



Communication is nothing but nitpicking

By Stefan Grafe

Understanding how we communicate, directly relates to brand success

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We all know that language plays a central role in branding and commercial communication. But as new science challenges the traditional understanding of how and why language evolved, marketing departments need to seriously rethink how they communicate with their customers.

Convention holds that language first evolved to facilitate the exchange of functional information. If you like, to enable prehistoric males to co-ordinate hunts more effectively (“Korg, I feel like bison tonight, let’s go to the water hole.”)

But Robin Dunbar, Professor of Psychology at the University of Liverpool, takes a radically different point of view. He believes language developed as a cheap, ultra-efficient and powerfully effective way of maintaining social harmony and cohesion in early human communities.

He tells us that humans, and lower primates, live in a far more sophisticated social world than other members of the animal kingdom, and that the cost of this sophistication, is the extra effort (time) needed to maintain group harmony. Early



humans (and primates today) overcame this problem with physical social grooming. On its most fundamental level, grooming is simply a pleasurable experience. It stimulates the production of the body’s natural opiates, the endorphins; in effect, being groomed produces a mildly narcotic effect.

But grooming is also an expression of friendship and loyalty, especially between mother and child. Grooming acts like a cement that holds alliances together. The larger a group, the more time individuals need to spend servicing their relationships.

But what happened when certain primate groups – that is, early humans - got too big for individual physical grooming?

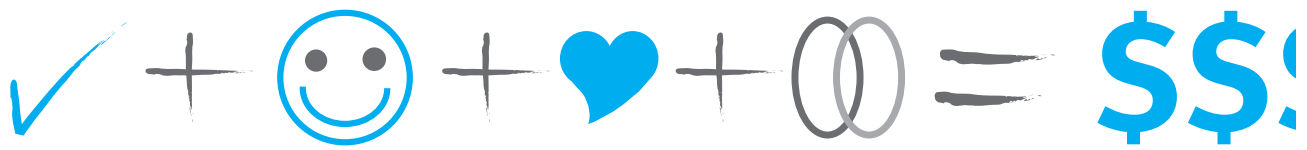
Well, this is where Dunbar made his brilliant leap; he concluded that primates started 'grooming' each other with language. He believes that general, everyday communicating (or gossiping) replaced physical grooming as society's glue. (It's ironic that we call one form of this communication nitpicking.)



Once understood, Dunbar's theories become very evident in modern human communication patterns. Females are far more active in their networking, 'catching-up' and communication. Looking at phone usage, we can clearly see how important this is. Also, two-thirds of our everyday conversations are taken up with social chitchat. Two-thirds of books are fiction, and the bulk of our newspapers' content are typically dedicated to 'human interest' stories. Dunbar's theories have also found a firm ally in modern neuropsychology. It demonstrates that social cohesion and 'grooming' communication aids the release of hormones in the brain that make us satisfied, secure and happy. The French and Germans recognise this phenomenon in expressions like 'caresser avec des mots' or 'mit Worten streicheln', which mean to stroke or cherish with words. Neuropsychology also shows that pure information (like, 'Darling before you open the phone bill') does not have this effect on our brains. It has a very different effect.

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So what are the implications for brand and commercial communication? The answer, in short, is an awful lot, for it fundamentally changes the way we should communicate with consumers. For a start it strengthens the old creative argument that firstly has to entice and build a relationship. It also supports the argument that for information or a message to become effective, a line of communication has to be opened. A further consequence would be that marketers need to strike a better balance between 'information' and 'communication.'



The better the relationship the more rewarding it is for both sides

The consequences for brands are also significant and rattle a lot of established market thinking. Brands need to regard themselves as part of their audience's social circle and behave that way.

Who likes people who only call if they want something? We give them short shrift. According to studies by IFM – Market Psychology Consultants-, companies who focus almost entirely on functional communication and offers leave consumers feeling empty, negative or feeling they are being taken for a ride. As a result they will often reject the product, or if they do proceed with the transaction, tend to 'see how much they can get out of it' and only respond to ever cheaper offers.

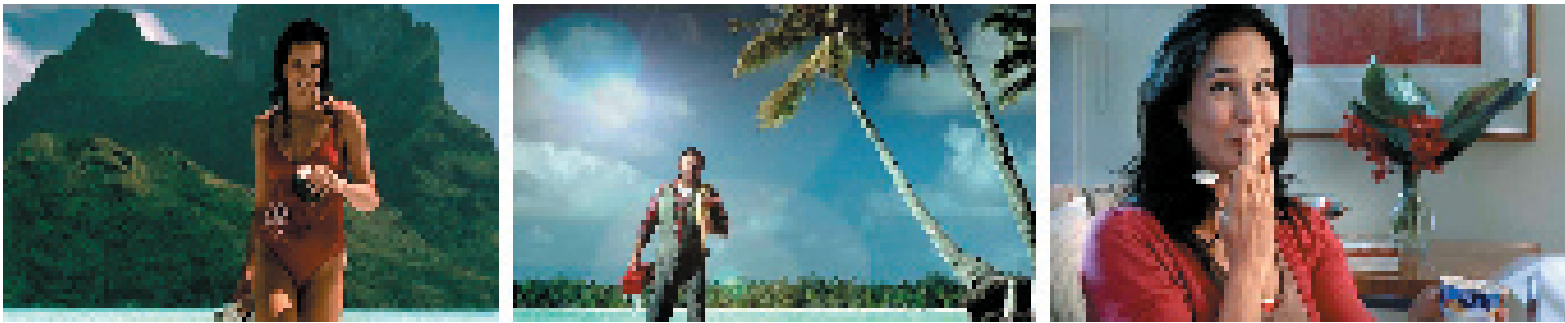
This is different to the old 'just invest and the rewards may come some time' adage. This method of 'communication' should be successful in both the short and long term.

So what is needed to properly 'communicate' with consumers? Firstly, brands need to be part of the social circle. This will inspire loyalty, a better reception and lead to continuous interaction. This is different to the old adage 'just invest and the rewards may come some time'. This method of 'communication' should be successful in both the short and long term.

This is not just a nice theory either. This much more effective form of communication is already being used very successfully. Washing powder marketers build virtual communities, clubs and rewards. Johnson and Johnson do it very successfully in the area of 'baby care.' Procter & Gamble established a viral marketing agency, 'Tremor', which has a database of 280,000 multipliers and spreaders across the US. (Basically Procter & Gamble provide samples and information and count on recipients talking to their peers.) In each test region sales increased by 15-20%.

But even those who try sometimes get it wrong, as they think 'we need to build a community that serves us', where in fact the opposite is true. They need to seek an audience that will make them a part of their community, and thus their preferred product or service.

A simple, yet powerful example of the effect of ‘we understand each other’ communication is the recent growth in sales of Fruche, a dessert dairy product. After years of decline, National Foods deviated from the typical brand and communication paradigms and looked at the psychological needs of their audience. A new position was developed that was encapsulated in the ‘Go to your happy place’ TV commercial (Clemenger/BBDO, Melbourne) which showed a woman simply being somewhere else with her mind. The commercial showed few of the typical ‘enjoyment’ and ‘hero’ shots. The pack was also redesigned (Cowan Design) to communicate the same message.



The result was (and is) that the audience felt like Fruche ‘fitted into their circle.’ And the proof was in the strong and sustained sales growth in a mature category.

Two other examples are the Tim Tam’s and the Omo ‘Dirt is good’ campaigns (which is based on a successful US campaign a few years ago), positioning themselves as an ally within their audiences’ social circle.

Modern science has given us a new way of thinking about communication. We need to ‘groom’ our consumers for them to reciprocate. Strategies based on this are achieving excellent results, even in mature markets.

FURTHER READING ON THE TOPIC:

[Robin Dunbar](#)

‘Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language’ 1996.

[Antonio Damasio](#)

‘The feeling of what happens. Body and Emotion in the making of consciousness’ 2002.

[Rita Carter](#)

‘Mapping the mind’ fourth impression – 2004.

[Web](#)

<http://www.apa.org/science/psa/apro5gossip.html>