**THE ELONGATING TAIL
OF BRAND COMMUNICATION**

An approach to brand-building
incorporating long tail economics

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ABSTRACT

The paper extends Chris Anderson's Long Tail theory to the world of brand-building. The central thesis it presents is that digital technologies aren't just offering us more media choices but are changing the very fundamentals of the marketing and advertising business. It uses Long Tail economics to forge a vision of the future of brand-building and provides the logical and economic groundwork why this will be inevitable.

When you can dramatically lower the costs of connecting supply and demand,
it changes not just the numbers, but the entire nature of the market.

– Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*

Ever since Chris Anderson first wrote about the 'long tail' in a feature for WIRED magazine in October 2004, the term has found application in myriads of fields. A simple 'long tail of' search will yield a depth of results that can only be explained by the very term itself.

There's mention of the long tail of scientific research, long tail of tags, long tail of software demand, long tail of TV, long tail of popularity, long tail of legal scholarship, long tail of camps, long tail of programming languages, long tail of the blogosphere, long tail of innovation, long tail of choice, long tail of video games, long tail of the flat world, long tail of street entrepreneurs… There's even a mention of the long tail of alcohol distribution! And I was still only into the third page of Google results.

However, the long arm of the long tail still hasn't yet found its way to some not-so-remote corners of the universe. The long tail of brands (not to be confused with the long tail of advertising, which is covered by Chris Anderson in the subsequent book he wrote) is very sparse and anorexic, at least as far as Google results go. Only four mentions show up.

And the long tail of brand-building or branding – the process of creating, honing, nurturing and shepherding a product/service from the wilderness of anonymity to the city square of instant recognition, recall and familiarity – is conspicuous by its absence.

In fact, brand experts go about their business as if it has been inoculated against the long tail epidemic. Almost all of them, it seems, are keen to keep sailing in the direction their ships have been ploughing all these years – and at least one guru insists on pushing the envelope further into short head territory.

In a celebrated speech at Cannes last year, Lord Maurice Saatchi unveiled his agency's thinking on building brands in the future. Mixing psychology with the Bible, his answer to the perils of brand-building in the internet era is simple – push deeper, harder and farther than we have done all these years.

Owning a clear, unique, single-minded proposition wasn't enough. To succeed in a world of message fragmentation, media fragmentation, continuous partial attention (CPA), and non-existent day-after-recalls (DAR), one has to hone the brand positioning relentlessly, until only one word – yes, one measly word - remained. Two words were one word too many, as Lord Saatchi reminded those pleading for lenience.

For Brand America it was 'Freedom.' For Coca-Cola, it's 'Refreshing.' For Sony, it may be 'Feel.' For HP, it's 'Invent.' The challenge was to find the word and not forsake it, ever. Having been anointed, The Word will guide the brand's future – its every move as a company, and not just its advertising and communication.

According to Lord Saatchi, One Word Equity – as this new approach was christened – will give advertising the kiss of life it so direly needs. For it was no less than advertising's funeral he had come to attend at Cannes, before being called upon to give it the CPR routine.

Of simplicity and complexity

The reaction to Lord Saatchi's speech was mixed.

One half of the advertising world – bred on the scarcity of media and the consequent need to be pithy and single-minded in what one is saying – applauded slavishly. To them, this spartan future world seemed just what the doctor had ordered. They could now go home and continue to do the same things they were used to doing – only working on it much harder and burning more of the midnight oil.

The boisterous half – most of whom seemed to be voicing their opinion on the blogosphere – differed. The really picky ones seemed to note that it took two thousand and five words to explain One Word Equity. In fact, One Word Equity itself was two words too long.

Most of the considered reaction was an unequivocal rejection of the disingenuous and un-layered simplicity a One Word Equity exercise leaves behind. Simplifying was one thing, simplicity was another. And in this world, though no one could quite define why, simplicity was no longer desirable. One had to be simple and yet not eschew complexity – a task that's easier said than done.

Russell Davies, planner provocateur and ex-world wide planning head of Nike, wrote on his blog (though not directly in response to Lord Saatchi's speech) : "What people actually want is stuff with some complexity, some meat, some richness. Stuff that has depth, humour, tension, drama etc etc. Not stuff that's distilled to a simple essence or refined to a single compelling truth. No-one ever came out of a movie and said "I really liked that. It was really clear." Clarity is important to our research methodologies, not to our consumers."

Judging by the reaction to this post and by the Mexican wave of blog posts and comments criticizing One Word Equity, it was obvious this idea of brand polyphony (as Russell calls it) was infectious and appealing. It's appealing because we ourselves as consumers seek it. We find fault in movie-characters for being too uni-dimensional. We say people are uninteresting (or boring) if their range of interests or conversations are too narrow.

In *The Long Tail*, Chris Anderson states an essential truth we all know and take for granted - "Everyone's taste departs from the mainstream somewhere."

But what traditional brand-building with its single minded and simple (and sometimes simplistic) brand-idea does is ignore that reality and reduces to the lowest common denominator all our individual relationships with one brand.

There's only one view of a brand you can have – the one that it has so painstakingly assembled for itself. All other probable ideas about the brand are deemed to be incompatible with this one and shouldn't be entertained.

Will the twain ever meet?

So, is there some way of reconciling this need to be simple in our communication and still not be perceived as a simpleton? Is there a brand-building model that can give us layered, nuanced and intriguing brands that are more than just skin deep and one word thin?

The answers to these questions overlap with the answer to the larger question (and the right one) I believe we should be asking in a world populated by Lord Saatchi's digital natives, digital immigrants and everyone else.

"What are the changes being wrought upon the business of brand-building by this relentless shift towards long tail economics?"

The answer is nothing short of cataclysmic and will represent a departure from everything advertising and brand-building has stood for until now.

But before we embark on that journey, here's a brief summary of the long tail and its terminology.

A short summary of the long tail

The original WIRED article introducing the Long Tail paraphrased the essential thinking behind it in a terse, and instructive, sub-head – "Forget squeezing millions from a few mega-hits at the top of the charts. The future of entertainment is in the millions of niche markets at the shallow end of the bitstream."

It is common knowledge that when you plot all the products (in a company or a supermarket or the universe) on the x-axis and corresponding revenues on the y-axis, you get what is called a Pareto distribution curve. More commonly recognizable as the 80/20 principle, this law suggests that a majority of the sales come from a very few products.

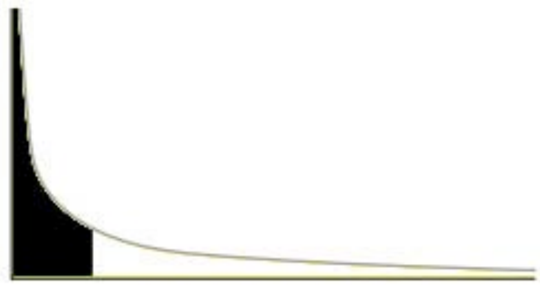

Figure 1. Pareto distribution curve illustrating the 80/20 principle .The black part of the curve are the hits – the 20% that bring in 80% of the profits. The white portion of the curve represents the hitherto ignored long tail of the market.

This sort of distribution is easily accessible and verifiable by experience – it is a truth that's been sprinkled with great generosity all around us. A tiny percentage of our clients do indeed give us most of our business. About 20% of words in the English language do form the basis for 80% of our conversation. Small concentrated areas of land in a country are likely to be home to a majority of its population. And so on. In real and measurable terms, the distribution is more 80/10 – that it doesn't add to 100 doesn't matter because they are percentages of different things.

This Law of the Vital Few is so ubiquitous, in fact, that we take it for granted that that's how the world is – and is meant to be. In particular, the 80/20 principle is the dominating force that has shaped our understanding of business and popular culture - and how we expect to experience both.

Take the pre-online music industry as an example. Only a handful of music albums released every year were hits – they made it to the Top 40 countdown, to store shelves, to TV and radio play times and the written (and unwritten) annals of pop culture. These were the hits that raked in the money – the rest were destined to obscurity and a bad-rep as money-losers and failures.

Recognizing this and with their own 80/10 and scarcity principles to deal with, the retail businesses where we buy our music, primarily stocked only the hits. With limited and expensive shelf space to compete for, a mainstream hit album stood more of a chance of earning its keep than a niche album.

Further, a hit album was the breadwinner not just for itself but also for the albums 'expected' to be hits. Because no matter how carefully one screened what makes it to the shelves, some of these projections invariably turned out to be wrong.

So what happens to the remaining 80% of the albums recorded every year? Very few make money of any sort and are destined to be the 'dark matter' of our culture – around, but invisible both to the eyes of commerce and discerning taste.

But things have changed with the arrival of online retailers like Amazon, Rhapsody and iTunes. While Wal-mart can stock only 4,500 unique albums (amounting to 25,000 songs) on its shelves, Rhapsody stores as many as 1.5 million unique song tracks on its servers.

And if you think that the majority (the tail) of these songs simply exist with no takers, you will be surprised. A vast majority of the songs on Rhapsody – even up to a staggering 900,000 and beyond – have been streamed or bought at least once. And as you trek upslope of the tail, many more times.

While these sales individually can't rival the mega-hits – the songs that sell by the millions – their combined sales amount to a significant addition to revenues. In fact, as Rhapsody and other online retailers build up their collection further, the revenues from this long tail can even match the revenues from the short 'hit-driven' head of the curve.

The reason why Rhapsody can pull this off is because, unlike a real world retailer, they don't have to deal with scarcity of shelf space. With virtually unlimited shelf space and an almost negligible rental on it, Rhapsody can treat all its tracks as equal – the mega-hits, the hits, the near misses, and the ones that will only sell in ones and twos.

The phenomenon of the long tail was first put into practice at Amazon's online book business. And now it has found application across industries. Rhapsody and iTunes in music; Netflix in movies; E-bay, and Amazon's own Marketplace programme, in retailing; Google in advertising (through its AdSense and AdWords programmes), etc.

Misconceptions and misnomers

One of the most common misconceptions about the long tail is that it requires the Internet as a precondition for it to work. It's true that the Internet has given rise to the most visible and celebrated examples (ironically, the hits) of the long tail phenomenon. But its existence (or involvement) isn't a necessary condition for the working of a long tail.

In his book, Chris Anderson begins narrating the history of the long tail with Sears and Roebuck and how in 1906 they revolutionized shopping with their mail-order catalog business. From their gigantic warehouses in Chicago they could stock and deliver over 200,000 items, compared to the mere couple of thousand at the nearest general store. And what's more, their efficiencies meant that people could buy them at as much as 50 per cent lesser, even after shipping.

Mail order catalogs were the long tail of general stores and so were the supermarkets that emerged soon after. Correspondence courses and degrees were the long tail of college education before online education took over. Credit cards are the long tail of the money lending industry.

In fact, as Chris Anderson mentions, "The story of the Long Tail is really about the economics of abundance – what happens when the bottlenecks that stand between supply and demand in our culture start to disappear and everything becomes available to everyone."

This process of easing of bottlenecks is gradual and wherever supply and demand are making light of the hurdles (with or without the help of the Internet), there's a long tail blooming.

The second misconception about the long tail is that it's an absolute term – that in a given market there's one concrete, well-defined and addressable block that responds to the name of 'long tail.'

The truth is that the long tail is a relative term – and the long tail is in fact made up of hundreds of long tails, each with heads of their own. And no matter where you are on the curve there's a long tail waiting to be unearthed further down the tail.

In that sense, time and technological progress are the twin engines that gradually dissolve the barriers to supply and demand until a time when we'll simply have "culture unfiltered by economic scarcity."

In my opinion, one reason why these misconceptions exist is because of the name. Chris Anderson picked up the name from statistics – curves with characteristics of these power law distributions are called "long-tailed distributions." Chris merely turned it into a "proper noun" and the long tail was born.

I think a better-serving name would have been 'the elongating tail' – an adverb + noun pairing capturing not just its present tail state but also suggesting the permanence of movement inherent in it.

With this name, the birth of the internet would have just been an incident (albeit a significant one) in the history of the elongating tail. A history that dates back to the times when man first started gathering at marketplaces for barter and trade, instead of settling for whatever his neighbour could offer.

The long tail hits a bottleneck

We began this journey together wondering why there has been no application of long tail thinking in brand-building. There are a few good reasons why.

One, the current discussions of the long tail (in the book written by Chris Anderson and in the media) have largely concentrated on the most visible instances of distribution and demand-and-supply bottlenecks. The retail and entertainment industries with their accessible examples have rooted much of the Long Tail debate in the marketplaces we recognize and understand – books, music, movies, second-hand books, etc

Two, examples of the application of Long Tail thinking in advertising are the twin approaches taken by Google. With its AdWords programme, Google is tapping not the mega-advertisers but advertisers of any sort and size – even you and me. For as little as one US cent, any one of us can place an online advertisement on a site anywhere in the world.

Google's AdSense programme on the other hand is democratizing media. You don't have to be a media conglomerate to make money by displaying ads - a simple humble blog will do. All you have to do is sign up with Google AdSense, and revenue from your blog could also be featuring on your tax returns.

In my humble opinion, these two early examples have stunted further thinking about long tail applications in advertising and brand building. But that is the peril of mistaking the long tail to be an absolute and singular term. The world around us is an overlapping series of thousands of long tails – some of which have been discovered and exploited, but a majority of which are yet to be discovered.

And finally, most of the principles of brand-building were formulated at a time when mass media with its hit-driven economics was at its prime. Its purveyors took the scarcity of media and limited exposure time for granted – for they couldn't even fathom a world of media abundance and audience fragmentation.

Built on the foundation of scarcity and how to deal with it, these principles have now become ingrained into our thinking and practice. So much so that we don't see the scarcity and distribution bottlenecks as a problem – mostly we don't even realize there are there.

As an industry we are also accustomed to the idea of repetition as a device of persuasion. So when we are offered abundant choices in distribution channels and bandwidth, our conditioned response is to repeat the same message (optimized for a 15 second slot) many many times over. After all, the more number of times the consumer gets to listen/see/read/experience a message, the more strongly he will associate it with the brand, right?

Lord Saatchi's One Word Equity is the worst of these excesses (think of the irony of it.) By reducing the carrier package to just one word, it ostensibly reduces errors in transmission. But what it also does is effectively multiply the available bandwidth manifold – think one word passing through a distribution channel optimized for the 25 words in a 15 second commercial or a press ad. The result? An effective multiplication of the media budget and more mind-numbing repetition.

An early example of long tail thinking in brand-building is a model named Transmedia Planning pioneered by a London planner, Faris Yakob. Recognizing that different media don't have to repeat the same message endlessly, Faris recommends using different media to tell different parts of the story. These individual mosaics of the brand story will then be assembled by the consumer in his mind, thereby allowing a richer, layered and interesting story to be communicated. As Faris points out, the advertising for Matrix (the movie) implemented this thinking.

Transmedia Planning elongates the tail of brands by using the increased channel bandwidth available to populate it with more than one message. But it stills refuses to forego the single minded brand proposition, which is the overarching brand story it attempts to narrate. And you can't go very much further down the tail, if you insist on peddling one product only.

Long live the single-minded brand proposition

In The Long Tail, Chris Anderson writes that the hit-driven media and entertainment culture of the second half of the twentieth century can be defined by these characteristics:

- A desperate search for one-size-fits-all products
- Trying to predict demand
- Pulling 'misses' off the market
- Limited choice

For anyone who has ever worked in advertising, the above should definitely sound very familiar. Try replacing 'products' with 'brand ideas' and have a look at it again.

We seldom think of the brand ideas and advertising we create as something we sell but that indeed is what we do. Consumers pay for it with their time and attention, and when the price or the benefit is not what they are seeking, they tune it out. We have a no sale and the gigantic universal spam counter registers yet another click.

In creating and peddling our wares we also use the very same devices and tricks that the media and entertainment industry have perfected in the last century.

We use pre-filtering as mechanism to predict and decide what will have mass appeal. We choose between alternatives – only allowing 'one' brand idea at a time to make it the expensive 'shelf space'. We pull off air any ‘brand idea’ that doesn’t connect with all of our identified consumers – even if it has its own small niche of buyers.

Whether we realize it or not, we have been dancing forever to the tunes of shelf-space scarcity and distribution bottlenecks. Even as we self-righteously believed that the single-minded brand proposition is the only right way to build a brand in any situation. And even in current times of abundance – abundant shelf space (for brand ideas), abundant distribution (in media channels and bandwidth) and abundant choice (of brand propositions tailor-made for each of our niche audiences.)

So what’s the option?

Chris Anderson summarises what to do, not just for the world of brands but for anyone staring at a long tail wild west. “In scarce markets, you’ve got to guess at what will sell. In abundant markets, you can simply throw everything out there and see what happens, letting the market sort it all out.”

And here he’s elaborating further. “The more abundant the storage and distribution, the less discriminating you have to be in how you use it.”

In short, the application of the first principles of long tail thinking to brand-building yields an essential truth – one more in harmony with the way the world works than with the artificial construct of advertising and brand building.

There’s nothing sacrosanct about the single-minded brand proposition. In fact, in markets of abundance it is the wrong strategy to follow. In these markets, it makes sense to make available in the market every single proposition your brand can and should stand for.

The long tail of brand building

In effect, the communication for every brand represents an individual market in which different messages for that brand compete for consumer attention and time. Largely due to the scarcity and expense of media, contemporary brand-building models advocate pre-filtering what goes on the limited and expensive ‘shelf space’ of media.

To ensure maximum bang for our buck, traditional brand-building models also advocate focusing on only one brand idea – called the single-minded brand proposition. Which made sense in times of mass media dominance, given the economics of the situation. If you couldn’t speak much or if it was too expensive to speak, speak about one thing and one thing only. And just ensure that it gets across.

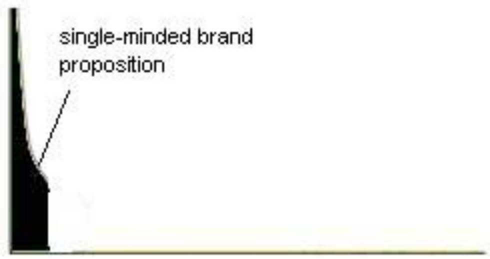

Figure 2. Truncated brand communication curve.
Traditional brand-building advocates artificially truncating the curve at the head to make the economics work.

Since everything – especially the entire advertising budget – rode on it, arriving at the correct brand proposition was a task of infinite magnitude. Some brands spend millions – on research and on employing the best professionals – to ensure that as many people consume what's on offer by paying with their time and attention. In short, the advertising agency's task is to engineer a 'hit' – a task made infinitely more difficult because there is only one product to get it right and there is no way to hedge one's bets.

But what of the other equally viable brand ideas for the same brand? They probably can't end up as 'hits' and attract audiences by the millions, but they too can have their own niche audiences – numbering in the thousands, hundreds, tens or even ones and twos. But the harsh economics of a hit-driven world mean that there's no place for them.

On the other hand, a healthy and complete long tail of brand-building would look something like this.

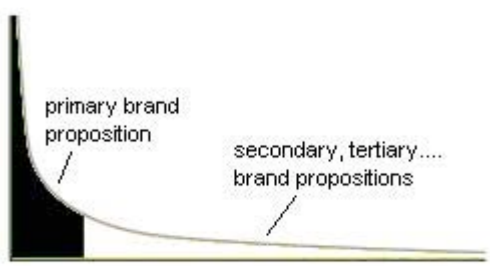

Figure 3. A healthy and complete long tail of the brand. The primary proposition stills draws the hits.
But abundant shelf-space and low distribution costs enable the brand to connect with every niche idea
with its own set of loyal consumers.

The task of the advertising agency here is to generate all the myriad communication messages with which people could relate to a brand and create communication for them all. (They will definitely need to help to pull this off, but we'll come to that in a little while.)

Of course, the streamlined and aerodynamic economics of mass media would still mean that one brand proposition may have to lead the overall communication. But no longer should it be allowed to dominate all the communication for the brand.

The fragmentation and abundance of media has now helped lower the barriers to connecting the supply and demand of more brand messages – theoretically of all possible brand messages.

For eg, Volvo's primary brand proposition could continue to be safety. But if there're people out there who relate to it as a stylish car, you can create communication tailor-made for them. Simultaneously, another bunch of people might actually like a Volvo for its European-ness. No longer will they have to ignore that connection and only seek 'safety' in Volvos.

As Chris Anderson puts it, "Long tail businesses treat consumers as individuals, offering mass customization as an alternative to mass market fare."

Elongating the long tail for your brand

In theory, the long tail can extend up to infinity incorporating every possible communication message for a brand. In practice, there are considerations of cost and the brand communication curve will have to be arbitrarily truncated at some point.

But unlike traditional brand-building models, the truncation doesn't have to happen at the head of the curve. The tail can stretch much further from where it currently ends; and as technology finds more ways to lower distribution costs, the further it can be elongated.

According to Chris Anderson, two imperatives summarize the secret to creating a thriving long tail business. They are:

1. Make everything available
2. Help me find it.

Here are some practical and simple steps that translate the above two rules to make your brand communication long tail a thriving marketplace of messages.

1. <u>Seek help in populating the curve</u>

No matter how deep-pocketed a brand is, populating the entire long tail curve with customized messages across the spectrum can be the shortest and quickest way to bankruptcy.

So, it is imperative that one seeks help from other quarters – preferably those who are willing to work for pleasure and not for money. And as some brands like Apple have already discovered, these fruitful sources can be your brand's fans – amateur enthusiasts who are likely to embrace the idea of giving legitimacy and form to their word-of-mouth recommendations.

Chevy recently ran a contest in North America for consumers to create their own commercials for Chevy Tahoe, their most profitable model. An online micro-site provided participants all the raw video footage required – participants could mix and match the material and assemble a commercial to their own script. In four weeks, the contest attracted more than 30,000 entries – far more than can have been done by a paid team of experts, no matter how large.

In the past few months, similar contests have become very popular – the latest being the one for Dove Beauty Soap, where the winner of such a contest was aired during the Oscars broadcast. The emphasis of such tactics has been "engaging the consumer rather than simply pushing a product." While it will tactically be necessary to choose a winner and reward her, the real value of these contests is the teeming mass of strategies, ideas and executions they create in a flash.

Of course, only a minute percentage of these entries are even half-decent – and the temptation to pre-filter them and present just a few can be overpowering.

But in a long tail world, the real opportunity is not in pre-filtering what's available but in making everything available to everybody. And providing the aggregated audience the tools to sort out what's good from what's not (like Flickr does for photos with its folksonomy, for eg.)

In its short lifespan, user generated content/advertising has already attracted its own legion of skeptics. A common complaint against it is that people enter these contests only to show off to their family and relatives and there's no lasting merit in what they create. While that is essentially true, Wikipedia and the other UGM successes have already proven that reputation can be a powerful motivator if harnessed right.

2. <u>Time is a natural elongating-agent of a brand communication market</u>

Every single brand message used by a brand in the past is, by default, a resident of the long tail of the brand. Its glory days over, it has given way on the shelf to the current brand proposition of the day – but it still exists, forgotten and archived.

Making these brand messages simultaneously available in secondary media could be the quickest and most cost-effective way to elongate the brand communication curve. The longer the brand has been in existence, the longer the tail can potentially be. In effect, one is using the advertising funds utilized in the past to populate the curve today.

For eg. one of the most popular IBM campaigns of all-time is 'Solutions for a small planet' – a campaign that broke and was active in the mid-1990s (but one that is still fondly remembered today.) As of now, the campaign is history, gathering virtual dust – even though it can still tug a few hearts and consumers.

Making this available – probably as a microsite hosting the commercials and the associated work – will give another gateway for contemporary consumers to discover and engage with the IBM brand. These consumers probably will number only in the hundreds or thousands compared to the millions who relate and engage with their current mass media campaign (What makes you special?) But they come at an incremental cost of almost zero.

And add these consumers with those that relate to the other campaigns that IBM has run over the last few years (including my personal favorite, 'The world's helpdesk') and you have a market that can rival the hits of the current main brand proposition. All at no cost at all.

3. <u>Recognise that ones and twos can add up to quite a few</u>
In *The Long Tail*, Chris Anderson writes "To think that basically everything you put out there finds demand is just odd. The reason it's odd is that we don't typically think in terms of one unit per quarter. When we think about traditional retail, we think about what's going to sell a lot."

The economics of the long tail are very different from those of traditional hit-driven economics. Long tail markets leverage the abysmally low cost of shelf-space and distribution to convert what were unprofitable customers, products and markets into profitable ones.

These audiences of ones and twos (very often more than that) are consumers who would have been lost to your advertising either because they don't relate to your current projected brand proposition or because it was too mass-market a fare for them.

By reducing the cost associated with customized communication with these consumers, the long tail effectively multiplies the potential audience for the communication of your brand.

So what's an effective long tail strategy to adopt while building a brand? Recognizing the power of these niche audiences, the best strategy to adopt is to chart out all the niche audiences the brand potentially has and address each one of them with the most cost-effective media mix – and with their own tailor-made brand message.

In fact, in more mature long tail markets each niche market of the brand will have its own closed loop of communication – tightly knit teams that live and breathe the idea in close conjunction with their audience, thereby incorporating feedback mechanisms into the very process of creation. Then the brand and the niche audience will move in tandem, locked together – not unlike a pair of salsa partners on the dance floor.

And for a lucky (or canny) brand manager, these closed loop communication teams can actually be pro-sumer brand enthusiasts – thereby eliminating the need for an advertising budget.

4. <u>Employ recommendation and word-of-mouth for your brand-building efforts</u>

While there has been great focus on generating word-of-mouth for brands, I believe there has been insufficient understanding or desire to do the same for the brand messages themselves. (A notable exception is the Crispin, Porter & Bogusky school of brand-building that has thrived on creating ever expanding ripples of word-of-mouth around their advertising.)

The most powerful effects of the long tail were first noticed when Amazon's recommendation filters pointed consumers to books that they might like – calculated based on the behavior of other shoppers like them. With recommendation filters, consumers found books they were interested in and Amazon sold more books from the tail of the curve.

The stuff in the long tail is useful only if it can find its way to your consuming audience. While pre-filtering tries to predict demand (a process not without its own risks), recommendations and other 'post-filters' amplify already existing behavior. Because the filters identify an existing pattern in behavior among the consumers of your advertising (as distinct from the consumers of the brand), they are more likely to find a sympathetic audience fit.

Consumers of your advertising are also likely to respond to recommendations like these, because they understand that other consumer experiences form the basis for them. And as we already know, consumers are much more likely to find other people's words more useful because they are perceived as not having a hidden agenda.

Recommendations also give the consumers of a brand's advertising a familiar place to start and work their way through the maze of messages. Without recommendation filters and the hits at the head of the curve, a long tail market risks being too much noise and very little signal.

Recommendations filters and behavior aggregators – the tools to amplify the secondary word of mouth around the brand messages themselves – are also a convenient vehicle to create buzz around the brand itself. They effectively reduce the work a consumer has to do – from trying to explain why they like something to merely saying, "follow this link and have a look at this video."

5. Don't try and predict. Measure and respond instead.

It's a legacy of our hit-driven economy that we are continually engaged in trying to predict the likely success of our chosen brand message being a hit. To this end, inordinate amounts of money and energy are spent. Often, all in vain.

The opportunity a long tail market offers is to do away with these 'expensive' means of predicting demand.

In a long tail brand communication, all possible brand messages are simultaneously available in the market. Technology and media may not have grown sophisticated enough today to measure and analyse every single variable in consumption patterns, inclinations and tastes of an entire market in real time. But there's lots more data available today in real time than was the case some time ago.

Armed with this real-time data, all one needs to do then is to continually adjust and respond in quick time, tweaking the messages or shuffling them around – from the sidelines into centre-stage, if one is garnering significant hits and showing the potential to become a mass-media hit.

The role of an advertising agency in this case shifts from being a gatekeeper who decides on limited data and gut-feel which brand message will be a success.

It becomes that of an active agent investing in the communication market of a particular brand. Keeping a keen eye on the market and how a suite of messages are faring, the agency keeps altering its portfolio of messages to ensure maximum returns for its clients.

6. When you have infinite choice, context is more important than content

For too long advertisers and communicators have focused only on what they are saying and not enough on who they are speaking to and where the conversation is happening. And even when they do so, they have almost always painted the picture with broad and all-encompassing brushstrokes.

The economics of mass-media and a hit-driven industry ensured that our individual differences were ignored and our collective similarities were addressed to. This gave rise to the artificial construct of popular culture where "the conventional is critically enjoyed and the truly new is criticized with aversion."

But as Chris Anderson notes, "Everyone of us – no matter how mainstream we might think we are – actually goes super-niche in some part of our lives."

A plethora of brand messages and the corresponding post-filters to navigate them enables our consumers to seek and find the message that best suits them – in the current context they are in. The very same consumers will return to consume and relate to a different brand message, when the context changes – either with time or with being in a different situation.

The contextual effects of the long tail effectively ensure that consumer's buying patterns needn't always be rounded off to the nearest million.

7. <u>Build negative databases of your brand communication</u>

Negative databases are an exciting new field in information theory. They are finding application in securing cryptographic messages to building computer immune systems mimicking those of our own.

Unlike normal databases, negative databases keep track of characteristics that don't define something rather than those that define them. For eg., a negative database of a dog will contain entries like 'wings', 'beak', 'feathers', etc – essentially all characteristics the dog doesn't have.

In a long tail communication market, while all messages are theoretically possible – not all are practically compatible. Association with one sometimes means disassociation with another – its antonym. For eg., if Volvo stands for safety, it cannot then stand for 'dangerous to drive.' But it can be "thrilling to drive".

Traditional brand building ideas didn't distinguish between the latter two messages. If Volvo stood for safety, it didn't stand for anything else. Effectively the rest of the messages were confined to the negative database bin without a thought.

In a long tail communication market, the need will be to carefully create and fashion a negative database of messages – a minute subset of all possible messages that cannot work for the brand.

It is this negative database that'll guide you and help you identify which messages cannot and should not populate your brand communication curve.

8. <u>Trade control for influence.</u>

In the 1980s, when NASA was contemplating sending robot aircraft to the far reaches of the solar system, a group of scientists thought of a novel approach which they detailed in a paper called *'Fast, Cheap and Out of Control : A Robot Invasion of the Solar System.'*

Traditional spacecraft are big, complex and are explicitly designed to be controlled by us. These design parameters result in an exponential increase in their cost, complexity and weight; and correspondingly decrease dramatically the probability of the success of the mission.

Instead, the new method proposed by this group of scientists was to send miniature bots in the hundreds or thousands. They would be cheap to make and launch. And since we don't have to rely on only one to succeed dramatically well - they don't need to be built in with fail-proof security and reliability (the real reason why they cost so much and take so long to build.) The Faustian bargain here is of relinquishing control. The bots would be on their own, only bothering to send back whatever they discover.

There's lesson for advertising and brand-building in there. Traditional brand-building is like those lumbering robot crafts – complicated and expensive, because we burden it with our do-or-do expectations of success. And with our overpowering need to control it and its every interaction and consequence.

In my opinion, the future of advertising and brand-building will also be 'fast, cheap and out of control.' Unlike our tried and trusted mass media advertising that we can take 'off air', future media vehicles will not come with an off switch. When we pay very little to run them, we are actually relinquishing our control over when, where, and how they will run. Effectively they are on their own.

Examples of these 'persistent advertising vehicles' are viral videos increasingly hosted on publicly shared sites, podcasting, in-game advertising, on-line virtual worlds, blogs, social networking sites, etc. These new media vehicles work in a paradigm very different from the tried and tested ways of 'slow, expensive and in control' advertising.

What all these media vehicles (and the ones to come) will do is embed our brand messages into the very fabric of our collective lives – making them 'searchable', 'findable' and 'experience-able' for eternity.

Your brand could have made a clean-cut with the past and sport a new strategy, new look, new idea, and new direction – but there will be no way to recall these 'miniature bots' already out there. They have a mind – and a lifespan – of their own, outside our control.

Therefore, a necessary first step to harnessing 'fast, cheap and out of control' brand-building will be to forego the single-minded brand proposition and embrace long tail thinking.

We'll have to learn to set our brand messages free and let each of them seek its own path of discovery and voyage. This merry mélange of overlapping brand messages will reach out to more people, at more times and with greater effect than could have done through traditional means.

Epilogue

Brand complexity is a DIY kit.

We began this quest by also seeking an answer to the question – can simplicity in communication yield complexity of brand character in perception?

Trying to communicate a complex message is a task that involves great risk and great expense. Great risk because the message may not reach the audience at all, or even if it does it may not be understood. Expensive because a complex message requires more media bandwidth – and many many more repetitions to get across.

A better model to communicate complexity is to let the consumers assemble it for themselves at their end. Just make sure that they have all the essential ingredients – a long tail of simple and easy to communicate brand messages – and they will eventually put together a complex, layered and nuanced understanding of your brand.

One of the most surprising and desirable side effects of long tail brand communication is that by merely contemplating more than one message at the same time, your consumer is assembling the complexity you sought to communicate, but wisely didn't.

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Every bit of thinking and elaboration in this paper owes its existence to Chris Anderson, his original Long Tail article for the WIRED and the subsequent book of the same name. So pervasive has been the influence of his thinking, I have often capitulated and included his words in quotes instead of explaining the idea in my own words. There are also occasions where his quotes have slipped in without attribution – mostly because I found the repeated referencing made reading difficult. But that's not to say I have forgotten or am not keen on paying my dues.

I must also thank Leland Maschmeyer for introducing me to Stephen Wolfram and his Rule 30 (through his blog - http://whistlethroughyourcomb.blogspot.com), which – though it didn't find mention in the paper – provided the inspiration for the 'brand complexity is a DIY kit' epilogue.

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