ABOUT DELVINIA

From digital strategy to data collection, Delvinia's business units offer a range of services dedicated to helping companies transform their organizations. Founded in 1998, Delvinia's Digital Consulting Group uses a human-centric approach to envision and bring to market new business models, digital customer experiences and products that enable its clients to realize accelerated growth.

Delvinia also owns and manages AskingCanadians™, an online data-collection firm with access to a research community of 600,000 Canadians who have opted in to participate in online surveys. Since its inception in 2005, AskingCanadians™ has grown into one of the leading data collection firms in Canada, enabling market researchers to quickly gather and deliver high-quality information from Canadian consumers.

www.delvinia.com
corporate.askingcanadians.com

ABOUT ADAM FROMAN

Adam Froman is the CEO of Delvinia, a Toronto-based digital strategy and innovation firm he founded in 1998. He is also the founder of AskingCanadians™, an online data collection business as well as the Centre for e-Democracy, a not-for-profit organization that teams up with academic institutions to study the impact digital technologies have on democracy. Adam sits on the Board of Directors of the Canadian Opera Company (COC). After earning a degree in engineering with a specialization in the area of human factors from the University of Toronto, he received an MBA in strategy and finance from the Schulich School of Business.

THE INTERVIEWER

The interview was conducted by Professor Robert V. Kozinets in June 2014.

Creating Sustainable Digital Experiences

MIR Interview with Adam Froman,
CEO of Delvinia and AskingCanadians™

Is the social media hype about being cool or about making money?
For Adam Froman, the answer is easy: Marketers need to be
very clear about how social media activity supports overall business
strategy. Only if the digital experience fits into the whole customer
journey will consumers become engaged and add value to the company
… and only then will the social brand become cool.

MIR: *Adam, you have been in the multimedia and digital technology space for more than 25 years. How have things changed over that time?*

ADAM FROMAN: Well, the only constant in this field is the constant change. On the other hand, the basic question for successfully creating digital experiences has remained the same: How do you create digital experiences from a human-centered perspective? Back in the '90s, companies would approach me and say, ''We need a website, but what should it do?'' But instead of just building one, we had to first find out WHY they needed one, and what it should look like, and then build it.

MIR: *So, in those early years was it mostly creating websites for clients?*

ADAM FROMAN: Yes, it was mostly technology and building applications. The market dramatically changed around 2007 or 2008 with the growth of social media. Marketers realized that digital technologies provided users with choice and control for how they interact with companies. The idea of having a consumer-centric approach to technology started emerging.

MIR: *What are the challenges with implementing a human-centered perspective today?*

ADAM FROMAN: Today, companies often start with the question: ''Hey, how can we market and be cool using social?'' But it is actually not a question of just leveraging social. It's helping companies look at how social media fit in the lives of particular consumers and how brands should utilize social media to create a better customer experience. If you're looking at things from a customer-centric point of view, then it's less about how to leverage social media for marketing purposes. Instead, it's about strategically leveraging social media in an omni-channel environment. You're trying to find out how social media fit in the context of a consumer's journey or a consumer's experience.

MIR: *How do you find out which social media platforms fit in the picture?*

ADAM FROMAN: You have to look at a customer's journey from the point of view of the customer. What we're doing often these days is mapping the customer journey. A company needs to analyze how its brand fits into the social experience of its customers. It's all about context and relevance and this is challenging because there are lots of tools and technologies available, and they keep on emerging.

MIR: *What is the role that mobile offers in this context?*

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ADAM FROMAN: Social and mobile go hand in hand now. You overlay the role of social and mobile in a customer's journey. If you're getting gas for your car, for instance, the journey would be to get gas and then go and use the variety store attached. So you analyze the role of social media on that whole path and identify the opportunities for the organization. The real potential lies in making it relevant. When you advertise to your customer through any channel and your customer can come and interact with you through any channel, you need to make sure that you're providing and looking at social media in the context of that consumer-centric, omni-channel environment. I know that sentence is full of buzzwords, but it's such a major thing.

MIR: *Everybody is talking about customer engagement and participation in social media now. For many managers engagement means how many likes and how many Facebook fans or how many comments you get and how many people click through or how many people view your page. What's your opinion on engagement?*

ADAM FROMAN: It's a real challenge because everyone is digital these days. Managers are confronted with it from vastly different angles. They're hearing it from the social media companies. They're hearing it from the technology platform companies. They're hearing it from the management-consulting firms. They're hearing it from the ad agencies. Their heads must be spinning. A lot of these marketers are focused on the short term, and they need something that will work for the next quarter.

MIR: *How do you bridge that gap between the holistic view that you have and the micro-operationalized view of engagement that most people still work with?*

ADAM FROMAN: I look at things from a broader perspective. What we try to do is ask the questions strategically, because while technology keeps changing, hopefully the strategy remains the same. If you don't understand your customers' behaviors in this context, then how are you going to prioritize and make decisions about where you want to invest your money? It's a question of how to measure your business. What does success look like to you, and how do you link engagement to the success of the business or return on investment?
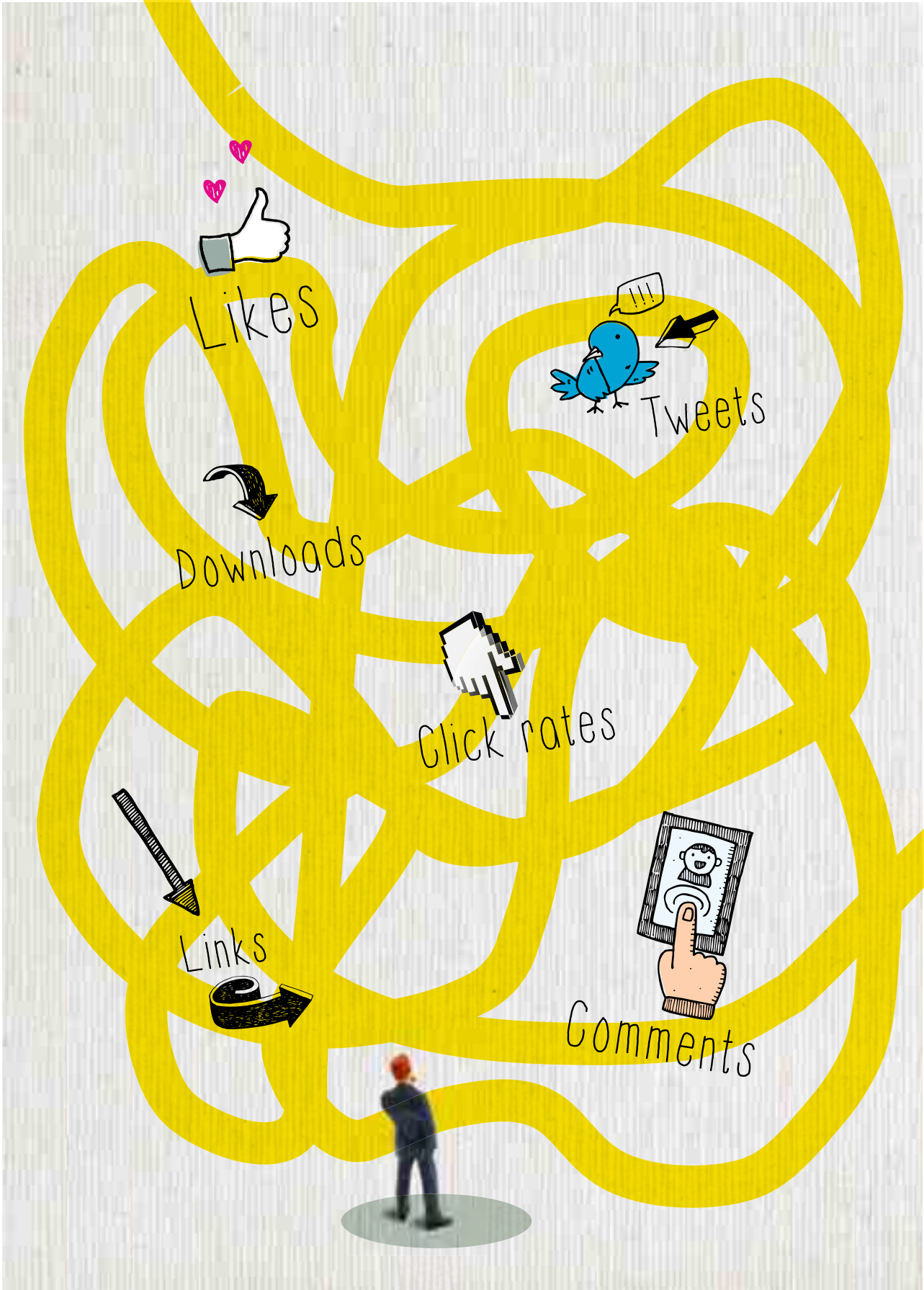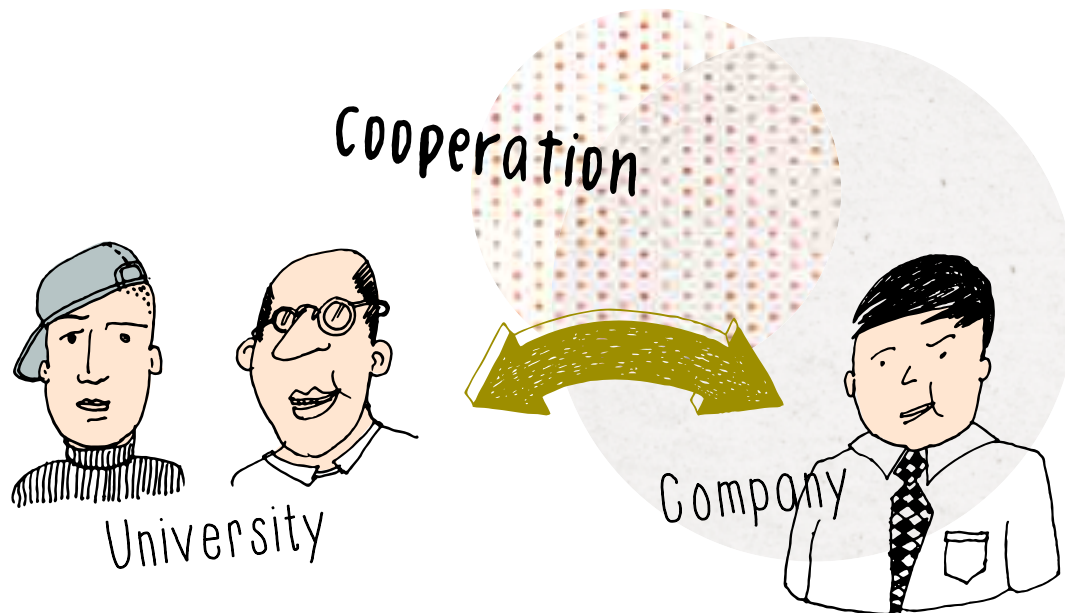
MIR: *So, you look at how likes or downloads or page views are linked to strategy?*

ADAM FROMAN: Yes, you might have a certain number of likes, but how do you translate that? How does that fit into either improving a customer experience or selling more? Or you have to translate a focus on app downloads into an explanation for how that helps to move your business ahead. Then you can go back and be tactical and say, "Hey, our job is to get as many downloads of this app as possible, because we know, strategically, it's going to help do X, Y and Z."

MIR: *And how do you adapt your strategy to the continuous change you mentioned?*

ADAM FROMAN: The strategy shouldn't change, just the tactics. In a year from now, an app might be irrelevant. But if the strategy is sound, you can identify the next opportunity or the next new social tool and assess it within the context of the strategy. Taking this approach is not always easy, because, like I said, managers are being bombarded and advised from a million different directions, and many of them are measured on a quarterly basis.

MIR: *Yes. It's very tactical …*

ADAM FROMAN: It creates a real challenge in the marketplace for doing really meaningful work that will have a long-term impact on the business. If you're going to do something in this space, it's not like, "We're just going to put it on social media, and everyone will go buy the brand." You have to think about how you're going to actively engage and trigger people to participate.

MIR: *All these online activities leave their traces and there is a huge pool of data that companies might use. How can managers use all this information?*

ADAM FROMAN: Taking it to the data context is another fascinating area. There are companies that are aggressively pursuing this use of passive and unstructured social data. They build algorithms or prediction models to find trigger points, and they analyze data to either quickly know what they should be doing to engage and use social or derive other insight.

MIR: *So, this is like an alternative to doing conventional surveys?*

ADAM FROMAN: Yes, it's a huge opportunity, and some companies are really focused on trying to figure out the opportunities. We have one client in the United States who helps sports teams increase ticket sales. He tracks some social data and

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sort of listens to what's going on in social media, then runs it through his algorithms. It's unstructured data, but he's pooling it. In real time, he can come up with recommendations for where they should be spending more money on advertising. It's really fast.

MIR: *It's still at a very early, exciting stage, for sure.*

ADAM FROMAN: Oh, yeah, it's a lot of fun. It's challenging because there are not many companies that have the foresight or the budgets to be able to really invest in this. We're only a sixty person company and I can't just invest in resources. But I build partnerships with the academic community to look at these problems while they're emerging.

MIR: *So you cooperate with academic institutions to develop new approaches and innovations?*

ADAM FROMAN: Yes, it's a win-win situation. For instance, I did a project with a marketing professor in social media. We collaborated on a government-funded research project on how to motivate people to participate in market research in the future. It was a really interesting research question for her, and I organized the funding. She got some publications and presentations at academic conferences out of it. It helped her get published. I got a perspective on the strategy to move forward with my AskingCanadians business.

MIR: *I think academic researchers get passionate about methods. They don't always get that passionate about things that are going on in the real world. It's nice to see these kinds of collaborations.*

ADAM FROMAN: I also saw a role for myself to provide mentorship to any students who wanted to work on some of our projects and to help students gain real world experience. Part of what was driving me to that was a shortage of talent in the marketplace. We needed to create an environment where we would help stimulate the next generation of talent to have a more applied experience base that a company like mine could hire. The best way was to let students work on some industry-led projects that they cut their teeth on within an academic context. They bring in new ideas, and you can find the people who are worthwhile.

MIR: *We have talked about the past and present of digital media. Let's finish with an outlook on what to look for in the future.*

ADAM FROMAN: We've moved into a phase in which interactive digital technologies are coming of age. So much of where we're going is about how to harness this area of data. I'm just intrigued by this stuff and by constantly learning and working with others who want to take on these challenges. You never know, in this area, where the next great commercial opportunity is going to be. But a lot of it is really driven by having that curiosity to keep on learning from it all.

MIR: *It sounds like some of your contact with universities and academia helps keep that intellectual spark alive, and to also keep you thinking about the interplay between basic research and applications.*

ADAM FROMAN: The only way you can do all this is partnership. We're partnering with our clients. We're partnering with the universities. Even if they're pursuing knowledge, and I'm running a business, we share that passion and understanding of learning … and therefore I feel we are well-equipped for any new challenges in digital media to come.

MIR: *Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts with us. We're on board for taking up the challenge.*
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