

BY DON E. SCHULTZ

IS THE PAST PAST?

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE OFTEN WILL OCCUR AGAIN

FALL, WHILE THE start of a new school year, is filled with the past. Although the students are new, we typically spend most of our instructional time explaining the past ... what has gone before, theories, cases histories, our own experiences and the like. We start with the past, thinking that will provide a foundation for the future. Like nature, what has gone before, we hypothesize, will likely occur again.

Fall is also the time for academics to submit their research papers to the various journals for review prior to publication. Being a reviewer for several journals gives me an opportunity to read and review these papers. Sure enough, almost every academic paper starts with the past ... a literature review. The background and support for the research conducted that supposedly will create new knowledge.

Fall is also the time for academic and professional conferences. There's a lot of "past" in those conferences as speakers focus on best practices, award-winning examples, historical reviews and the like. How, if you copy them closely enough, you may be able to replicate their success. (Note: Past failures are seldom discussed, although they likely have more real value going forward.)

I attend many of these conferences, sometimes speaking, sometimes listening and sometimes just because I like the venue. (Miami in November is generally much better than Chicago.) So, I get to hear much about the past, and I even speak about it myself ... my research, experiences, beliefs, hypotheses and the like.

So, what does this focus on the fall and reminiscing have to do with marketing, communication, brands and branding, and "master planning," the topic for which this column is named? Here's the hoped-for link.

The idea was sparked by a September 2007 working paper from professor John A. Deighton. John, formerly of the University of Chicago, is the Harold M. Brierley Professor of Business Administration at Harvard University. As background, John and Rashi Glazer succeeded me as co-editors of the *Journal of Direct Marketing* and quickly re-named it the *Journal of Interactive Marketing* in 1997.

John's paper, written with Leora Kornfeld, "Digital Interactivity: Unanticipated Consequences for Markets, Marketing, and Consumers" is a bit of the past and some of the future. There, Deighton and Kornfeld review the vastly different direction online, interactive, Web, social networks, search and the like have taken in the past decade than was anticipated. The trajectory, as they say, has been dramatically different from the one

John and Rashi anticipated as journal editors.

They had anticipated a marketplace driven by the new direct marketing technologies. The big differences, they believed, would be ones giving the marketer much more powerful and inexpensive tools and capabilities—ones that would make consumers much more responsive to the direct marketer's efforts. To quote: "Direct marketing would become as fluid and as personal as conversation." It stood as a radical change in favor of the marketer.

Ten years later, as they say, many of John and Rashi's suppositions are only partly true. The problem? The power shift has evolved to the customer, not to the marketer. Customers have adopted and adapted the various new technologies and methodologies in ways few marketers and academicians could imagine. And, as customers gained more control of the marketplace, to the chagrin of marketers, one wonders if the past is really the past. That is, does knowing what has happened have much value in terms of envisioning the future? Or, are we doomed to future regret simply because we thought the future would be something like the past? In short, is the past worth very much or, is it simply the past?

This same sort of thing occurs in the academic papers I review. Newly minted Ph.D.s, trying to extract some publishable work from their studies and dissertation, begin by citing studies of television viewing audience behaviors from the 1960s and 1970s and use that as the basis for their investigations of online and interactive systems. Other authors have tried to connect today's search engine marketing to consumer searches in library card catalogs. So, how relevant is the past to the current marketplace ... or to the future?

All theory is based on the past. All marketers are trying to build, refine, develop or improve theories about customers, marketing, communication, branding and the like. It's these historical theories that drive our future behaviors, right or wrong. So, the question seems to resolve: Is the past simply the past, or is it a gateway to the future?

Unfortunately, the same "is the past past" question arises professionally. How relevant are business examples or best practices from the mid-1990s on the Internet, the Web or mobile? It's nice to know how things worked once, but shouldn't we be looking forward, not backward?

In short, is the past really past? In marketing, communication, promotion, brands and branding, I fear it is. We're not dealing with a replicable science in market-

ing, promotion or branding. They aren't like the natural, replicable phenomena of trees budding, fish spawning and birds nesting. Those things are fairly predictable. But, how replicable is what we do? Can we really replicate anything in a dynamic, networked, people-driven marketplace? Is the past really past or does it hold some clues to the future? If you're wondering the same thing, maybe we should talk. It's getting lonely out here in the future. **m**



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