# THE NATURE OF MARKETING

## Marketing to the Swarm as well as the Herd

By Chuck Brymer

**What exactly is *The Nature of Marketing: Marketing to the Swarm as well as the Herd,* all about?**

This book, quite simply, explores what I feel is the future of marketing: engaging communities around your brand.

Look at how a school of fish behaves. They have no leader, but even a single darting fish can lead the entire school toward a food source or away from a predator. This is not just a metaphor for how swarms of consumers now behave in an era of digital connectivity, but in fact an observable trend. How these communities form, interact, and disperse is irrevocably changing the landscape for marketers and how we communicate.

Centuries ago, communities of people gathered in town squares and influenced each other. Today we have become a global community that can quickly flock toward – or flee from – your brand as a group.

For example, look at how a single blog entry about trying to cancel AOL spread across the Internet – soon afterward, they stopped charging for much of their services. Or look at how the irresistible force of people sharing digital music online ultimately led to legal downloading services like iTunes and the second generation of Napster. Advertising and branding are still important, but they are now just one voice that influences the swarm.

**What will I learn from this book that I do not already know?**

First and foremost, you will see trends like social networks and Web 2.0 in a much larger context. Consumers now often influence each other on line and offline more than advertising and marketing can, and we will increasingly need to understand this process of influence in our own marketing efforts.

Suppose you create the best advertisement imaginable for your product or service, but a housewife in Iowa posts a horror story about it on a site like Consumerist.com, and then the blogosphere picks up on it? Or, on a more positive note, what happens when enough consumers rave about your hotel on major travel rating sites? Or an affinity group makes your product an official supplier? Or everyone decides to purchase a hot new toy for Christmas?

This is the heart of marketing to the swarm. You still have to create a brand identity and promote it to people. But now, you have to listen to your community as well. You can't simply buy your way into or out of the path of the swarm, but you can create a dialogue that attracts it to strong brands.

In the book, I refer to this process as one of conviction, collaboration, and creativity. We need to have a clear brand message, we need to engage communities and co-create our products and services with them, and we need the creative skills to attract these communities to what we can offer them – the ability to create messages that not only attract people, but get people talking with each other.

**How will this book change my view of marketing? And as you wrote it, how did it change yours?**

I am a product of what I feel is the golden era of advertising, where strong brands were created by combining the right message with products and services that attracted people. I personally came away from this project more convinced than ever about the value of this process. But now it has been magnified: customer perceptions must match your brand message at the speed of light, literally. And more important, tomorrow's dominant brands will be built on attracting these communities as a whole, not just on reaching a percentage of them with advertising.

**Why the name, *The Nature of Marketing: Marketing to the Swarm as well as the Herd*?**

There is a saying in government that if you like laws or sausages, don't watch either being made. I now think a similar thing applies to the process of creating a book title!

All joking aside, we made a thoughtful choice to chronicle a growing force of nature in consumer behavior, one that that biologists have seen for centuries in the animal kingdom. Humans are becoming more like swarms in nature as we become a global, digitally-linked community, and this is dramatically changing our purchasing behavior.

I also want to make an important point about the last part of the book's subtitle, "as well as the herd." We have traditionally marketed to a herd of individual consumers in front of their television sets or web browsers, instead of a swarm that influences each other. Herd marketing works as well as ever, and is not going away. But leveraging entire swarms of consumers will be an extraordinarily powerful force for the future.

**How far have we progressed as an industry in marketing to communities?**

Let me be very honest: we are just scratching the surface today. I noticed this in researching case studies for this book, and you have probably noticed it as a consumer – how many brands truly engage you as part of a community nowadays?

I believe this is changing quickly, and the early adopters are already reaping the benefits. Look at the community that has emerged around Apple, which now commands a market share of nearly 80% of the digital music market, or Google, which is home to two out of three Internet searches. Brands that attract the swarm, and often generate a dominant market share in the process, are serving as a model for the rest of us.

**What should we be doing that we are not doing now?**

More than anything, we need to be paying attention to consumers at a community level. Are they part of the creative process for your products or services? Do they have a voice in your company? When they are saying things about you in the community, online or offline, is anyone listening? And above all, do they identify with rather than simply purchase your brand? If there is one key take-away from this book, it is to start thinking more like the swarm of consumers.

For example, twenty years ago we simply created ads to sell lightbulbs. Last year, our client Philips posted a challenge to everyone to listen online to the Live Earth concert, to calculate how much energy and greenhouse gases they would save by switching to their compact fluorescent bulbs – and engaged people to tell their friends. The result was selling three million lightbulbs by following the swarm where it flocked.

**On the basis of what you learned from doing this book, what advice do you give your clients?**

Because we are involved at a very high strategic and creative level with our clients, one key thing I am proposing to them – and doing ourselves for our top offices at DDB – is having a Chief Community Officer who oversees your relationship with the community. I see this role, which combines the influence of a Hollywood agent, the effectiveness of a guerilla marketer and the expertise of a digital programmer, as a model for how we approach marketing in the future.

I am also telling clients the same thing DDB has been saying for over 50 years: listening to your customers and delivering brand value is more important than ever. For example, our famous "We try harder" campaign for Avis wasn't just about a slogan – it was about rallying the entire company around clean cars and great service. In a digital swarm era, the dialogue with your customers is more important than ever.

**Do we run the risk of causing a swarm backlash if we are seen as overtly playing to these communities?**

Very good question. Swarms flock to things that benefit them, and flee from things that do not. They are the ultimate judge and jury of our marketing efforts. If these communities feel they are simply being "marketed to" as opposed to listened to and helped, it most certainly can work against your brand.

**Can one create swarms off line as well as online?**

Absolutely. Look at events ranging from the Beatlemania of the 1960s to the New Coke backlash of the 1980s. These were all swarms that grew and multiplied through traditional human contact.

This underscores the key point of my book. It is not about marketing to social networks or creating blogs – rather, it is about forces of nature that are being further unleashed by digital technology. The fact that consumers are behaving more like communities, and less like individuals, goes far beyond how much time we are spending online.

**What is the single best example you have seen lately of natural swarm activity affecting a brand or marketing?**

Look at the growth of tools that link communities themselves nowadays. Facebook is estimated to have a market value of over US$10 billion nowadays, and many of the top 100 websites are ultimately tools that connect swarms together. I feel this trend is a model for the future, and it validates a lot of what we are saying about engaging people at a community level.

**What is the single best example of encouraged swarm activity around a brand or marketing that you have witnessed in the last six months to one year?**

A couple of examples come to mind recently. For one, the Volkswagen Group has steadily continued to cultivate an image of being a thinking man's car, building a community using everything from a humorous video blog in Germany to participatory web sites, as well as traditional advertising. They had record sales of over 6 million vehicles last year and command a 10% market share of a competitive global market – I believe in part because of a consumer community that identifies with the brand. Sales in the first 6 months of 2008 grew both in the US and globally: http://media.vw.com/article_display.cfm?article_id=10353

A more publicly visible example was the success of Radiohead's album In Rainbows, which was first made available for download at a price of one's choosing, with minimal publicity. After attracting a huge swarm of listeners, it went on to become a number one seller after being physically released as a CD. This, to me, was a perfect example of a strong existing brand leveraging a swarm of consumers.

**Why did you decide to write this book?**

I frankly felt that much of what is being written about engaging communities was looking at pieces of a much larger whole. There are books out there – good ones – on subjects like social networks, Web 2.0, co-creation, and the social dynamics of groups. Someone needed to pull together trends like these and look at the larger forces of nature that are changing consumer behavior.

Successful brands will need to rethink the relationship they have with their consumers, and they will not get there by simply putting an ad on Facebook. Serving as the CEO of DDB Worldwide has given me a tremendous 20,000-foot view of how things are changing nowadays, and I wanted to lay out the whole picture in a way that stimulates dialogue in the advertising and marketing community.

**What other books have you written?**

I was a co-author for the book Brands and Branding, in partnership with The Economist magazine, in 2004.

**Have you always thought you would write a book?**

Advertising is all about communication, and I have been in advertising for over a quarter century. For me, books are still the logical medium for communicating ideas to the greater public. For example, I may reach a few hundred people when I deliver a speech, but the right book can get people talking around the globe. So it makes sense to me to use the printed word as one of many ways to be part of this dialogue, and I look forward to doing more of this in the future.