The Art and Science of Omnichannel Marketing - and a Dash of Peter Max

By Marshall Sponder | *Jun 3, 2014*

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Robert D'Loren is the CEO of Xcel Brands, a company that owns the Isaac Mizrahi name and has an interest in Liz Claiborne New York. Yesterday, we told you how the company is championing an omnichannel marketing strategy. Today, we'll continue the conversation — and explore how the company stays in tune with consumer demand.

One thing of paramount importance is color forecasting. For a holding company for two top clothing lines, as well as a jewelry line, forecasting what demand will be in terms of color and style is critically important.

No one would be crazy enough to make big investments in a thought or whim about what *might* be popular in two years, D'Loren said. Rather, companies have to keep their fingers on the pulse of future trends and monitor places from which they evolve.

The Great Pyramid of Art

Creative types often refer to pyramids, divided into layers. The one that fuels D'Loren's imagination has art at the top, followed by music, film, technology and architecture. More recently, he's added two new layers at the bottom — fashion and social media.

D'Loren said he was introduced to the great "pyramid of art" at the offices of Peter Max, the German-born American illustrator and graphic artist. Max rose to fame in the late 1960s for his use of psychedelic shapes and color palettes, like the one shown in this post.

D'Loren said he worked closely with Max for a time. It was a beneficial relationship, he recalled, prompting him to share the story of the great Lucite pyramid in the artist's office.

I can't locate an image of this pyramid, so you'll have to use your imaginations. According to D'Loren, it stood on or near Max's desk.

Standing about three-feet tall, it encapsulated the hierarchy of art and the concept of trendsetting. The message that it represented still resonates today, especially with the extension to fashion and social media, he explained.

What does that pyramid have to do with color forecasting and fashion trends? Let me explain.

What a lot of designers do now (bearing in mind that all fashion and product brands have creative directors and people who are constantly looking for trends) is send trend-spotters into various cultural centers … Paris, Milan, Tokyo. The idea is to *look at what is hot in art.*

For example, Robert Lichtenstein's work stole the show in Paris last year. What trickled down into fashion from those works were his color palettes.

Fashion designers take their cues from art, D'Loren explained. Then they look at the next layers on the pyramid: music and film, because that is where other visual cues emerge. Architecture, the next layer, supplies many cues in terms of graphics, prints and patterns.

In essence, the clothes and colors you wear today reflect the hottest recent trends in art, music, film, technology and so forth.

But Wait A Minute…

Call me a skeptic, but I had some doubts about the whole thing. So I shared then with D'Loren.

Do the curators in major museums or art and cultural centers truly know what they are doing when they choose "hot trends" to promote? Or are they simply making it up as they go along to fit their own preconceptions of art and what the prevailing trends ought to be?

D'Loren countered, again, with his own "mental model" of how the fashion and accessories world works. Namely, in his world, the art curators are the de facto "trend setters," and designers take their cues from art curators.

D'Loren looks at the various cues from the arts as "data-points" that are factored in, along with the ideas of his designers as well as the ideas shared by customers *through the multi-channel experience and social media*.

How are these data-points weighted? Well, the creative process doesn't work in a big data or automated way. There are no data capture technologies, business intelligence tools or other protocols in the fashion world. Not yet anyway.

Even in this digital age, fashion is still very "analog" based, he explained. But data is becoming more important.

Creative teams supply their designers with intelligence about what customers want. They work closely with data and analytics from various omnichannel experiences. Then empowered marketing and sales people at retail outlets — on- and off-line — function as boots on the ground, listening to customers and analyzing needs and desires.

Brilliant Right Brains

Today it still takes people who have absolutely brilliant right brains, working in a more "analog" mode, looking at all of what is going on out there and take those cues and interpret that through the lens of the brands they are working for, D'Loren said.

"After all, Picasso didn't go out and use spreadsheets to figure out what he was doing," he noted.

However, D'Loren thinks we will get to the point where databases can manipulate big data sufficiently to create real business insights. "We'll be using all these data points to forecast what will likely be the next 'big thing,' but we're not there yet," he said.

What's Ahead

As time goes on, content curated from social media coupled with intelligent listening platforms such as Brandwatch, Crimson Hexagon and Geofeedia that are feeding into cloud-based repositories that can store and annotate content with the right taxonomies, will make it increasingly easier for companies to spot trends.

Source: Geofeedia – curating Fashion Shows at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, NYC

My own point of view: certainly better image and facial recognition capabilities are needed for trendsetting discovery. *But predictive analytics and annotation platforms already exist in part, and Facebook and Google have proven the merits of these capabilities.*

Google's augmented reality device, Google Glass, would be a great data collection point, for instance.
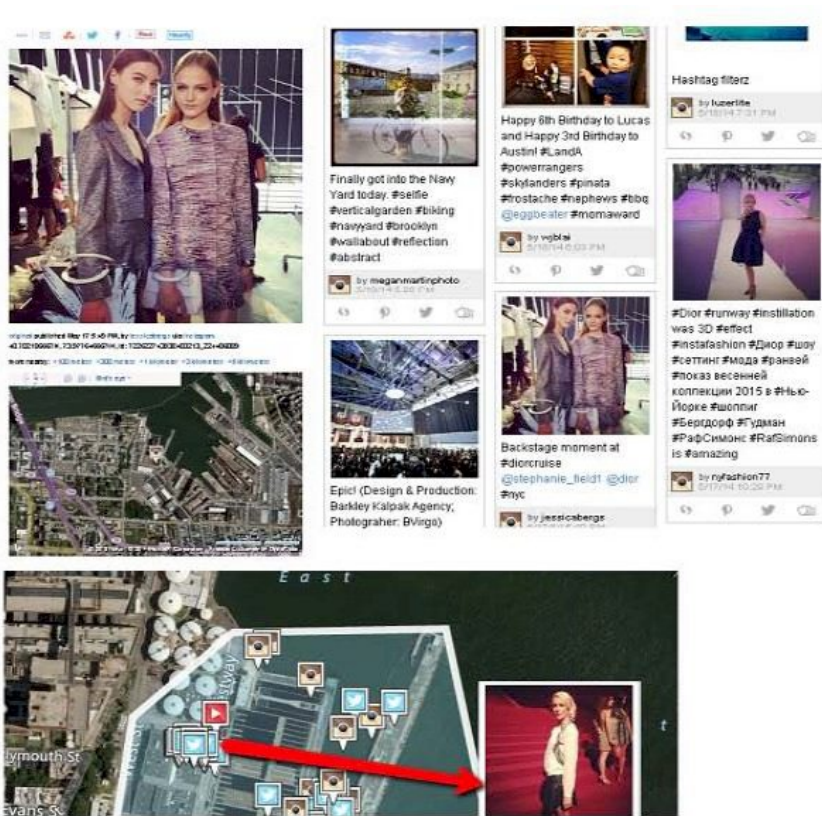
While direct observation and interaction seem to work best to collect information about what to design, social media and big data could provide some of those cues in the future. Social media has enabled transparency, authenticity and open communication in ways that no one very dreamed of, except, perhaps, the people who put Star Trek together.

But that transparency has also created responsibilities. We are moving to a place very quickly where not only do people want to know how a product was made, but also they want to know where and how it was made. Soon, people will expect to see that transparency and that will be part of the branding.

Leveraging Omnichannel

The bottom line is simple. D'Loren embraces omnichannel:

Each marketing channel has its own customer base and customer likes and dislikes. We know what our QVC customer wants because she speaks to us every day. We engage 2.5 million women for two hours every Monday night on QVC, and while she is watching she is also on her tablet, talking to us. The lifecycle of our sale is one hour, and we know exactly what she wants because she is very engaged with us.
When you get into brick and mortar sales and move into wholesale accounts it is a little more difficult because everything is coming to you filtered by a retailer, and we do not have that direct consumer relationship. In our own stores we know what she wants because she talks to us, and in our own e-commerce we're getting the feedback all the time. So we are trying to look at trends in the real world and what customers are telling us they want and interpreting it through the lens of our brand."

About the Author

For more than a decade, Marshall Sponder has influenced the development of the digital analytics field with his industry blog, WebMetricsGuru, which focuses on social media metrics and web intelligence. He is the author of Social Media Analytics and possesses considerable in-house corporate experience as a visionary at IBM and Monster, combined with contract work for Porter Novelli PR, small businesses and start-ups.

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