



Letting Go: Six Secrets from Google's BrandLab

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THE RUNDOWN

No matter how carefully calibrated, it's challenging for the machinery of a large corporation to make a brand sound cool to a 20-year-old. To meet this challenge, marketers are opening their brands to customers and discovering ideas that could never come from inside their office walls. In this new paradigm, brands need to open the door. Kim Larson, a brand building expert at Google's BrandLab, works with more than 100 global brands each year. They share their fears, failures, goals and successes. As part of the Engagement Project, she shares how letting go can lead to new, more rewarding relationships.

Brands put a huge amount of time and money into getting their standards right, from building brand books to choosing a font treatment and defining color palettes. All this is crucial to establishing a brand's identity, but too much control can also stymie the ability to move with the pace of change. Too much emphasis on tightly controlling your core message almost always prevents brands from engaging freely with customers. At Google's BrandLab, I talk with some of the world's biggest brands every day about their strategies, challenges, hopes and fears. We bring together the brands, their agencies, Google and YouTube to figure out how they can better connect with consumers in the digital age. The most important thing I tell them: Let go.

Here are six of the secrets of brands that do this well:

SECRET #1: TAKE A SUPPORTING ROLE

Let the consumer take center stage. Again and again, I find that brands who let go and flexibly, adaptively engage with their consumers are the most successful. The idea isn't to leave the consumer alone to call the shots. You're there beside them in a supporting role; taking part in the dialogue. When Kraft's Philadelphia Cream Cheese launched its Real Women of Philadelphia campaign, the conversation shifted from recipes to sisterhood. "The brand had a decision to make: Are we comfortable in enabling that conversation where we're not in the center of it?" recalls John McCarus, SVP, Group Director of Brand Content at Digitas. After briefly considering steering the conversation back to food, they let it evolve in the direction their customers were taking it — and saw their community grow exponentially.

SECRET #2: CONTROL IS AN ILLUSION

In the broadcast age, it was common for brands to hold on to the illusion of control. Today that mindset has changed. As Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos says, "Your brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room." So while it may seem counterintuitive to relinquish "control" after spending so long carefully crafting your brand's identity, you never really had it to begin with. The risk of criticism makes almost all brands nervous. A common fear is that by putting your brand into the hands of consumers you leave yourself exposed to negative comments or hard questions that you might not want to answer publicly. But by opening channels where consumers can express how they feel about your brand, you can actually regain the power to influence what people say and address it — the good and the bad.

SECRET #3: MAKE IT EASY TO PARTICIPATE

Not everyone will want to speak up. So, create easy-entry, low-risk ways for consumers to participate. For the launch of the Chevy Sonic, Chevrolet hosted a bungee jump stunt, where consumers' clicks pushed the car off the edge of a stack of shipping containers. The campaign, part of a wider engagement initiative, led to a net increase in their YouTube channel subscribers, as well as increased brand lift and consideration. By first targeting a specific group, millennials, Chevy was then able to spread and amplify the message to a wider group of fans. The Sonic became America's best-selling subcompact car.

SECRET #4: IF YOU OPEN UP, THEY WILL TOO

For their 'Our Food. Your Questions' campaign, McDonald's Canada encouraged customers to ask about anything through Twitter and Facebook and responded to 10 of the best with a series of informative and entertaining YouTube videos. What is in the sauce in the Big Mac? How is a hamburger patty made? Why does your food look different in advertising? The brand's answers to these questions, and others, resulted in millions of views and prompted customers to submit more questions and reveal more about what was on their mind.

SECRET #5: SHOWCASE EXPERIENCES

Eighty percent of marketing campaigns' reach now comes from amplification through advocacy, a recent international study by Ogilvy found. Create opportunities for people to share their actual experiences. Take Prudential's Day One Stories campaign, where users are asked to share photographs and videos that capture their personal retirement journey. This campaign takes the concept of "show, don't tell" to a whole new level. We're seeing across categories that visual content is what really compels people to think differently about brands.

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SECRET #6: TRUST YOUR FANS

Brands can keep themselves relevant — whether their audience is 20-somethings or 60-somethings — by crowdsourcing. Taco Bell does a great job of this. (It's no coincidence they were named 2013's Marketer of the Year by Ad Age.) They've consistently invited their

customer to help redefine what their brand means over the last 24 months. Its “no strings attached” style of collaboration was on show throughout the launch of the Taco Bell DLT (Doritos Locos Tacos) Cool Ranch and Fiery flavors. They challenged content creators at VidCon this year to make videos launching the new Fiery flavor. Sixty-five content creators took them up on it putting the product into new contexts. Taco Bell CEO Greg Creed says, “You have to entrust 23-year-olds to protect or amplify the brand without the classic structure that organizations use to make decisions ... If you are a control freak, you’re not going to like the future.”

It’s not really a secret recipe — you may have heard some, if not all, of this advice before — but marketers are often surprised to see that it actually works. It does. As the examples I’ve shared show, consumers *want* to participate with brands. In fact, 78% of customers express their brand loyalty by spreading the word about the brand, a recent ClickFox survey found. So let go, and let them do the talking.



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