The matter of trends and intelligent brands

By Oresti Patricios , issued by Ornico

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At the end of each year a big trend in the marketing industry is to discern the trends for the coming year. The media bulges with pundits (like me) who hang their reputation on predicting what will be big in the next twelve months or beyond.

Here I am again, but this year I'd like to hop on the trends band-wagon a little bit differently and I hope a little bit smarter. I'd like to use the thinking of one Dave Duarte to discern the difference between trends, trifles and truths and to talk about why it's crucial for brands to know this. I'd go as far as saying that to be an intelligent brand you'd have to understand what differentiates a truth from a trifle or a trend.

Now Dave Duarte is what you'd call a smart, switched on human being who really gets marketing and where it is moving to. An online marketing educator and Social Media specialist, Dave works with universities around the world, but his home-base is UCT's Graduate School of Business where he runs a leadership programme and lectures on the Executive MBA. He helped Ogilvy establish the Ogilvy Digital Marketing Academy - which has been an outrageous success and is helping to catapult that agency into a complex, digital, socially networked future. This while churning out bright new minds that can comfortably work in that sector and still create award-winning campaigns.

Dave gives back to the South Africa tech community by serving on the boards for non-profits Mxit Reach, and Creative Commons South Africa and has worked with brands like Allan Gray, Associated Magazines, Cairo University, Castrol, Curtin Graduate School of Business, Discovery Health, First National Bank, Gordon Institute of Business Science, Investec, Jupiter Drawing Room, Kagiso... well you get the idea. The list goes on and it is impressive.

One of the most perplexing and complex challenges for intelligent brands is to navigate social networks, and to understand how to engineer new technologies for the best benefits. Dave says that a useful entry point for doing this is to understand how to distinguish between trifles, trends and truths. Like Dave, I believe that this would help brands more readily distinguish between what's merely fashionable from a digital perspective and what is meaningful. What needs to be heard and what is here to stay.

It's a profound skill that's not only useful in navigating social networks, but once learned and practiced so that its almost an intuitive talent, it can become a way to transverse through complex and cluttered consumer and business contexts. To decide what matters, what will materially affect your brand, and what's nothing but a passing trifle.

So let's first look at Dave's definition of a **trifle:** "Flighty and fashionable, trifles are the candyfloss of social media or technology, and have as much staying power as cotton candy left out in the rain. A great example of this was Flooz and Beenz which was some kind of internet currency that was completely divorced from real world money. People love cold hard cash and symbolic variants of the likes of Kenya's M-Pesa which delivers convenience and easy access to banking in a country where the unbanked used to struggle to transfer funds. Unlike Beenz and Flooz, M-Pesa represents the real thing, rather than some sort of Monopoly currency. That's why even though digital "currency" was at one time touted as the "secret sauce" of ecommerce it bombed. It wasn't the real thing and became a trifle that had absolutely no staying power."

Dave says **trends** are very different and can quite easily be discerned. "Easily distinguished from trifles by their staying power and ability to influence commerce and culture, trends are notable for their ability to affect consumer behaviour. The sharing of photographs, stories, diaries, opinions and other personal data online is a massive trend. Millions of people across the world are doing this on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, and there are thousands of companies that underpin the technology that enables this sharing. It's likely that social media is a trend that will shape the way people do business, communicate and experience life for decades to come."

Lastly if there's one take out here for intelligent brands, it is to know the enduring staying power of a **truth.** Let's see how Dave defines a truth. "All trends are underpinned by a fundamental truth or enduring reality that is sustainable. The truth about social media is that people are collaborative animals and live in a communal world where they desire to share experience and more. This isn't a truism but is a truth that has been scientifically proven and recorded in numerous anthropological, social and psychological studies. People's need to connect with each other is almost as high up as the survival instinct. Combine this powerful natural driver with web-based tools to enable social connection with mobile devices that connect seamlessly to the web, and you have the makings of a major behavioural shift. Business will never be the same again because technology has given birth to the tools that which enables the expression of this truth."

Good luck for 2013 and may an understanding of trends, trifles and truths provide a compass to steer your brand to new victories in the coming months and years.

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