Let's talk about talking

Context as the guiding principle in deliberation-oriented media management

Full paper

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Deliberation – a topic for media managers?

This contribution is concerned with marketing aspects relevant for deliberation-oriented media managers. While this may seem odd at first, there is no reason a media manager should not be managing the production or distribution of media that focus on the interests of the public sphere. However, even if you are disinterested in deliberation, the ideas we present are compatible to basically anything you are trying to distribute. Just as a remembrance: Wiebe in 1951 (1951, p. 679 ff.) already questioned: "Why can't you sell brotherhood like soap?" With that he opened the discussion for social and nonprofit-marketing – and to sum it up, marketing could indeed easily be transferred to nonprofit environments (Kotler/Levy 1969, p. 15; cf. Kotler 1975, cf. Kotler 1975) and, as Rau showed (cf. 2000, p. 89 ff.and 2007, p. 137 ff.), the approach is also fruitful for newsroom output and situations with merit wants or demand in media usage.

We want to show how the concept of product-oriented marketing helps understand how general engagement in deliberation may be elevated by marketing deliberation around context rather than content. At the start, we like to outline the specifics of product-oriented marketing in accordance to Rainer Funk, adding our own thoughts on why the marketing of media profits from the product-oriented-marketing approach so much more than the marketing of "normal" products like cars or cigars. Here, it will become obvious that the most essential paradigm shift for success is to build media marketing around context rather than content. The final part of this paper tries to elaborate on the advantages of context over content when it comes to media-based deliberation.

What is product-oriented marketing?

The psychoanalyst Rainer Funk uses the term "product-oriented marketing" to sketch out the dominant form of marketing in modern times (Funk, Rainer, 2005; 2009, p. 3). Our translation: „The favored marketing strategy of the 20th century was a product-oriented one. This term does not mean that marketing was about the outstanding qualities of a product and it's practical value. Product-oriented marketing rather means that the qualities attributed to the product can only be called attributes in a rudimental way."

According to Funk, product-oriented marketing works because it implies that the marketed products are accessories of desirable lifeworlds, trying to suggest that, in order to be part of said lifeworlds, the consumer would be well advised to buy the accessory. Once again, Funk (2009, p.5), in our translation: „Through the production of emotional realities, certain target groups should get the

ability to feel alive again, full of emotions, active, creative, oriented, aroused, secure or full of passion. […] Successful advertising today orchestrates worlds of experiences and lifestyles, it gives the impression that the products are parts of these lifeworlds. The ad brings forth a world of experience or a sweet dream, a world full of fascinating beauty or even dirty brutality, in which the desires, affects and needs of people are materialized, and, at the same time, the yoghurt or beer or powerful car are at home." Communication, in accordance to this concept, means any sort of action that tries to negotiate the status of the relationship between customers and the lifeworld.

This psychoanalytical stance on modern marketing seems to coincide with marketing concepts that are typically found in management, like „brand relevance" (Romanuik et al., 2004) or experiential marketing (Schmitt, 2011). However, these similarities are not analyzed well enough for the moment. That is why this paper focuses on the psychoanalytical theory Funk presents.

Gusko et al. (2011) have evaluated on methods to compensate for the two major deficits product-oriented marketing has: Diminishing returns and abolishable accessories. Diminishing returns occur if the consumer does not experience that the marketed accessory brings her closer to the promised lifeworld. A consumer may easily experience that consuming Coca-Cola does not translate into getting closer to Coca-Cola's young-people-party lifeworld. Abolishable accessories are, in some way, the opposite negative effect: A young-people-party lifeworld still exists if the consumer chooses to remove Coke from it.

Gusko et al. present solutions for both of these problems for the case of media as products, working with a definition of media as material agents whose purpose is to solve certain problems and whose activities shape and enable social order. The gist of their proposed solutions is to get rid of the concept of media as windows, giving the consumer the chance to not only observe lifeworlds and thus either accept or reject them, but also to engineer these lifeworlds. Thus, the accessibility of the lifeworlds is way higher, while, at the same time, the media as tools for engineering are not just mere accessories anymore, but rather necessities. Obviously, these solutions prefer lifeworlds built around media that give the consumer a variety of possibilities and incentives to be active in the lifeworld-engineering process. Social media are a prime example, and social-media-based lifeworlds may incorporate other, more traditional media, pretty easy because of their similarities when it comes to media logic.

The underestimated value of context

Communication and media theories in general differentiate between the content of media and the context, between the "what" and the "how" of communication. While most media marketing approaches rightfully stress the value of content (cf. Rau 2000, p. 89), there is a growing number of cases where it is not advisable to put too much emphasis on content in marketing. The major disadvantage of content is that content presents the consumer with a pretty binary option: Either she is interested in said content or she is not. Generally, interest grows the more specific the content is, because, in the words of the lifeworld-concept, specific content presents a clearer visual of the lifeworld, making it easier to control one's own process of getting immersed into this lifeworld. However, special content is reclusive towards mass audiences. On the other hand, a diluted content means a diluted lifeworld, which would ridicule the whole idea of deliberation, where thoughtful consideration is vital.

This is why we propose to focus on context rather than content. By "context", we specifically refer to the practices of communication, the written and unwritten codes of communicative conduct. In essence, context is about the "how" of communication instead of the "what". Context avoids content's major disadvantages, as it is hard to imagine how a purposefully crafted context should be diluted or reclusive in any meaningful way.

Let us give you an example: Consider Facebook a social-medium-based lifeworld and let's assume that Facebook's context is defined by it's main claim "Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life." Albeit appearing to be just a functional description, this claim already stipulates several codes of conduct. First of all, it tells the consumer what specific use she should make out of a plethora of possible uses, namely connecting and sharing with people. Given, this is pretty broad, and we do not consider it to be perfect when it comes to avoiding dilution. However, it still gives Facebook a purpose, yet leaving the consumer to interpret that purpose in several ways and thus giving her the opportunity to engineer the lifeworld according to her own needs, making the lifeworld highly immersive.

Second, the claim awkwardly restricts the helpfulness of Facebook to connecting and sharing with people in one's life. What does "people in one's life" mean? When is a person "in my life"? The simple answer is: Whenever I want that person to be! This is quite the clever trick of this lifeworld. If the claim would suggest restricting Facebook's uses to friends and family, for instance, it could fall into the "reclusive"-trap. If, on the other hand, the lifeworld did not make any claim about the people with whom to connect and share, the lifeworld would lose the personal aspect of the interactions. Keep in mind: "Personal", as is implied by "people in one's life", as a code of conduct suggests the ideal lifeworld-bound relationships to be evaluated not primarily by their instrumental usefulness, but rather by their contribution towards the wellbeing of a person as a *social* human being. The lifeworld, in essence, becomes a lifeworld that focuses on human social needs, yet let's the customer engineer it to fit her needs best. That is the "wide range of opportunities" we mentioned earlier.

Context as a paradigm in creating deliberation-oriented, media-based lifeworlds

Deliberation-oriented content consists of topics worth of deliberation. If you use, say, a social medium to promote discussion about an important political topic, your consumer base will consist of those people who are, at the same time, interested in the topic, interested in discussion on the topic and interested in taking part in such discussion in a social medium. You may be able to convince people to take interest in a topic they are not interested in by default, through different means of marketing. Engagement, however, is the hard thing to produce. It is not like there are too few consumers who think Wikipedia is important, it is just that they do not feel the need to become producers for the project themselves. Twitter has experienced a similar issue; that is why their new claim "Follow your interests" makes much more sense from a product-oriented marketing standpoint than their previous claim "What are you doing right now?" It involves those who are passive and do not look for ways to become active.

Here, a lesson can be learned for deliberation. Though deliberation simply cannot work when consumers stay passive, it has to make the smallest possible demands of action on the consumers. While content would ask the customer to "keep an open mind towards a topic", context asks to

"keep an open mind towards deliberation, no matter what the topic is". Immersion into a context-lifeworld thus works even if there is no current topic that the customer is interested in, as long as she is interested in the notion of "important topics being out there".

How do media-based lifeworlds help the deliberation process? For deliberation to work, it has to be voluntary. For many people, the transition from their private sphere to the public sphere, in order to engage in deliberation, is the major negative. They dislike being exposed in the public sphere. Media-based lifeworlds offer public-sphere-contextuated, private-sphere-rooted spaces for altercation. There are no huge obstacles in the way of getting involved, as being part of such a media-based lifeworld is as easy as joining Facebook. Yet, there are no demands involved as well.

"Deliberation", according to Habermas, primarily means a "discourse free of domination" (Habermas, 1981). Obviously, deliberation thus cannot work as long as it is not voluntary. Our proposed model of deliberation helps voluntariness, as it roots the decision for participation in the private sphere, without the risk of damaging the stability of said sphere. While the idea of deliberation does not actually work in a public sphere, where there still are certain people or parties who have major advantages in the deliberative process, measures of "equalizing down" such advantages contradict free society; however, measures of making advantages less important do not. Giving consumers the opportunity to take part in deliberation out of their private sphere is such a measure.

The other important thing about deliberation is that it presents a form of collectivization, meaning it is a form of collective action in order to reach certain collective goals. However, in contrast to most forms of collectivization, it actually suffers from the subordination of individuality under the common purpose. This is why deliberation in the public sphere is so hard to achieve. On the other hand, private-sphere-rooted deliberation may avoid these issues, sustaining individuality to a much larger degree.

Suggestions for media managers

As a conclusion of this contribution, we want to give three pieces of advice for media managers who try to follow our suggestions.

First of all, consider the following question: Is the accessory you build your lifeworld around the idea of deliberation or a medium? Both are quite valid options. However, remember that the aforementioned issue of diminishing returns is easier avoided if a medium is the core accessory.

Second: Give both your main claim (or, as we like to call it, overarching theme) and your main examples of conduct a lot of thought. This paper did not elaborate on these; however, Gusko et al. (2011) have shown the importance of both.

Third: Avoid creating lifeworlds that become "greedy institutions". Lewis A. Coser defined them as institutions that try to aquire the "undivided commitment" of their participants (Coser, 1974). Deliberation does not work if consumers feel to have no choice but to take part in it.

Further research

As one can see, these pieces of advice are not sufficient at all. We expect additions by working out the base for commensurability of the concept of product-oriented marketing and economically oriented marketing theories that have better formulas for success already. Further research is also required when it comes to suppositions of media effects on immersion into lifeworlds. Last, but not least, the purpose of the concept of product-oriented marketing in theories of psychoanalysis is to point out several negative effects this kind of marketing has on individuals. Further theoretical work is required here. If media managers take deliberation serious, they must avoid these negative aspects.

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