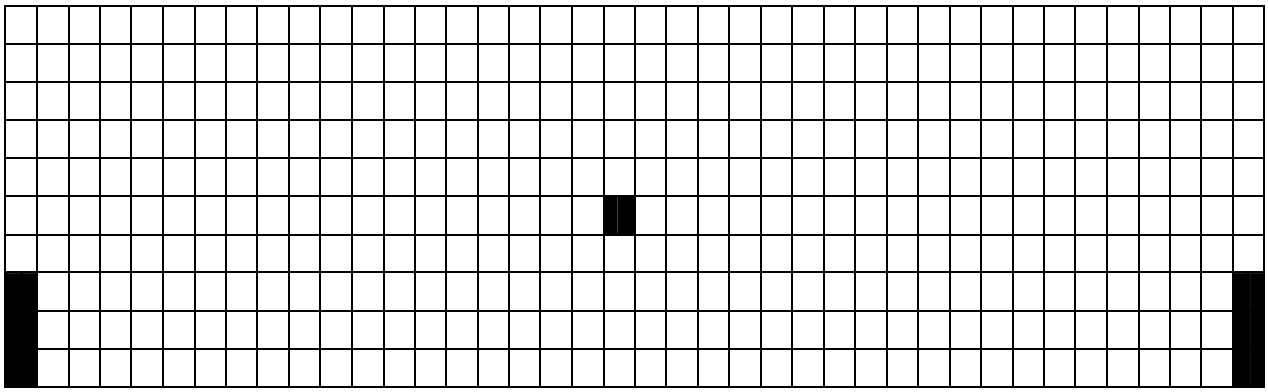
Pong was probably the first really meaningful interaction that anyone had with a computer. Introduced in the mid-seventies, this funny little game gathered the nation's interest and quarters and provided a very simple demonstration of what a computer could do. Pong is actually a very good example of how ones and zeros work to create something useful. What follows is a simple instruction in how to build your own Pong game. We'll use a fake computer language, just to keep things simple.

First, you need to imagine the computer's screen as a grid. Let's say our grid is 40 by 10. You probably already know this, but each cell in this grid is usually referred to as a Pixel. So, we've got a grid that has 400 pixels. We can refer to any particular pixel by its coordinates, and we can refer to a group of pixels, as long as we identify them all together and give them a name. Deep down, the computer would deal with all the numbers we are about to write as ones and zeros, remember. But to keep things clear, we'll just go ahead and use base ten numbers.

To get things started, we need three elements: two paddles and a ball. In our fake computer language we would write:

```
"leftPaddle" = pixels (1,1) to (1,3)
"rightPaddle" = pixels (40,1) to (40,3)
"ball"= pixel (20,5)
```

Our three elements, on the grid would look like this:



Alright. The players are on the court and the ball is at midfield. The fans wait patiently for the action to begin. Time for another line of code:

```
Add (1,0) to "ball"
     Repeat
```

This makes the ball start moving to the right. The first time through, the position of "ball" is (21,5), then (22,5), (23,5) and so on, until it eventually moves right off the playing field. Not much of a game yet. Time to give the players a little power: let's say that the person in control of the right paddle can move his piece up by pressing the semicolon key (";") and down by pressing the backslash key ("/"). The code is below. We'll use the word "on" to say "when this event happens, do the following":

```
On ";"
     Add (0,1) to "rightPaddle"
On "/"
     Subtract (0,1) from "rightPaddle"
```

We'll give the left paddle player the same control, with the "a" and "z" keys:

```
On "a"
     Add (0,1) to "leftPaddle"
On "z"
     Subtract (0,1) from "leftPaddle"
```

Pretty much the last thing we need to do to make this a real game is set up the actual play. Right now, "ball" will continue to count up to infinity, unless we put in some sort of rule into our new, imagined world that affects it. This is called "collision detection" and it's sort of a basic element of pretty much any video game you've ever played. You write it as an "if-then" statement, which tells the computer to perform a certain action when a particular condition occurs. The condition we need to watch for is a paddle getting in the way of the balls path, and it's written like this:

```
If “ball” equals “rightPaddle”
    Then subtract (1,0) from “ball”
```

To make things fair, we should also give the same control to the left hand player:

```
If “ball” equals “leftPaddle”
    Then add (1,0) from “ball”
```

The essence of the code here is that, if ever ball and paddle want to inhabit the same pixel, ball gets affected. There’s still a lot of work to be done on this Pong game. We have to set up a scoring system for one. Plus, the ball right now is just set to go back and forth across the screen is a straight line, which doesn’t make for very fun game play. But the basics are here, and hey…this is supposed to be about marketing strategy, anyhow.

The rules of the game are the rule of the world…if you want
You know what makes Pong fun? It mirrors the rules of the real world. Look a little closely, and you actually see, in those few clunky lines of made-up computer code, we’ve actually programmed two of Newton’s three laws of motion. Check it out:

- An object in motion will stay in motion unless a force acts upon it.

“Ball” is going to keep on moving the direction its going, unless one of the paddles gets in its way.

- For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction

We built the rule that, when “ball” does run into one of the paddles, it bounces off and begins traveling in precisely the other direction.

But there are three laws, right? The one we left out says that actions result in a loss of energy. We could program that in, of course. The code would do something like count the number of times a paddle goes up and down the screen. After a certain number, we could make the paddle “tired” by forcing it to move in half-time.

But here’s where things start getting cool: we programmed those laws into the game, but we really didn’t have to. If you and I went to the tennis court and played a game, we’d have to obey all the laws of physics. But if I want to model a tennis game inside my computer, I can break the rules all I want. Let’s say I wanted to have the ball change direction every fourth time it crossed the net. Or I wanted to let one player return the ball at double speed. No worries. I just have to change the math a bit in the code. It’s easy.

And fantastically powerful. This is really the promise of the computer: the ability to take new control of the elements around you. In fact, this is one of the motivations that keeps coming up when you talk to programmers about what attracted them to computer science

in the first place[2]. But the course of technology is from the labs to the living room, and we are firmly rooted in an age where the average person has ownership and control over a tremendous amount of computing power. The thing is, it is coming into the living room with the same promise that it had in the lab: you can use this collection of wires to remodel your world the way you want to.

Bottom line: when a person gets technology, they think "power". It's practically a reflex, and it hardly matters what the technology is: bow and arrow, cotton gin, MRI machine, or Pagemaker. The first thought is "imagine what I can do with *this*!"

For the most part, though, the living-room receivers of computer power are not necessarily interested in remodeling the laws of Physics. They want to tweak the controls of conversations and commerce. Really of marketing itself. And, while Physics is not really up for debate, the laws of the consumer world certainly are. Newton just observed and named what actually happened when you threw, dropped and rolled things. GM, AT&T, KMart and Microsoft don't have nearly that same level of authority.

What is True?

Marketers are *not* liars. In fact, the job of marketing is to establish truths:

- It is important to have milk in your refrigerator at all times.
- Having a Coke improves your day
- A dirty ring around your collar is embarrassing
- Calling your mom is a good way to show you love her

Marketers deal in truths or they don't deal at all. But, why is something considered "true"? In the Pong example, the code is built around a few truths (i.e. body in motion stays in motion). We all accept the Pong Physics as true because we observe it constantly around us. But what about the statement "a dirty ring around your collar is embarrassing"? What makes that true?

The truth (haha) is that "truth" is really a condition that happens to an idea because of its circumstances, sort of like how a "the flu" happens to a child or "flat" happens to a tire. A child is just that: a child. But, at a certain time, a set of circumstances will occur (namely, a flu virus is in his system) that would cause us to view him as being sick.

For ideas, the condition that has to exist is that a community of people has agreed that a certain idea is true, and arrange their lives accordingly. With the child, the arrangement you make is to give him fluids, keep him in bed, and keep other kids away from him. If a community of people determine that "a dirty ring around your collar is embarrassing", they will begin washing all shirts in Wisk.

Where is truth?

[2] For more on this, check out Ellen Ullman's book *Close to the Machine*. It's a great exposition of how programmers see themselves in the world.

This all sounds (hopefully) like I'm talking about building brands, but actually I'm not. Really, I'm paraphrasing a handful of writers and thinkers who established a school of philosophy called Pragmatism[3] around the beginning of the 20th century. Two authors in particular seemed to frame up the ideas best: Charles Pierce[4] and William James[5]. In fact, it was James who lent me the lyrical set of words that I used to title this piece:

> "Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found?"

James' sense was that there is no truth, other than the truth that we all agree to. This is a significant break from the classic philosophers who saw truth as a hypothetical ideal to which all things aspired. Just like the American he was, James and his group did away with the established concepts of the Old World and introduced their own. In fact, Pragmatism is the only philosophical school that to have been born in America. And it feels like: Americans like to see themselves as discoverers, pioneers and self-made-people. No hypothetical ideals for us, thank you. We'll build our own truths.

But, we still have to answer James' question[6]. Truth is to be found in the community. Some truths are easy for us to all accept, such as the ones that Newton pointed out and we built into Pong. But others are not so easy. James himself was concerned with much more important truths than the ones listed above (chiefly: whether or not God existed), but we can still examine situations such as ring-around-the-collar.

Let's start with the focus group of one: do you think its true that ring-around-the-collar is embarrassing and, therefore, to be avoided? I'm going to assume you say yes. If you're reading this, you're most likely some kind of professional or aspiring professional. I'm sure you've taken your shirt off at the end of a long day and seen that smudge all the way around the neck. Let's just say that the shirt is still generally wearable, with the exception of the ring. If you put this on, there's a good chance people will see it when they meet you.

And they'll think you're a slob. Well, that's no good. We can roughly imagine that most everyone we talk to would agree with us. I suppose there may be a segment out there who will tell you that it is good to be a slob, but I don't think they would argue with the direct connection between ring/collar and slob. So, in our minute focus group, we can say that we've determined the truthfulness of the ring/collar statement.

Of course, the Wisk marketer is only halfway there. The iconic ring-around-the-collar campaign(s) worked because they followed the tried-and-true framework of: show the problem, introduce the solution, demonstrate its efficacy, and show the resolution. Thirty-

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[3] If you want to know more about Pragmatism than is roughly outlined here, please read Louis Menand's excellent book *The Metaphysical Club*. That is where I first learned about Pragmatism, and (seriously) the more I read, the more I thought about marketing.

[4] Especially in "The Fixation of Beliefs" and "How to Make our Ideas Clear"

[5] Especially in "The Will to Believe"

[6] Which, he of course, does on his own in the essay. But we can walk his path just as well; this time, we'll just take a detour through the mall

second stories, told masterfully by Unilever (the makers of Wisk), P&G and others for the last half-century. With the establishment of the ring/collar problem, the marketer simply must follow the next steps to make sure that the consumer sees the product as the solution. It does the market no good to simply communicate the problem. He or she must make sure that the product-as-solution is a part of the truth that is being established.

The best ads in history have roughly adhered to this formula, even the incredible Apple 1984 commercial, considered by ad critic Bob Garfield[7] to be the best ad ever made.

> **Show the Problem:** Computer technology—dominated at the time by IBM—repressed individuality and creativity.
> **Introduce the solution:** The Macintosh, this time symbolized by a bold, strong and luminous woman.
> **Demonstrate its efficacy:** Again, this is done symbolically, with the woman's hammer smashing the IBM/Big Brother world
> **Show the resolution:** This is really the clever part here—the resolution is a promise to deliver people from this awful future (present?) on January 24th, 1984

There you go. Want to make great commercials? Follow the path, Grasshopper. You don't need to re-make Tide commercials, of course. Chiat/Day definitely innovated within the template. But they followed it.

Where truth telling goes bad

If it's so simple, why is there so much bad advertising? I'm not just specifically talking about lame television ads. I'm talking about completely misdirected campaigns[8]. Really two things go wrong: the first is that those in charge of creating the communications do a bad job of creating communications. More specifically, they focus too much on getting noticed and less about creating truths.

The other thing that goes wrong is actually even more dangerous: the misidentification of which truths are worth establishing. Henry James was concerned with really big truths about the existence of God and the purpose of human existence. That may be a little too significant to be tackled in a marketing campaign. But the point is very clear here: whatever you're putting all of your effort into communicating has to be significant. Pierce, in his essay "How to Make our Ideas Clear" makes a critical distinction between ideas that are THIS, THAT, AND THAT and THE OPPOSITE.

The task of marketing has been reduced down to increasing two critical factors: relevance and differentiation. Focusing on relevance is demonstrating that your product solves a problem that *matters* to people. Otherwise, you go through all the effort to establish the truth, only to find out that this truth is totally forgettable.

The bounds of the community

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[7] Bob calls "1984" the best ad ever in *And Now a Few Words from Me*, and I definitely agree with him.
[8] This is actually where I take after Bob Garfield. Really: read his book. I think I have a different angle on what he talks about, but he is the lead on this subject.

An idea is imbued with truthfulness if the community accepts it and arranges their life around it. We've nailed just about every aspect of that statement, except for the notion of a "community". And here's where it all gets interesting.

I'm going to introduce a new rule: Communities are confined by the scope of their communications technology. That is, a community only exists to the extent by which members can share information with one another.

Here's an example. When I was in Junior High School, just about the coolest pants you could wear were from a brands called "Rags". These fancy little trousers were immediately recognizable because they had a string-tie for the belt. I assume that was the reason for the brand name: the string tie connoted, ironically, that these were cheap pants, barely held up and together. I say "ironically", because I remember them being somewhat expensive. Put on a pair of Rags, and you were noticed and identified as cool.

I didn't have a pair.

The point is, the community that I was involved in, Sunnyvale Junior High, had identified the truth (Rags=Cool) and arranged their lives accordingly ("*Pleeeeeeeease* Mom, can't I get a pair?"). I don't know why this was true. Maybe one of the jocks wore a pair one day. The origin of the truth wasn't nearly as important as its existence.

Around the same time as the Rags Phenomenon, my family and I went back to New Jersey (where we had come from, three years previously) to visit our relatives and old friends. When I connected back up with my old pals, I remember mentioning Rags, expecting to have a shared moment of recognizing something as cool. I got nothing. They were completely unaware of Rags and had no opinion of their coolness. Despite the fact that my life was extremely similar to theirs—age, family demographic, interests—I was no longer a part of this community, very simply because we didn't communicate.

You can imagine where I'm going with this story. The Rags experience is now one for the history books. The current class of teens has no boundaries imposed upon it by small-scope communications technologies. Certainly, back in 1981, we at Sunnyvale Junior High helped to cement the status of the Rags brand as being cool. But we did it just among ourselves. Today, everyone has a hand in defining the brand, because everyone has a hand in establishing its truth.

Begin freaking out…now!

Quick: what's the definition of a "brand"? It's a tough question. Despite the fact that so many of us spend so much time thinking about and working on brands, it's a little difficult to define what one actually is[9]. I spent a good chunk of time, trying to come up with a definition that I felt accurately communicated not only what a brand is, but also why having one is important and worthwhile. Here it is:

[9] Especially without coming up with some cheesy analogy that doesn't really do anything to make the concept any clearer.

Brand: the ideas a consumer has about your offering, which prompts an action.

There are two things that bear pointing out. The first is the identification of the actor in all of this: the consumer. Your brand is really an idea that he or she has. Or rather the ideas, plural. It's likely that the consumer has more than one idea about your offering: some created by you, many created by other people. The second important point here is the end: "which prompts an action." If the brand is good, the action is "buy". If the brand is bad, the action is "not buy". Or potentially, "tell others not to buy" or "picket your corporate headquarters".

I'm only sort of half-kidding about that last point. Consider the case of Nike. Consumers had a very positive image of Nike, associating them with perfection and dedication in sports. Then, the story broke about them using sweatshop labor to produce their very expensive shoes. The idea that Nike was abusing workers figured itself into the brand and very clearly prompted some actions. Same thing happened to Gap, Kathie Lee Gifford and a few other brands[10].

This is essentially the same point about communities establishing truth. In the not so distant past, though, the means to spread a single message to a large number of people was firmly in the hands of the corporations themselves. Clearly, Nike was not going to take out an ad during the Super Bowl and accuse itself of using sweatshops. Today I could send that message around the world faster than you could lace up your Air Jordans.

How? You know precisely how: Email, blogs, ePinions, MySpace, discussion boards and a host of other services that allow me to log on, write whatever's on my mind, and send it out or (and this is potentially more dangerous) have it be found when someone does a search on a brand name in Google.

Why? That's a much more interesting question. And one that (finally) brings us back to the primary point of this essay: power.

Power will be used with you or against you

I guess the Subservient Chicken campaign didn't sell a whole lot of chicken sandwiches for Burger King. That's too bad. It does, however, demonstrate a very key concept in developing interactive strategy: consumers have power, and they will use it either with you or against you.

If you didn't see the Subservient Chicken campaign, here's the shorthand: the site was set up without Burger King branding. Borrowing its style from the smuttier side of the Web, visitors were presented with what appeared to be a video of someone in a chicken suit (and garter belt). One could type commands, which the chicken would then perform for you. All of this to communicate the "have it your way" tagline that Burger King built its business on.

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[10] By the way, I am very much not accusing Nike or anyone of using sweatshops. Rather, I'm just pointing out that these idea came out, and that the public reacted to them. Talking about labor practices is not the point here.

The thing that I liked about this campaign is that it recognizes that the consumer has power, and tries to play to that feeling. The problem was (and this is why it didn't actually sell anything) that this was only a superficial interaction and ultimately a waste of the consumer's power. It ends up that you weren't *actually* controlling a guy in a chicken outfit. Bunches of bits of film were shot for the commands that the creative team imagined someone typing in. When someone actually typed in "dance" or "strut", the bit of video that corresponded to that action was played.

But, more importantly, commanding someone in a chicken suit to spin around does not make one hungry for a chicken sandwich.

Let's go back to Nike (since we picked on them in the last section). For years, they have run a program called Nike ID. Visitors to the Nike ID site can design their own athletic shoes, choosing patterns, colors and other stylistic elements, including your own word stitched into the heel. Commanding chickens doesn't make you want to buy a sandwich; designing your own shoes very clearly makes you want to buy those shoes.

People get technology and immediately think power. Nike invited them to use that power on its site, with its product line. That is an interactive strategy.

Where do we go from here?

Very clearly, the pace of technology is picking up. Already, we're seeing significant changes in television, radio and movies, prompted by the spread of technology, not to the creators, but to the consumers. People are beginning to use cell-phones to look up competitive prices while in the grocery or electronics store. Travelers will soon no longer watch pay-per-view movies in their hotels anymore, since they can find a much bigger and cheaper selection through the hotel's WiFi connection. People create their own 30 second ads for iPods. What else? You name it, the power keeps on flowing.

The best thing to do, I believe, is to forget about all the technology for a while. Or rather, don't start to build a strategy based on the introduction of some technology to your market. Instead, return back to the core idea of the interactive strategy and examine the exchanges and transactions that you currently have with your consumers and how value is created each time.

Ultimately, it is time for everyone to realize they are in the relationship business. And here's a truth about relationships that I wish I came up with on my own: Relationships are always controlled by the person who is less in love.

Who's less in love in your relationship with your consumers? Most likely, it's the consumers, not you. And that just means that you need to try harder to keep them around.
