Brand Communication in a Digitalized World

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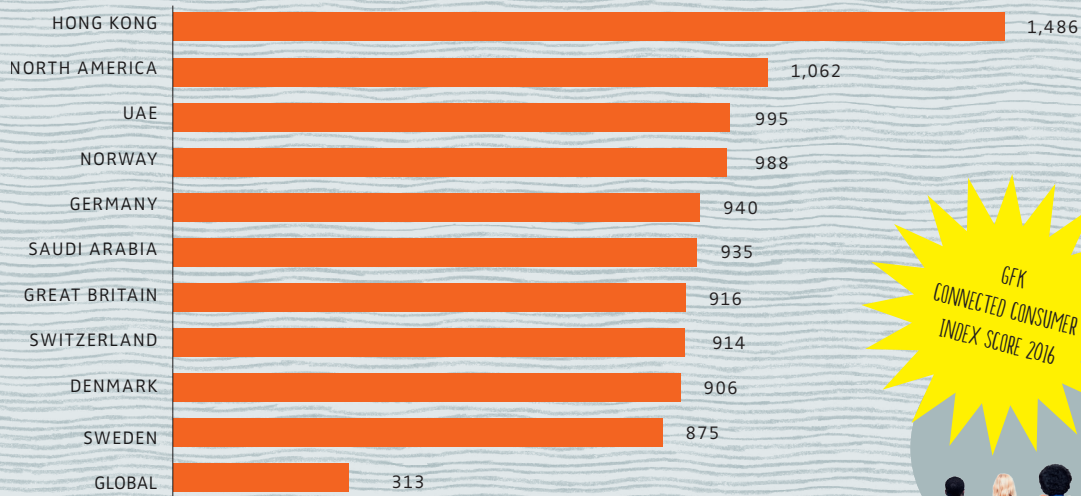GfK, Nuremberg, Germany
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Digital connectivity in all areas of life /// New digital developments enable us to be ever more connected – with ourselves through so-called wearables, with others through all forms of social media, and with products and services through smart homes, for example. The GfK Connected Consumer Index provides a measure of the degree in which we are increasingly connected. The index shows the extent to which being connected has evolved over time and also enables a cross-sectional comparison of different regions. The connected consumer in Germany, a country that is often said to be technically conservative, is well-connected compared with many other countries (Figure 1). In many regions of the world, the ''connected consumer'' is now the new normal consumer.

The extremely rapid mass adaptation of smartphones and smart LCD/LED TVs has long been the driving force behind this trend (Figure 2). More recently, though, wearables and the smart home have also been driving this trend. Given this, we can expect fundamental changes in the social relationships among connected consumers and in the way in which they communicate, and I will explain three major points: The change from ''lean back'' to ''move around'', the adaptation of edited dialog, and continuous partial attention. First, however, a word on iBrains.

iBrains: The real and the virtual world are merging in everyday life /// 360-degree digital connectivity is especially prevalent among the young generation. Of course, today, older generations are also connected, however – and this is the key difference – older generations have not grown up with smart, digital connectivity as digital connection devices didn't exist in their youth. Of vital significance for this young generation – we refer to them as iBrains – is their

FIGURE 1:

GfK Connected Consumer Index: Germany comes in at number five out of the 10 most connected populations in the world

HONG KONG	1,486
NORTH AMERICA	1,062
UAE	995
NORWAY	988
GERMANY	940
SAUDI ARABIA	935
GREAT BRITAIN	916
SWITZERLAND	914
DENMARK	906
SWEDEN	875
GLOBAL	313

GFK CONNECTED CONSUMER INDEX SCORE 2016

Source: GfK Connected Consumer Index

socialization during a time of accelerated digitalization. The formative stage of this generation is influenced by the merging of the real and the virtual world. iBrains have already had the digitally connected world as children and young people with them in their pockets. The older generations can certainly be just as highly digitally connected, however they have been socialized without the everyday digital devices. For this reason, all users of smart technologies are formally identified as ''connected consumers''; however, the communication revolution associated with digital connectivity is occurring in the iBrains generation.

In contrast to analog communication channels such as traditional TV, radio or traditional print media, digital media is designed to be interactive. Previously, during the days of analog media, you had to do extensive research; today, you can simply enter a term in a search engine or comparison site and you receive an almost overwhelming amount of information. The challenge today primarily lies in being able to select relevant and trustworthy information and no longer in being able to simply obtain any information at all.

From "lean back" to "move around": The way in which we communicate is changing radically /// Connected consumers are not only looking for information, but are sharing their experiences and opinions with each other. The evaluations of other customers, buyers and users are now of great importance to those searching and deciding whether or not to use or purchase a product. For many consumers, this is the most important source of information before they make their own purchase.

The way in which we communicate is changing radically through digital connectivity. In the analog world, promotional communication had only a ''lean back character''. The advertisers attempt to plan their media across traditional channels in such a way that the predefined target groups are quantitatively reached as precisely as possible across the booked channels. Wasting resources is to be explicitly avoided. The potential buyers/customers are presented with the product information across the chosen TV stations and print media in order to influence consumer purchasing behavior.

In today's digital age, this type of stimulus-response communication still has its place, however it must be supple-

mented with interactive offers that consider consumers to be participants who share their own information about their experiences with services and products. The participants no longer just share their experiences via word-of-mouth in their direct circle of friends and acquaintances, but they are increasingly spreading this information across digital channels into the virtual world. From the perspective of media planning, sharing experiences in this way does not lead to wasted resources, but only to additional quantitative reach. However, this could very quickly become highly costly if the experiences shared are negative.
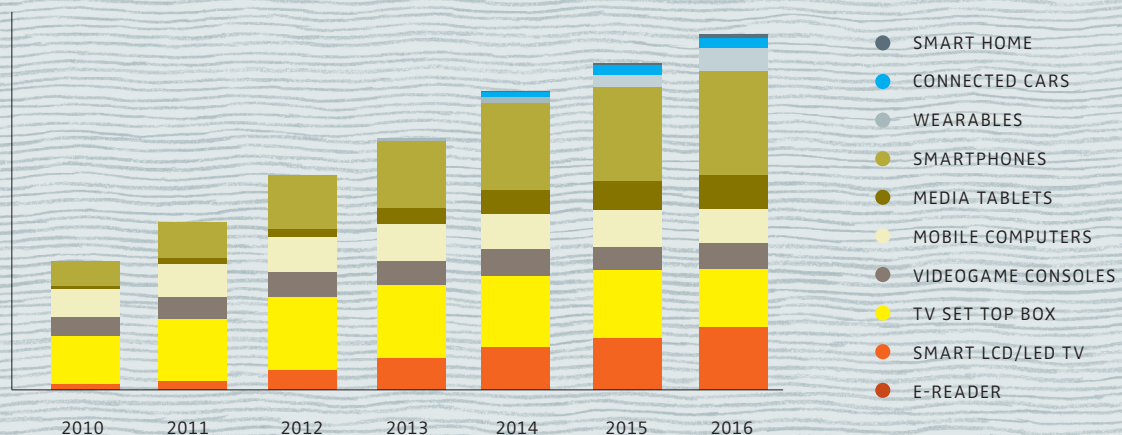
The most extreme form of negative digital communication is what we call a "shitstorm" in Germany. This involves a sudden outburst of extremely painful communication that usually dies out again over time. Quiet, prolonged, negative visual stories that show up on highly frequented websites such as "one out of five stars" or "thumbs down" etc., are underestimated. We call this type of active reporting on experiences or entire stories "move around communication". Consumers become prosumers: proactive consumers who report their experiences, share their knowledge and perceptions and thereby prompt the provider of services or products to revise their offerings. A completely new scope of activity has emerged in the iBrains generation – being an influencer. According to the results of the 2015/16 GfK Consumer Life Study, almost a third of iBrains see a trend towards "we are all influencers" and they want to be part of it. For some young people, acting as an influencer is now not only a calling, but a career. And many of them are the stars of their generation. The desire to become a professional and successful influencer is most certainly prevalent among the iBrains generation.

From spontaneous to edited dialog /// As "move around communication" becomes more prevalent, dialog also becomes more important. This brings to light a second, relatively abrupt change in the way the young generation communicates. The young generation doesn't consider the telephone functionality on the smartphone to be useless; however, making a telephone call with a "smart mobile phone" has, without a doubt, lost importance as chatting on a messenger service is preferred. The iBrain generation's style of communication is changing radically: The direct, spontaneous dialog is losing, while the written (short) text and edited verbal messages are winning. "Chatting" gives iBrains the opportunity to edit the message before the chat is posted. This makes it easier to create a picture of oneself that represents the "desired self" and not the supposed "actual self". This also applies to voice messages. With this in mind, many cases of dialog are no longer about a rapid sequence of spontaneous actions and reactions, but rather edited actions and reactions.

FIGURE 2:
Development of the GfK Connected Consumer Index by device:
Mass smartphone adaptation has been the driving force,
quadrupling over the observed time period.

Legend:
- SMART HOME
- CONNECTED CARS
- WEARABLES
- SMARTPHONES
- MEDIA TABLETS
- MOBILE COMPUTERS
- VIDEOGAME CONSOLES
- TV SET TOP BOX
- SMART LCD/LED TV
- E-READER

Years: 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016

Source: GfK Connected Consumer Index: Figures for Germany

Continuous partial attention and a shorter attention span /// For 75 % of iBrains, belonging to interest groups is very important, whereas – also according to the GfK Consumer Life Study in Germany – this is only important to 43 % of the overall population. However, the majority of iBrains who belong to a community do so in a virtual environment. A consequence of belonging to multiple virtual communities is the "always on phenomena". Media research often uses pictures of people watching television while at the same time engaged with their tablet on their lap. Everyone has also seen the pictures of people who are at concerts while simultaneously attempting to take pictures of the stage.

From these phenomena, media planners have come to the conclusion that all communication channels must be utilized – analog as well as digital – in order to reach the target groups. Unfortunately, in doing so, the significance of "reaching the customer" is often minimized to "making contact with the customer", which means maximizing reach. However, the actual consequence of simultaneously using different communication channels is ignored – the continuous partial attention. The adaptation of continuous partial attention is the third consequence of the expansion of digitalization.

"You can do several things at once, but only if they are easy and undemanding," writes Nobel Prize-winner Daniel Kahneman. When different communication channels are used at the same time, the awareness for the content presented in each channel is transient and superficial. The attention span becomes shorter if you are constantly switching between the various stimuli. With regard to communication, this means that it is not enough to simply make contact; communicators must enhance the qualitative presence of their messages to be able to "get through" to their audience.

The heuristic PFA approach to successful communication in a digitalized world /// Instead of thinking about shortening the message, creativity should be put into the relationship between the three building blocks of communication with the young generations. The three building blocks are Priming, Framing, Acting. (Box 1)

Stimulating dialog always involves the form of narration. Mere facts such as "20 % discount today" help to create short-term uplifts, however they do not stick to the brand in the long term. Rather, the point is to take the connected consumer seriously as a partner in dialog and not just as mere consumers. By constantly creating a dialog through a digital spider web of interaction, the young generation will perceive this as a partnership. Only then will a brand become a companion of the iBrain generation.

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{ Box 1 }

THE THREE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION WITH IBRAINS

Priming relates to the "What". You need to decide what content should be prepared, what needs should be addressed and what opportunities should be prioritized.

Framing relates to the "Where". You need to analyze the context within which the content has to be framed.

Acting refers to the "How" – what form of narrative in which medium can be chosen and how the various channels can be linked together using dialog.
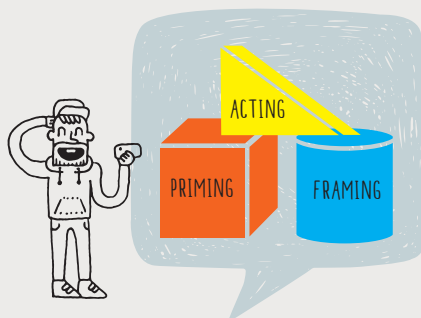
FURTHER READING

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