

How Consumers Help Build a Brand's DNA

More companies use feedback from ad efforts to enhance their products

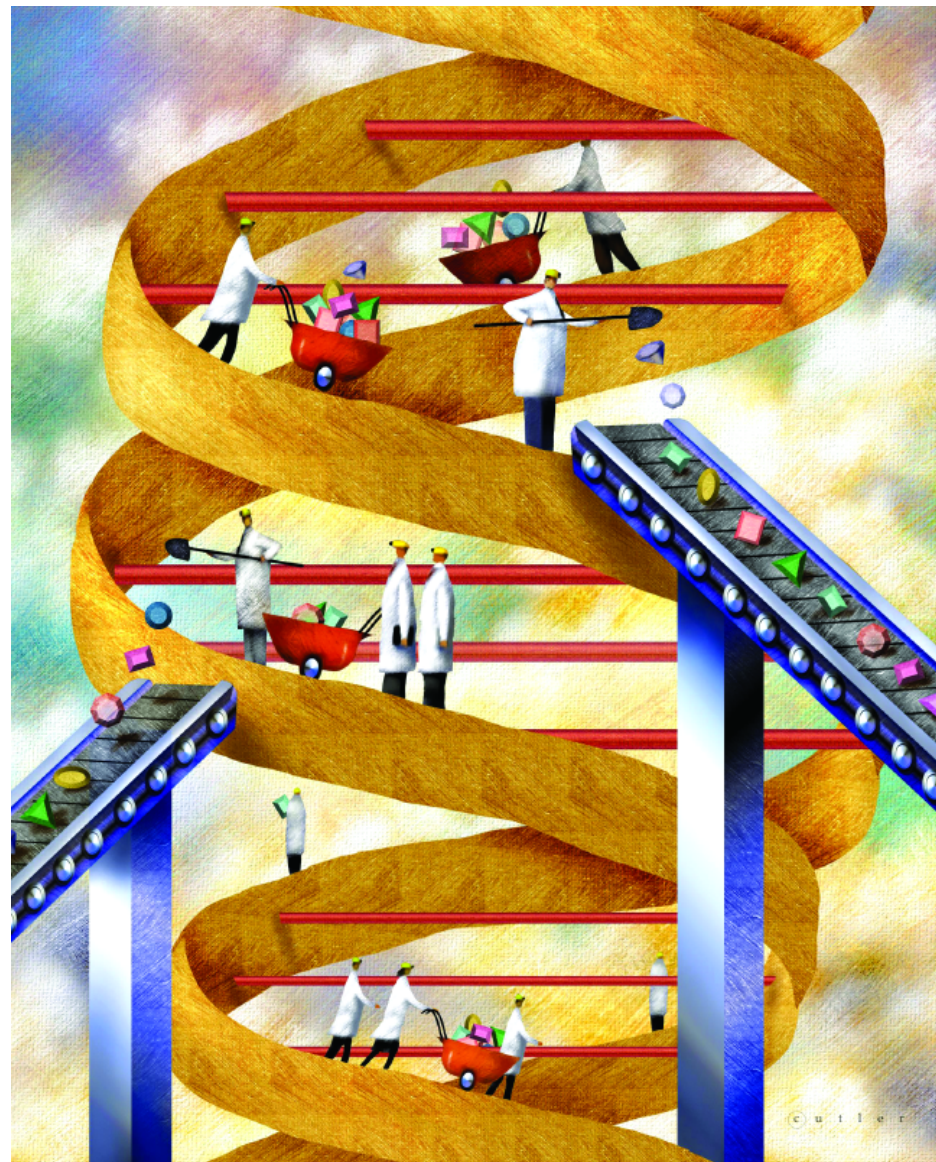
BY JOAN VOIGHT

When your marketing asks consumers to share what they think about your brand, you better be ready to change it in ways you hadn't counted on. Tweaking products to make them more usable isn't only for the clever folks in R&D anymore. In our open-source world, everyday people have a lot to say about how you should change—not just your marketing, but also the things that you market.

Savvy marketers are listening. Road trips, blogs, online forums, chat rooms and social-networking sites have become the modern-day focus group—and they're faster and less expensive. So-called "conversational marketing" not only engages the audience, it provides valuable research data and hopefully builds some positive word of mouth. Now, many marketing departments are forging paths to their product research departments, allowing everyday customers to join in-house designers in upgrading the car, computer or gadget that is being promoted. Many efforts are driven by the marketing, rather than the research department, thus expanding the authority and budget of the marketing group. On one level it seems like common sense, but on another level, it is extraordinary.

Procter & Gamble, for instance, launched two new social-networking sites in January that are designed to win over customers and at the same time research how to improve the company's marketing and communication efforts. Another example is BMW's Mini Cooper, which used its promotional cross-country tour last summer to collect consumer feedback. Conversations along the way and tour-related online chatter revealed that owners were not thrilled with their car's cupholders and front-seat mechanisms. As a result, the 2007 model (launching in February) has bigger, better cupholders and front seats that are easier to maneuver.

Another innovator, Netflix, is using a con-



test to improve the accuracy of its movie recommendations. The online movie rental service announced last October it would award \$1 million to whomever came up with a way to boost accuracy by 10 percent or more. News of the prize triggered an overnight storm of TV, print and online coverage, with a resulting boost in brand exposure. By January, more

than 14,000 individuals or teams in more than 100 countries had registered to compete. (By press time no one had earned the prize.) Not surprisingly, Netflix is looking for more ways to incorporate consumer feedback to other marketing and service upgrades.

Some companies, such as Gateway, are so high on the concept that they make feedback

and product improvement the focus of their ad campaigns. Others, such as Apple, are more covert. It studies consumer comments for product guidance, but doesn't tout the fact that upgrades and add-on products are customer-inspired.

Here is a sampling of open-ended marketing programs and the product improvements they've spawned, plus insider advice on how to get it right.

Gateway: Ask and Receive

Gateway's "Ask, Listen and Deliver" marketing campaign is a one-two punch, seeking to attract new customers by asking them how to revamp the computer before they buy it.

In the three months it has been running, the TV and offline effort by O'Brien Industries has been gathering consumer requests for what they want in their PC. Part of the campaign involved a road trip last October through December, during which company staffers traveled around the country in six branded SUVs interviewing hundreds of people about what they want in their PCs. That data was uploaded to a microsite, www.AskandDeliver.com, which allows users to read the comments and post their own. The TV spots ran through December and referred viewers to Gateway.com, which links to the AskandDeliver.com microsite.

The company is changing its products and services based on the top requests and will trumpet the improvements in ads later in 2007, says Mary Ann O'Brien, CEO of O'Brien Industries, Omaha, Neb. Among the anticipated upgrades? More attractively designed equipment and thinner, lighter notebook computers, say sources. "The program has also validated our decision to move tech support back to North America," says a company rep.

In the past, Gateway would have gleaned part of this information from customer surveys and support calls, but it would be slower and less clear-cut, says the representative.

By making ads that ask what's wrong with its products and then fixing it, Gateway hopes to "position the brand as more responsive" than the competition, says O'Brien. "Along

with making game-changing improvements, we can also uncover small nuggets and tweak our products and service in ways" that make a big difference to customers, she says.

Turbo Tax: The Inner Circle

Software maker Intuit saw the power of linking customers with product managers as a way to market its business products and is applying that approach to Turbo Tax, its tax preparation software for the general public. Turbo Tax Inner Circle is an online community in which consumers ask and answer each other's questions and post comments about the product and taxes. The circle is promoted in the feedback section of the brand's Web site and is jointly overseen by the marketing and product management departments, with the latter picking up the tab. The marketing team manages the customer feedback, "paying close attention to common issues and often asking the community what they think" of specific features, says Dan Maurer, Turbo Tax marketing vp. The group builds word-of-mouth marketing and reinforces the brand's reputation of being responsive to customers and making life easier for them, he says. The site tells members they are "key contributors to the IT product development team."

Established three years ago, the circle numbers about 5,000 and welcomes any taxpayer, whether he or she is a customer or not. "Circle members will tell us what could be improved in the product, such as lessen the tax jargon, and then give us guidance how to change it," Maurer says.

In July 2006, the company was considering two layouts of a filing instruction and asked the circle to give their preferences. Overnight about 1,000 people responded, with an overwhelming 84 percent favoring one layout, making the decision process fast and painless for the designers, say company officials. Before the Inner Circle, Turbo Tax got its feedback from in-product questionnaires, focus groups and customer support calls. Now the online group works in concert with those methods and tells the company how to improve them.

Turbo Tax sibling QuickBooks has a well-established online community supported by the product development department and used as a marketing tool. Aimed at small business owners, the community site includes a feature called "We hear you" that lists the most popular requests for software improvements and tells how the product has been changed. For example, many consumers requested charts customized by industry. When the company agreed to comply, managers asked the online group to help identify the top 30 industries.

Sources say Intuit plans to



TAKING CONTROL: Turbo Tax updates its software based on consumer feedback, and current spots even show consumers taking power away from accountants.

expand and relaunch a third online community in March. "It takes just a handful of people to provide the infrastructure of these communities and it would take a battalion of us to try to answer all the customer questions that come up," says Scott K. Wilder, QuickBooks group manager. "We've learned to recognize the expertise of the user."

Dice.com: Geek Speak

The online job site for IT professionals worked with Modem Media to incorporate consumer feedback into its cheeky online "Does Your Tech Job Suck?" ad campaign. The company later decided to use topics and terminology from the audience's often-passionate postings to revamp its Web site.

Even the agency was surprised at the result of the banner ads that offered users a chance to answer the question and read the answers of others. In 45 days, the banners, which launched last May and ran on sports and tech sites, averaged more than 400 rants per day. Unique users submitted an average of three rants each. At the peak of the campaign, users who interacted with the banners three or more times spent an average of about 18 minutes per rant session, says an agency representative.

Typical comments ranged from: "I want to put my boss in a function and delete him," to "Calling my co-workers idiots would be unkind to idiots," to "My raise was great. In colonial times."

Thomas Silver, Dice marketing svp, notes that his company listened to the "tone, language and type of projects in the rant postings." Then product developers "changed headlines and added article topics" on the Dice site to match what the users were saying mattered to them.

"This type of conversational marketing was a great way to market to a group that doesn't like ads and considers themselves outsiders," says Mark Galley, creative director at Modem's Norwalk, Conn., office. Silver says the rant ad banner gave "our highly interactive, smart and critical target audience a way to talk to each other and vent frustration." It also encouraged them to look for new jobs.



LISTEN UP: Gateway's microsite states that the company stopped telling consumers what they should want in a computer, and started asking.

Apple: Stereo Headaches and Fixes

Apple builds brand loyalty by hosting discussion groups on its Web sites that let customers swap advice and tips. In the last few years, the company has been mining those internal conversations for ideas about product enhancements, say industry sources.

Take the iPod Hi-Fi, which connects an iPod to a home stereo. Based on an analysis of the Apple customer forums, the introduction of the iPod Hi-Fi was triggered in part by

**Fed up with
your tech job?**

**Vent your
frustrations here!**

DATA-MINING: Dice.com used job rants posted after this ad ran to revamp its online service.

company-sponsored online conversations, says consultant Brian Glover, senior manager of market strategy at Biz360. "Most of the consumer content in the iPod forums talks about [existing iPod products] rather than wish-list items," he says. But a wave of complaints hit the forums in early 2006 about unsatisfactory attempts to connect the iPod to home stereo systems using third-party devices, he says. The main problem: inadequate remote controls. "The iPod users' ability to conveniently connect to their home stereos is very important to the customer

experience, and therefore to the brand," says Glover. Apple listened. In February 2006 the company introduced its own connection device, the iPod Hi-Fi. The online launch campaign directly addresses the specific remote control problems cited by the customers in their forum complaints.

Apple won't comment on consumers' role in the Hi-Fi, which doesn't surprise industry observers. To openly welcome consumers into the product development process can be hard for companies that want to control their image and maintain a level of cachet in the marketplace, especially design-oriented brands like Apple. Along with proprietary concerns, "it means openly acknowledging that your products are not perfect and that you don't know everything there is to know about how your products are being used and perceived," says Jim Nail, CMO of Cymfony, a media research firm. But the feedback exists in the outside world regardless, he says. Marketers can ignore it or they can listen to it, learn from it and work with it.

Overcoming Barriers

The hardest part of incorporating product management and consumer-oriented marketing is crossing the hallway from marketing to product design, according to several marketers.

The cultures don't always see eye to eye, and the bigger and more established the brand, the harder the process usually is. Product designers tend to be tactical, detail oriented and focus on the technical side of product features and applications. Marketing managers usually see the broader, customer experience aspect of the product and worry



how it fits in with people's lives.

There are, however, a few practical steps companies can take. O'Brien, says that a C-level executive, ideally the CEO, should oversee the effort to solicit customer feedback and make it clear the marketing and product development people will be working together as a team.

Turbo Tax's Maurer advises holding weekly sessions where the team evaluates the most common customer comments for the week and then decides if requested changes can be made. Often the change is small and can be easily done. "We've learned if you don't get on it right away, it won't get done," he says.

Overcoming the organizational challenges can be well worth it, say the pros. "Consumer content tells marketers what they really need to know: how people are using your products, what the defects are and what they wish they had," says Glover. O'Brien calls it a "market's dream. When we make improvements, we know for a fact people will care about them. And in our ads we can boast, 'Look, we did it.'" ■

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Super Bowl Blogathon!

Go to SuperAdFreak.com on Sunday, Feb.4, for uncensored, real-time, spot-by-spot coverage. See what ad guys, authors, directors, Web stars and others have to say about the year's most-anticipated commercials. Post your own comments and join the debate.