Interactivity's Unanticipated Consequences for Marketers and Marketing

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Abstract

The digital interactive transformation in marketing is not unfolding, as some thought it would, on the model of direct marketing. That model anticipated that marketing, empowered by digital media using rich profiling data, would intrude ever more deeply and more precisely into consumer lives than broadcast media had been able to. Instead the transformation is unfolding on a model of consumer empowerment, in which consumers use digital media to communicate with one another and deal with marketing's intrusions, showing none of the passivity displayed by mass media audiences. This paper categorizes five roles for the interactive consumer and draws implications for marketing practice. It concludes that the balance of power over marketplace meaning-making is shifting from marketer to consumer to the extent that media usage migrates from broadcasting to interactivity. The new marketplace rewards more participatory, more sincere, and less directive marketing styles than the old.
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A decade ago there was a sense, not misplaced, that the Internet was about to disrupt the settled practices of marketing (Alba et al., 1997; Deighton and Glazer 1997; Peterson, Bronnenberg, and Balasubramanian 1997). If marketing's practices were to change, surely the marketing profession would change, and the topics that marketing scholars studied would follow in the wake of the new practices. What exactly were these practices and where would they lead marketing? A common prediction was that the new tools would enable very powerful, very inexpensive, and very intrusive direct marketing.

Direct mail and telemarketing had indeed allowed the marketer to intrude on the individual customer. Call and response vehicles like the telephone and the reply-paid postcard had made it possible for the consumer to be reached directly and to reply directly. The expectation was that the new digital tools would turn this clumsy and artless action-reaction sequence into many cycles of deft action and reaction. Direct marketing would become as fluid and as intimate as conversation.

This article is not about how these early conjectures were right, although they were right to some degree. It is about how they were wrong. The really surprising and interesting events of the last decade have not been those that gave power to the marketer. Rather they were those that empowered consumers.

Few envisaged how much power the new technologies would give to the people. Mass communication technology empowered marketers with marketer-to-consumer tools such as radio, television and database-driven direct marketing. The digital innovations of the last decade made it effortless, indeed second nature, for audiences to talk back and talk to each other. They gave us peer-to-peer tools like Napster, eBay, Tivo, MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, Craigslist and blogs, and information search tools like Google and Wikipedia. Mobile platforms have given us ubiquitous connectivity, context-aware search, and the ability to tag and annotate physical spaces with digital information that can be retrieved by others. In sum, new traffic lanes were being built, not for the convenience of marketers, but for consumers. They were not built with commerce in mind, although commerce has soon begun to investigate how to use them.

Yet commerce has had to enter these traffic lanes with caution. The marketer in peer-to-peer environments is an interloper, more talked-about than talking. At best its role is to provoke conversations among consumers, and at worst it becomes the enemy, attacked with invective or parody. Today, as marketing strategy grapples with the question of how to work with social media, old paradigms die hard. Marketing may be less a matter of domination and control, and more a matter of fitting in.

This article first reviews briefly the early conjectures. Then it identifies five discrete roles for the interactive consumer in contemporary life, and five ways that firms interpose themselves into these lives in response. It discusses the media

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markets that form as each of these paradigms develops. In the concluding section of the paper it offers a theory in the form of an integrated account of the generative forces driving these five marketing paradigms, and proposes future research directions.

The early conjectures

Ten years ago, digital interactivity was maturing but interactive marketing was in its infancy. National digital information exchanges had been in place since the 1970s, the Arpanet protocols had been used since 1983, the Web protocols since 1989, and ordinary individuals had been surfing since the introduction of Mosaic in1993. And yet Internet marketing was not yet a factor in the marketing practices of firms.

It seemed plausible to some that the Web would be used the way that direct marketing had been used. Deighton and Glazer (1997) asserted, "The logic of direct marketing has become – for industries from airlines to financial services to computer manufacturers – the logic of all marketing." It went on to argue that "the explosion of digital technologies onto the commercial landscape in the past decade brings nothing fundamentally new to direct marketers; rather if fuels the shift from 'crude' broadcast marketing to interactive marketing…When the marketer talks in digits to the consumer and the consumer responds digitally, the cost of direct marketing falls precipitously and its efficacy rises correspondingly – and in this way the sovereignty of direct marketing principles in marketing is more generally assured."

The argument was not new with the founding of the journal. Blattberg and Deighton (1991) defined interactivity as the facility for individuals and organizations to communicate directly with one another without regard to distance or time. Deighton (1996) argued for three features of interactive communication, "the ability to address an individual and the ability to gather and remember the response of that individual" leading to "the ability to address the individual once more in a way that takes into account his or her unique response." Interactive marketing research has flourished, and many of the topics that scholars studied were indeed on the path that led on from foundations in direct marketing, among them lifetime customer value, customer relationship management, and loyalty programs.

But this article claims that, for all that, direct marketing practice has been a poor parent for the academic discipline of interactive marketing. It taught us that computational power belongs to the marketer, in the form of the database, the computer-driven publisher and the auto-dialer. It neglected to notice that the digitally enabled landline phone, the cellphone, and the networked personal computer would give people countervailing computational power. They would let people protect social lives with the same technologies that direct marketers had used to disrupt them. A technology as simple as Caller ID could become a barrier to unwanted calls. Tivo erected a barrier against broadcast advertising. Google let consumers profile companies as easily as companies could profile consumers. And the implications of the Internet for self-organizing person-to-person communities of resistance were more serious.

We did not foresee that, as the interpenetration of the computational world and the social world accelerated, people would be running their private and social lives with as much information processing power as marketers. The direct marketer's conception of the consumer, naked and exposed to intrusion by phone, mail and spam, and helpless against database surveillance, is precisely the wrong conception to use in designing interactive marketing strategies. Personal computing gives people the strength to defend. A new philosophy of marketing will be needed as the digital interactive era matures, one that owes little to the old.

Digital interactive marketing: Five paradigms

The five emerging marketing paradigms are distinct from those that have traditionally interested marketers, the broadcast paradigm and the direct paradigm. They are responses to the diminution of marketing's power relative to the consumer in the new media environment. These paradigms acknowledge that people use media in ways that are more purposeful and more assertive than the ways that they used mass media and that allowed them to be so easily stereotyped as couch potato advertising audiences and interrupted-at-dinner telemarketing audiences. Words like "viewer" and "listener," and others bequeathed to us by the era of centrally-managed media, are limiting. Indeed the word "consumer" is of limited value in understanding the new context. The marketer needs to be alert to many roles that are played by the person who lives on the buying side of the buyer-seller dyad, because as marketing becomes more ubiquitous it encounters this person in roles that have nothing to do with consuming or being part of an audience or a market target. Therefore in what follows, we shall use the word "person" when we do not intend to limit the roles envisaged for the person who later becomes the buyer, and when we use a specific role descriptor like "consumer" we mean that specific role.

In summary the roles we shall discuss are as follows.

Interactive marketing paradigms	How people use interactive technologies	How firms interpose themselves to pursue marketing goals	Resulting digital media market
Thought tracing	People search the Web for information and browse for entertainment	Firms infer states of mind from search terms and Web page contents and serve relevant advertising.	A market in search terms develops
Activity tracing	People integrate always-on computing into everyday life	Firms exploit information on proximity and pertinence to intrude	A market in access and identity develops
Property exchanges	People participate in anonymous exchanges of goods and services	Firms compete with these exchanges, rather than participating with them	A market in service and reputation and reliability develops.
Social exchanges	People build identities within virtual communities	Firms sponsor or co-opt communities	A market in community develops, competing on functionality and status
Cultural exchanges	People observe and participate in cultural production and exchange	Firms offer cultural products or sponsor their production	Firms compete in buzz markets

Thought tracing

The interaction that matters to search engines such as Google is between the person in search of information or entertainment on one hand and a vast body of right and wrong answers, or apt and unlikely diversions, on the other. When search leaves a trail, it is as if curiosity itself is revealed. The clickstream reveals what is on the person's mind.

The commercial success of Google has shown how useful it is to be able to perform surveillance on the paths people follow when they are searching for answers on Websites. Its AdSense product has provided a source of revenue for all kinds of special-purpose searcher lures. For travelers there is Tripadvisor, for cosmetics users Makeup Alley, for those choosing among consumer products ranging from juicers to digital cameras there is Epinions and for romance there are such sites as match.com, Lavalife, eHarmony and Plenty of Fish. It has enabled all-but-free matching of buyers and sellers on Craigslist.

It is likely that domains beside websites will start to become searchable. Dourish (2001) anticipated a future of "context-aware" computing in which computation and interaction are distributed through the environment and not concentrated on the desktop. In this view the physical environment can respond to a person's needs and activities. Downloadable podcasts and cellphone tours allow environments such as cities and museums to be searchable. GPS-enabled cell phones and mobile devices are making visions such as Dourish's a reality, with content associated with specific locations readily available. Cities and tourist sites are also becoming searchable. Several American cities including New York, Boston, Chicago and San Francisco, offer self-guided cellphone tours and podcasts in which landmarks can be "clicked on" and interpretive information can be received. Recommendation sites like Yelp are comprised entirely of user-generated reviews and tips about things to do and places to go to in a variety of cities. And as tourists find they can search cities, their curiosities and habits also become observable.

Thus what we reveal today about ourselves and what is on our minds as we search for answers generally may very soon be available to marketers in exactly the sense that it is available to marketers through Google, as a clue to our thoughts, goals and feelings.

Activity tracing

The model just described, in which the cellphone performs as life's remote control device to permit interaction between mobile computing power on one hand and layers of information in the environment on the other hand, is just one manifestation of a more pervasive change in the marketplace: mobile marketing enabled by ubiquitous connectivity. In this paradigm, people are potentially audiences for persuasive communication not just when they are searching. Ubiquitous computing makes them "always on." What is traced is not just thought but activity too.

The argument is that when a person is always connected to the Internet, the person is always in the market, always available to be communicated with, and always an audience. That is a disconcerting fate, from which people may look to escape and technologies emerge to do the job. One such technology is known as attention banking, which places a filtering software agent between the individual and the siren calls of marketers, rationing which appeals come to the individual's attention (Farber, 2005).

Thus in the same way that advances in offensive military hardware inspire neutralizing advances in defensive hardware, when it becomes technically possible to be ubiquitously connected to marketing messages then defenders of consumer privacy will invent ways to selectively disconnect people from the marketplace. And the ability to filter or customize the market's messages gives individuals the power to put a price on their attention. A market in access emerges. Just as broadcast television taxed our attention with advertising to pay for programming, so we will enjoy ubiquitous computer connectivity for the price of voluntary exposure to context-specific persuasion efforts.

Property exchanges

The two paradigms just described change the rules of marketing but do not entirely destroy the family resemblance. Marketers must capture the attention of people who are trying to do something else – they must divert or intrude. Television and radio advertising are manifestly intrusive because advertising interrupts the serial presentation of programming. Paid search is also intrusive: marketers pay for links precisely because the links would not earn a high rank relative to the unpaid links if not paid for. And sending uninvited messages to a cellphone based on proximity or activity is the most intrusive of all.

The next three paradigms are different. If the marketer wants to thrive it must become an ally, someone who is welcomed into social or cultural life and is, perhaps, even sought out as someone with cultural capital. All three are paradigms built on peer-to-peer interactivity motivated by the desire to exchange, to share information, or to express one's self.

The property exchange in ideal form dates back to Napster and the concept of file sharing. In this pure form the exchange is anonymous – what's mine is yours and what's yours is mine in a utopian community without private property or status games, and in that pure form it collided quickly with rights holders in the wider world. Its more survivable forms emphasize private property exchanged in markets or cultural and social capital built in communities, as anonymity gives way to varying degrees of reputation and identity, and free exchange gives way to priced exchange. At the market end of the spectrum there is eBay, and at the communal end are Flickr and YouTube.

Definitionally, however, this category is distinguishable from the two that follow because it is driven by a distribution motive, the desire of ordinary people to have access to distribution power that was once the exclusive preserve of firms. Interactive technologies allow people to share and exchange, and marketing understands distribution and the value of controlling channel proliferation. Initially it looks askance at public exchanges like eBay because it does not welcome distribution of second hand goods, seeing resale as competitive with the first sale, and it

overlooks public exchanges like Flickr because they do not seem to distribute anything of marketable value. Over time, however, it learns to work with peer-to-peer public exchanges. Firms like Dell use eBay as a direct-to-consumer channel, and music publishers and an third party advertising supported service license colleges to distribute their products for free, with certain restrictions, or for a monthly fee, with restrictions removed. (Hansell, 2007). Peer to peer exchanges predate the Web, as stock markets, swap meets, usenet groups and bulletin boards attest, but speed, ubiquity and ease of posting and searching have made them integral elements of markets.

Social exchange

The property exchange deals in things; the social exchange deals in identities and reputations. Korea's Cyworld is, arguably, the most compelling example, showing how pervasive the phenomenon can become when computing costs are low and broadband connectivity is almost universal. Forty percent of all Koreans maintain a Cyworld presence, and 90% of Koreans in their 20s, generating $100 million in revenues each year (Wikipedia 2007). Cyworld has become an infrastructure for the enactment of elements of Korean social life, and arguably could become as transformative as the telephone and the automobile were in their times.

MySpace and Facebook are illustrative of this concept in the United States. A person's Facebook site presents a face to the world, including information about whereabouts and action and a "wall" on which friends can post short, often time-sensitive notes, allows people to exchange digital gifts, provides a marketplace for buying and selling, and allows posting of photographs and video clips. The chief executive of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, described the site as offering a new medium for contextually relevant advertising, "Advertising works most effectively when it's in line with what people are already trying to do. And people are trying to communicate in a certain way on Facebook — they share information with their friends, they learn about what their friends are doing." (Locke 2007).

We can distinguish between three kinds of interaction in social exchange of relevance to marketing – communal, instrumental and voyeuristic. (In digital communities even voyeurism is interactive because presence can be detected digitally.) Nielsen (2006) suggests that 1% of web interactivity is truly communal, 9% is instrumental (using a community for some temporary advantage) and 90% is watching others being communal. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) remind us of three community commonalities – consciousness of kind, shared rituals and tradition, and a felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole. Very few people belong to online social exchanges in this sense.

More prevalent is the instrumental social group (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). Groups form around software, technology platforms, and products such as automobiles and gadgets to share tips and help novices. Some are sponsored by manufacturers and some aggressively preserve autonomy from manufacturers, but all are environments in which the work of marketing can be advanced.

Most commonly, the form of digital interactivity of most interest as a marketing medium is word-of-mouth communication. Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007) observe that "word of mouth is a major part of online consumer interactions within the environment of online communities," and go on to argue that our understanding of person-to-person communication may not describe well its role in evaluation and purchase of products on line. "Individuals behave as if websites themselves are primary 'actors' in online social networks and that online communities can act as a social proxy for individual identification." Digitally enabled social exchange is likely to spread beyond the desk as connectivity becomes mobile and ubiquitous.

Increasingly, mobile devices are featuring location-aware capabilities, so that content can be matched to one's geographical location. Particular models of cell phones and add-on applications for cell phones, also known as "apps" bring an array of functionalities to the devices, effectively transforming them into location-sensitive broadcasters and receivers, endowed with knowledge of the individual's patterns, preferences, and social network.

Flixwagon, for example, enables the broadcast of live video from mobile devices to blogs, websites, and social networks, with a single click on the handset. Whrrl maps the past and current activities of the members of one's social network onto an on-screen map on the mobile device, instantly communicating the whereabouts of friends, their activities, and their reviews and recommendations, with positive recommendations represented by a plus sign on the map and negative reviews represented by a minus sign. Users can update their location, send and receive invitations, and post opinions to those in their network in real time using text messaging.

Cultural exchanges

Digital interactivity creates new opportunities for the marketer to contribute to culture. It would of course be quite wrong to say that marketing gave nothing to popular culture before the Internet. But in an earlier era, the influence of advertising was often incidental to a more urgent persuasive purpose. Water cooler conversation might be given a little edge by the weekend's Superbowl ads, and "Where's the beef?" could migrate from fast food advertising to electioneering rhetoric and back, but ideas flow faster on networked channels, when the water cooler is replaced by email chatter, blog gatherings and MySpace page postings.

In this category, marketing is a cultural producer. Just as an author puts into circulation words that do not become ideas except in the minds and hands of readers who make them over for personal or social purposes, so marketing here aspires to be an author in the culture of its customers.

An early instance of a marketer who assumed that people could be relied on to embrace, not fight, brand-building communications if its content was engaging was Jim McDowell, who led BMW's initiative to hire major Hollywood directors and actors to create short films (Moon, 2002). The films did not run on television or in theaters, but were downloaded from the Internet. In the summer of 2001 about nine million downloads

were recorded with an unduplicated audience of two million. Traffic to the website was driven by media advertising of $14 million, and production of the films was estimated to cost $15 million.

Buzz marketing is an umbrella term for the mobilized power of the culture to pass on a marketer's message, an easy task in today's templated and networked environment in which rich media applications can be passed from person to person with extreme ease. In this model, individuals don't feel as if they are receiving advertising messages. Rather the impression is one of passing on something that is novel, entertaining, and very much of the moment.

Consider for example Office Max's "Elf Yourself" campaign in the Christmas 2006 season. People were invited to embed a personalized audio message and a digital image of their face into an animation of a dancing elf in a Christmas green and red outfit. During the campaign's five week run, 26 million visitors were registered, peaking at 200 hits per second. Coverage followed on CNN, VH1, *USA Today*, and *Entertainment Weekly*. OfficeMax responded tongue-in-cheek to the attention in a full page ad in the *Wall Street Journal* on the first workday after the holiday season. "OfficeMax would like to publicly apologize for the recent drop in global productivity", began the advertisement, and went on to encourage workers to return to their pre Elf Yourself level of productivity, and to visit OfficeMax should they require calendars or shredders to help them get organized.

In contrast to the playfulness of the Elf Yourself campaign, Unilever's Dove brand ran a series of Web-integrated communication initiatives over the years from 2002 to the present that fundamentally redefined the brand. In what it described internally as a shift from a functional brand positioning to a brand with a point of view, it confronted the beauty industry with the charge that its communications had been undermining the self-esteem of its users by setting and propagating unrealistic standards for female beauty, and offered instead what it termed the Campaign for Real Beauty (Deighton, 2007). In particular it developed two video products, one featuring pre-teen girls describing their anxieties, and another, captioned 'Evolution' in which a plain woman is transformed by cosmetics and photographic techniques into an icon of stereotypical beauty. These advertisements were widely disseminated on video hosting networks like YouTube, Soapbox, Break.com, Vimeo, Jumpcut, Blip.tv, Metacafe, and Revver, and in addition generated a number of parodies and tributes, both by amateurs and on network programs of Oprah Winfrey, Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien.

In 2007 Unilever's Sunsilk shampoo placed an ostensibly amateur video on YouTube titled Bride Has Massive Hair Wig Out, which showed a bride-to-be reacting in horror to her wedding day hairstyle and hacking at it with scissors as bridesmaids tried to stop her. The video, which contained no brand references, soon accumulated three million YouTube visits and replays on talk shows. Later the episode was revealed as a "net seed," intended to plant the term "wig out" in the culture, to be used later in conventional advertising for Sunsilk hair products.

Cultural production includes the online sharing of links, images, and files with friends, family, and co-workers. The sharing began with the forwarding of links, still a popular activity, and has evolved into a digital form of gift giving. On the social networking site Facebook, members give gifts to each other – virtual, as opposed to actual goods – such as birthday cakes, teddy bears, baseball mitts, martini glasses, and items related to timely stories or trends. These gifts are posted onto friends' public pages. An assortment of such gifts is offered for free, with the more fashionable digital gifts available for purchase for one dollar. Facebook's annual revenues from this market of virtual goods averages over $34 million. (Liew, 2008).

Interactive, networked tools also facilitate the creation of spoofs and parodies, some good-natured, others with a more political agenda. One such example is a Starbucks ad posted to YouTube under the alias of "Poor Bastard". As noted by Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell (2008), this video pokes fun at Starbucks' high-priced coffee beverages in the context of cost relative to feeding a child in a Sudanese refugee camp, and demonstrates "consumer-generated advertising targeted at changing perceptions." In addition to YouTube, the video was widely distributed and commented on via the websites consumerist.com and adrants.com, both of which provide platforms for the consumer to "talk back" to products, and to talk to each other.

The technology underlying each of these phenomena enables easy interaction with the content and among viewers. If the campaigns are effective it is because the interactivity leads to engagement by the audience in co-production of social meaning, and harnesses the psychological consequences of co-production which, while well-documented in the production of services (Bendapudi and Leone 2003) are less studied in the co-production of meaning.

Conclusions and general discussion

The paper has argued that developments in interactive technologies in the past decade lead to the conclusion that direct marketing is not the appropriate ur-model for interactive marketing. Five kinds of interactive marketing have been identified inductively from the landscape of contemporary marketing practice. Is there a parsimonious way to discriminate among these practices? In Fig. 1 we offer two factors that distinguish among the functions of the five categories of interactive marketing medium.

The first factor we employ relies on a distinction between information and meaning proposed by Wolfe (1994). Wolfe argues, in a distinction particularly powerful as we grapple with the limits to the information age, that information is what machines can make or use, while meaning is what only people can make. Information, as he defines it, reduces complexity into smaller, more manageable, units, while meaning makes larger sense out of smaller bits. Information communicates through signs; meaning, through symbols. For those who seek information, context is only noise; for those concerned with meaning, context is everything. Information and meaning, in short, work at cross-purposes. Communication is possible between ma-
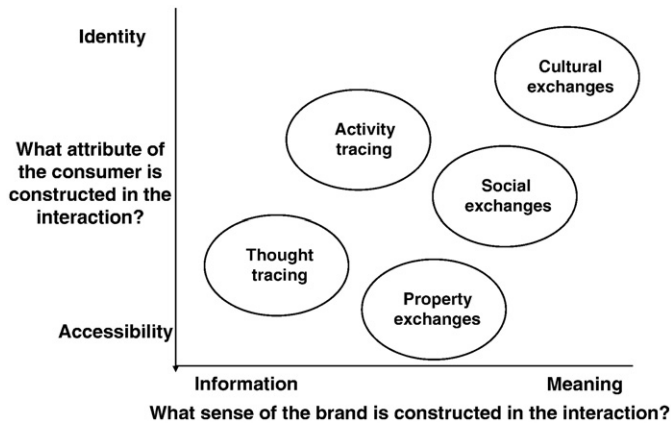
Fig. 1. A Categorization of Interactive Marketing Media by Function.

chines, but interpretation is not. Information can be processed, not read. The act of reading requires an interpreting self.

Monitoring interaction at the level of thought tracing in this view, even if it is aided by Google's algorithms, limits the marketer to the realm of information. The marketer can identify who might be interested in a brand, and who might want more information about the brand. But the marketer desires to operate in the realm of meaning because marketing's purpose is to make a brand mean something that, but for the marketer's intervention, it would not come to mean. Monitoring of interaction in a world of ubiquitous connectivity does not solve the problem. It increases the amount of information available to marketing but it does not alter the capacity to construct meaning.

Wolfe argues that community is integral to meaning-making. He contends that because the world is infinite in its possibilities, meaning is never captured perfectly in the way one individual represents those possibilities to him- or herself. Any one reading of a text is partial and provisional. It takes membership of a culture to read a text in a manner that one can rely on others to read it and, in particular, to be able to use a brand symbolically. And the process has the robustness that comes from recursiveness – culture is needed to read a brand, and reading a brand makes culture.

Thus the search for consensus forces us to turn to others to triangulate across facets of meaning, a social act that binds us together in interpretive communities. Meaning, so it seems, is a cultural idea, not a psychological idea. Thus the five categories of interactivity that we have identified from practice can be arrayed linearly on a scale that measures the power to give symbolic meaning to a brand, and therefore the power to effect marketing transformations on a marketplace.

The second factor we use to distinguish among categories of interaction is the extent to which the category employs or enables identity over mere accessibility. Interaction requires the ability to recognize a person on a second encounter, so that the parties to the conversation can maintain the thread of the dialogue. Simple kinds of address, for example cookies or email locators, are all that is needed to manage simple recognition.

Mobilizing the human need to assert and present to the world a self-serving identity entails more than a cookie. It depends on the ability, opportunity and motive to manipulate one's personal reputation.

To use a search engine to answer a query, or to engage in a very simple transaction on the internet, requires nothing more than an address. As evidence that this is so, Google claims that its search tool collects no individuating information beyond what is needed to address the searcher with the result of the search. But to trade when risk is involved, reputation becomes important, and without identity there can be no reputation. Similarly to interpret the significance of action sequences requires more than just an address. Thus the five categories of interactivity can be arrayed linearly on a second scale, one that measures the power to mobilize identity.

In conclusion our analysis of interactive practices points to a progression up and to the right in the figure. This integrative picture privileges some of the emergent interactive forums over others from the perspective of marketing. In particular, the most potent of the new media are those that enable cultural exchange, media currently exemplified by the functionality of YouTube and Facebook. This analysis concludes that the form of interactivity most attractive to marketing is that which can facilitate peoples' identity projects and contribute to the collective making of meaning.

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