

‘Conversational Marketing in the Age of AI’

Vikram Sakhuja’s speech at the DMA Asia Brandmasters on April 7, 2023, Mumbai

They say there is no better marketing than word of mouth. I bought tickets to see Pathan and RRR only because of WOM. A product-based conversation led me to buy Varmora Tiles for my bathroom I’m currently renovating. My next show on OTT is clearly influenced by Netflix’s recommendation engine, A Uniqlo jacket I was browsing followed me when I visited the store leading me to buy it. For my upcoming trip to Scotland, I followed up a Booking.com search with a call to a real human at the hotel to get a 40% better deal.

In all these examples my brand choice was a result of some kind of a ‘dialogue’. At a profound level, in marketing communication by definition the word ‘communication’ involves a feedback loop. So why is it that so much of marketing is still one way. All marketers would be best advised to pay heed to the saying – “Baat karne se hi baat banti hai”.

The good news is that marketers have never had it better to have conversations with their consumers. It is interesting that at the formative years of Digital marketing my earlier company chose to call its Digital practice GroupM Interaction. Today it is clear that all aspects of marketing have the ability to be interactive or conversational:

- **Take advertising:** *Broadcast epitomized one to many and one way message delivery. Today not only do we have the ability to deliver personalized communication to cohorts, but we also have the ability to provide an instant feedback loop that gets the consumer to the brand’s marketing assets, a call centre or sales channel. I think brands on IG and Pinterest are getting this right.*

- **In-market consumers look for Expert advice and this intent is obviously a gold mine for marketers:** This has led to a huge business Search, followed by Reviews, referrals and Influencers. Are we viewing this as a conversation opportunity.
- **Web 2.0 has been all about users generating content and Sharing it leading to the explosion in social media:** This has spurred brands to develop their social media and content strategies and truth be told that while Social is used well for Performance on Branding we are still figuring our way about it
- **Loyalty building:** We have attempted CRM, Remarketing, Omnichannel marketing and Sales calls to get consumers back. If we kept it conversational rather than spammy, wouldn't it work harder.

The insight I am offering here is that the way marketers treat advertising, search, social and loyalty can change profoundly if we look at it from the lens of starting a conversation. And for that we need to listen before we respond.

Now let's come to AI. The age of AI has introduced an interesting layer. Because AI learns from your past behavior, it tends to reinforce it. If I've been watching Crime shows on an OTT platform, the platform will push more such similar shows. At one level it increases the relevance of my query. However, this has a tendency to create more polarized and insular groups and communities. And has deeper sinister sociological implications that worry me.

But I see a salvation through generative AI which at least can reduce insularity and open our minds. Let me demonstrate with two examples .

In India you need to choose wisely when you want to ask someone for directions, because everyone will have an opinion even if they don't know the answer. I choose paanwaalas or if I can see a Food delivery agent. Because chances are that they know. What about Search. I asked the Q What is the opposite of Artificial Intelligence to Google and Chat GPT.

Google's answer: Artificial Intelligence is a product of human intelligence therefore there is no opposite to AI. The concept of the question is Artificial.

ChatGPT's answer: the opposite of artificial intelligence would be natural stupidity or organic ignorance. Now which answer is better? I'm not sure. But ChatGPT made me think more.

Let's also look at SEO. If today's SEO is about conducting keyword research, optimizing your website's content and inbound links, will a generative AI engine change the game. I queried "website for best bathroom ideas" on google and ChatGPT.

Google's top 2 hits were sponsored - Beautiful Homes and Bonito. Then organically I got houzz.in, housebeautiful, pinterest-kbchatdrive and architectural digest.

ChatGPT gave me houzz, HGTV, Better homes & gardens, Apartment Therapy and Elle Décor. Apart from Houzz they are all different. So, whose directions should I follow.

ChatGPT with its underlying large language model and generative AI technology is good at understanding user intent and providing a summarised answer from a vast pool of knowledge instead of pointing them to a destination.

Google search engine uses complex algorithms to index and rank billions of web pages and provides users with the most relevant search results, instantly.

So, if your intent was to visit the most relevant website chances are google search is still better than ChatGPT.

That said, in the area of enterprise SEO, ChatGPT can complement conventional SEO strategy to give a dramatic optimisation opportunity. Say, for a website with more than 1000 pages that has duplicated meta-data, ChatGPT can create custom title tags and descriptions (instead of resorting to slugs and formulaic solutions) that can save countless hours with better results. Enterprise SEO also often requires large scale content production. ChatGPT could play an important role in increasing efficiencies by automating content production and empowering content staff to create more with less and save countless hours on initial research.

But What does Google Says About That? *Google has a section in Search Essentials where it categorises automatically generated content as spam if it has been generated for the primary purpose of manipulating search rankings and not helping users. What is helping users is a grey area. We can see an interesting battle play out on the do's and don't's of valid auto generated content.*

So, what I have said today:

- 1. The essence of communication is a feedback loop. Consumers in any case are making brand choices based on conversations they are having. Now marketers have a hear and now opportunity to join this conversation through advertising, search, social and loyalty.*
- 2. AI can play 2 roles in conversational marketing. A prescriptive one that tends to reinforce what you already believe or “find relevant” and a more descriptive one which assimilates knowledge and allows you to come to an answer. One will make polarised tight cohorts the other can increase diversity. Both have a role.*
- 3. Lastly, the role of humans will be to go to uncharted areas where machines can follow. The three areas that AI seems to struggle with is empathy, authenticity, and blue ocean ideas. As a species let us humans be one up on the machines and keep the conversations real.*