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Give Them Something to Talk About: Brian Solis on the Art of Engagement

THE RUNDOWN

Word of mouth has always had the power to make — or break — a brand. In the digital age, consumers are increasingly taking the lead in conversations about brands through reviews, YouTube how-to's, comments and social media posts. Author and digital analyst Brian Solis has studied the compound effect these interactions can have on brand perceptions. As part of The Engagement Project, he spoke to us about how brands inspire people to share meaningful product experiences.

First impressions matter. They matter to people and they especially matter to brands. At Google, we've taken a long look at how, increasingly, first impressions are formed online and have a big impact on what we decide to buy. We call this online decision making moment the "Zero Moment of Truth," or ZMOT for short. In his latest book, *What's the Future of Business: Changing the Way Businesses Create Experiences*,

Brian Solis, a principal analyst at Altimeter Group builds further on ZMOT's implications. He zeroes in on how consumers' first impressions of a brand often come from fellow consumers sharing experiences online. The accumulation of these shared experiences, Solis says, means brands need to pay more attention than ever to customer experience, journeys, and the relationships they nurture.

What does engagement mean for you?

Engagement is really about Actions, Reactions and Transactions; something that I refer to as A.R.T. Engagement, for me, is something that *locks* in an interaction or exchange. Thinking about engagement in that way inspires a different approach for content creation; you want somebody to feel something, not just see it.

If you think about engagement in this way, is it measurable?

Absolutely. You define your desired outcome and that outcome becomes what you measure. It's the relationship between cause and effect. Unfortunately, most marketers don't consider the outcome to be more than some low-level engagement measure — a 'Like', a 'Share,' a comment — when in fact you could introduce an emotion. If you love something, you share it. This isn't just about impressions; this is about expressions. You want people to share it and do something and that should be designed into your engagement strategy.

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How can you enlist 'shares' to support a campaign objective?

No content should be designed today that isn't inherently shareable. Take the Jeff Gordon Pepsi MAX commercial on YouTube. It comes from that same thinking that goes into Super Bowl commercials, where you stop and go, 'Oh my god, that is the best commercial I've ever seen!' For some reason marketers only get that creative once a year, but YouTube and the social web are unlocking that type of thinking. Everything you introduce to the social web should have the same caliber of creativity that goes into a Super Bowl commercial.

Is there a tendency for marketers to feel so overwhelmed by technology that they lose sight of their basic instinct for how consumers behave?

Look, I'm a consumer, you're a consumer. When we talk about the brands we love, it's very human

and natural. But when we try to talk to people like us, we blank out and turn into ‘Marketing Man.’ We lose that human nature, that empathy.

If you take a technology perspective, you are forever reacting. The minute you take a step back and say, “What’s the bigger mission?” you start to realize what you are trying to do is change behavior. This relationship between cause and effect is very human. Once you articulate that vision, technology becomes an enabler. It starts to work for you.

Consumers share brand experiences, whether the brand is listening or not. Do brands listen enough to those conversations?

Author Maya Angelou said: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Take Twitter, Facebook, YouTube — what is shared is experiences. Somebody is eating a delicious dinner; that picture is published and shared. Somebody spots a product that makes them feel fantastic; it too becomes a shared experience. There are shared experiences that represent every step of the customer journey. These conversations existed before technology, but now they are searchable, retrievable and building on each other. Shared experiences, in aggregate, become the brand.

What happens when a brand’s marketing doesn’t reflect its image among consumers?

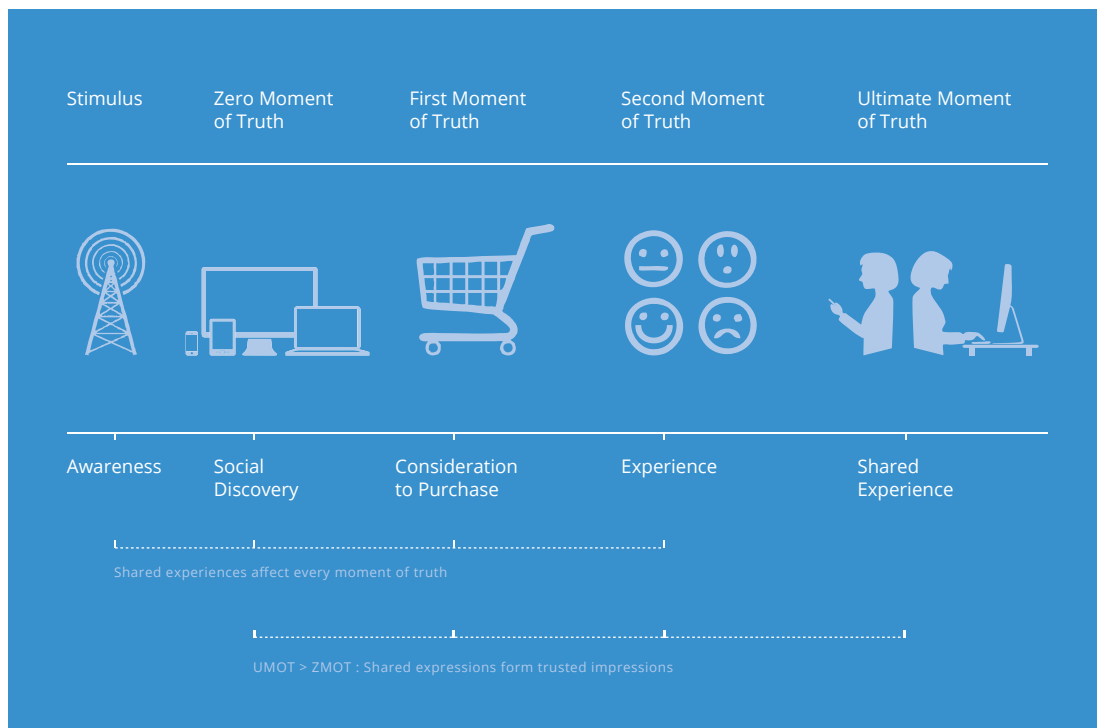
You may say: “This is our brand, this is what it represents, this is what we want you to feel, say, share.” But always ask yourself: “What is the collective experience that is published across the social web?” If you compare the two, many times there’s a disconnect between promise and real world experiences. I refer to this as the ‘experience divide.’ In many experiments I’ve found the brand promise and the experiences that are felt and shared are not even close to being aligned. That’s a problem.

How can brands close that gap?

If we spent less time ‘talking’ about our brand and brand promise and more time designing how we bring it to life, the experience divide would naturally narrow.

What can brands do when online consumers’ first impressions are being shaped by other consumers’ experiences?

These conversations — these shared experiences — they don’t self destruct. They build upon each other, creating a collective index. Search engines plug into this cloud of shared experiences and that Ultimate Moment of Truth, or UMOT for short, of shared experiences becomes the next



person's ZMOT. Experiences form impressions. Impressions become expressions as they're shared. Expressions form new impressions. The link between UMOT and ZMOT is the future of branding and relationships.

This is a new way of thinking. As a brand you have to create the experiences you want people to have and share, and reinforce that through positive conditioning, so those are the things people find — over and over again. To get people to share more positive things, you have to first make sure they have a positive experience. This is a renaissance opportunity for brands to look back: 'Why did we start this company? What are we trying to do?' Because in the social web, it is those experiences that become your brand.



Brian Solis

Brian Solis is Principal Analyst at Altimeter Group. His latest book, What's the Future of Business: Changing the Way Businesses Create Experiences, is published by Wiley, John & Sons.