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It's a seamless world

Integrated online and offline communication is the way to go

Sample these startling statistics. In the 16-26 year age group, there are more people on social media networks than newspaper readers, in Indian urban cities. The numbers are likely to increase further in the years to come. In cities like Mumbai and Delhi, internet/digital is the most viable medium after TV, in terms of reaching the 16-35 year old male audience in SEC-A1 category. And one can go on and on.

As a CMO/Business Head when I look at driving and growing our brands and business, I feel that one needs to look beyond just these numbers and what it really translates into. The message is loud and clear - it is time PR, advertising, events etc. are executed in an integrated manner both offline and online. Since I am not into laboring any point and am keen to make this article as light as possible, primarily using a few known examples.

Say a brand like "Reliance Digital" or "Croma" is advertising on print/TV. What most urban consumers do immediately, if they find it interesting, is

to go online either from their hand held mobile or laptops, visit the relevant websites, do a search and even compare the products offered and their prices. Let us say while searching, the website you intend to visit shows up or the said products or brands don't show up on the first 20 results, then the whole investment may be in vain. On the other hand, lets say you, the brand, invested in SEO as well and it was there in the top results on search. Then the story is entirely different. For all one may know, the customer even consummated the transaction online. Despite this, even today, many top search results are occupied by competing brands in several

The screenshot shows a website interface with a main banner for 'Electronics' featuring a group of people. Below the banner are several product listings:

- Washing Machine:** 'Wash 14 MP' with a price of ₹ 6,999 / Save ₹ 3,500.
- Washing Machine:** 'Wash 14 King' with a price of ₹ 11,999.
- Refrigerator:** '120 Liter' with a price of ₹ 12,990.

There are also promotional banners for '5% Cash Back' and 'Free Delivery'.

categories; categories like technology, financial services, education, travel etc. are no exception with a 360 degree cover being a must now.

On a related note, recall, that for buying a DSLR camera, I personally, relied a lot

on my friends feedback on social media networks to choose between a NIKON or a CANON and one of the things that I noticed is that many brands don't lay equal emphasis on having enough evangelists online as well as offline. The difference between interest and purchase, for all you may know, could be these evangelists online.

In categories such as travel, hotels etc. where one consumes the experience, the advent of TripAdvisor and HolidayIQ have made digital and online so important. Here, I want to make a point about the distinction between sponsored reviews and genuine reviews

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of independent travelers. It is advisable to invest in the latter genuine and independent reviews, rather than the sponsored ones. The key here is that even big brands like Taj or Fortune cannot afford to just depend on sponsored discussions/reviews.

Let me also bring in another kind of offline and online integration which needs to be on the radar of marketers, and which impacts the way consumers look at brands or build their affinities. Let

“ Online is an unforgiving world and if you don't respond fast, you could lose control ”

us say, as a consumer, I bought a book on Flipkart and was acquired as a customer by the portal through traditional channels like TV or OOH.

The purchase process was a breeze and I chose the Cash-On-Delivery option. The consumer communication happened offline, the purchase happened online and the fulfillment will again be happening offline.

Take another example - that of PolicyBazar. For buying insurance, the same consumer, after going through the initial phases online on their portal, ~~insurance~~ is not keen on closing a high value, high involvement product like insurance online and opts for a human interaction before paying up. But for paying up, he again logs in online. Here again the process flirts between online, offline and online in one seamless circle. So, the inevitable conclusion is that brands can no longer escape the online/offline integration from any perspective, not just marketing, branding or communication. Having said that, here is a word of caution for fellow branding professionals and business heads. Invest in adequate infrastructure and resources to engage consumers online and on social media networks, for prompt responses to their feedback and comments.

Online is an unforgiving world and if you don't respond fast and well, it goes viral quickly, leading to loss of control. Post that, pulling back is quite difficult and often not possible. Just remember unlike a print advertisement or TV commercial, anything online is there forever. I am saying this because in my own experience when I complained online about Sofitel Mumbai's BKC property, I got a response quickly whereas, when I did the same with Hyundai, the response was slow and poor.



My closing advice or tip to any brand and business owners today is that communication is all about seamless integration. They need to understand their category well and then accordingly build the communication blocks. ●

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