



My 2012 CES Takeaway: Brands Beware

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The 2012 Consumer Electronics Show (CES) held in Las Vegas a few weeks ago once again gave us a sneak peek into the latest and greatest technology that will soon hit the market. From smart TVs and 3-D experiences to new social integration platforms and plasma screens measured in millimeters, there was no shortage of jaw-dropping innovation that had everyone's heads spinning by the end of the week.

The CES experience confirms what we already know: technology will continue to advance at an ever-accelerating rate. And it's becoming more and more difficult to argue with the notion that technology is going to influence and impact every aspect of our everyday lives. The ways in which we drive our cars, get our news, pick an outfit, communicate with friends, make purchases, etc. are all going to evolve for most of us as we integrate new technology into our lives.

For many of us, advancing technology has only positive effects - It keeps us more informed, engaged and entertained. We access content on an endless array of digital platforms, we turn static messaging into dynamic experiences and we can become more efficient with our time because of technology. Not to mention the fact that it makes us feel pretty damn cool to own the latest and greatest shiny object.

But for marketers and brands, it could potentially be an entirely different story. Technology may actually be a threat to brands if they don't fully understand some of the pitfalls of nonstop technological innovation. It may actually lead to a place where technology shifts the fundamentals of how brands need to think about their products, their marketing and their end consumers.

So it's now more important than ever to be hypercritical of technology, analyze it from every angle and think about both the opportunities and the challenges it presents. I believe this is critical, because if they're not careful, technology could eventually lead brands down a path that becomes highly disconnected from consumers.

So after only a few post-CES weeks, I haven't been able to fully digest and crystalize everything I witnessed, but I have been thinking about three challenging questions that brands need to think about if they're going to operate in this new technological world.

Are we losing sight of content?

At CES I saw a ton of new ways to consume content. Apps available across mobile devices, tablets, new smartphones, new smart TVs, gaming consoles, vehicles, etc., etc., etc. But what I didn't see in the two-million-plus square feet of displays was any technology platform that allows for new content creation. It

was all about content delivery and access. Where was the technology that turns consumers into broadcasters? Where was the collaborative video editing software? Why didn't I see any amazing apps on smart TVs that I hadn't heard already? And why was the content we were looking at on the device a secondary consideration to the device itself?

Now, I understand this was a show about electronics, so it will always have a technological focus. But to have the world's best and brightest technology producers in one place and have very little conversation about the creation of new content worries me. It feels like we're all quickly becoming enamored with unprecedented access, but access to what?

I'd rather be able to get amazing content in one place vs. mediocre content in ten different places. And to me it feels like the current path of technology is focused on the latter. So as marketers we can't be seduced by all of the new platforms and technology and lose sight of the underlying reason that those platforms exist- to deliver great content. So my takeaway in this area is that brands need to tread cautiously into the evolving world of technology and stay focused on creating great content. Don't be worried about smart TVs and tablets until you have a great reason to be there. Connecting with consumers comes from the right combination of content and access, but without a foundation of great content, unlimited access is meaningless.

Is too much technology killing real experiences?

What also struck me as I walked around and saw some of the wackiest uses of technology was that brands need to think about using the right level of technology in their product offerings. For brands and products whose DNA is rooted in technology, pushing the boundaries of innovation feels right. Seeing Panasonic and Samsung create 3-D experiences and hearing that Slingbox and Sony are creating a "cloud" data solution seems consistent with these brands and the products we've come to expect from them.

But for many other brands whose products have a foundation in true emotional experiences, it can feel forced and out-of-place. I saw indications of technology that would one day let cars drive themselves and another that turns the windows in your house into touchscreens with widgets. And I also saw a platform that brings every clothes retailer right into your home and lets you try on their merchandise through an augmented reality experience.

Now, that's cool at CES, but will consumers ever really want that in their lives? Some of it feels like a misuse of technology and something that you've seen in *Back to the Future 2*. I like driving my car, and when I look out my back window I want to see my backyard, not a WeatherBug widget and the CNBC ticker. And for some inexplicable reason, I know my wife likes going to the mall and spending countless hours trying on different outfits with her friends.

When technology tries to replace these real, tangible and meaningful experiences I believe it's gone too far. So my advice to brands that have been around for a while is to think long and hard about the core experience they deliver and use technology to enhance that experience, not supplant it. Because I can promise you I won't be replacing the windows in my house with new ones that let me manage my investment portfolio.

Do we really understand how fragmented the technology landscape is becoming?

You can probably tell by the way I phrased the question that I don't think most of us are. As marketers we're all aware that consumers can pretty much consume anything, anywhere, anytime. At this point content is no longer confined to any single platform and we are living in an age of content decentralization. Take Pandora, for example: you can now stream your music on your computer, on your iPhone or Android phone, in your car, on your television and probably through your refrigerator in the future. You can likely say the same for most major content providers that exist now and will be developed in the near term.

To me, this has the biggest implication on a brand's marketing strategies. This decentralization of content adds another layer of complexity to a landscape of growing media fragmentation. Again, if we think about Pandora, years ago it was simply a computer-based music service. The marketing context was similar to any online advertising you might execute. Then it rolled out to mobile devices, tablets, smart TVs, and now automobiles. The same property that was causing fragmentation from traditional audio platforms is now fragmenting itself.

And you might ask, "Why is that a big deal?" Well, I think it's creating multiple messaging contexts within each property. This means that brands may need to start customizing messaging based on property, followed by the multiple contexts in which that property is delivered. Imagine McDonald's partnering with Pandora – would McDonald's deliver the same exact messaging to a consumer on Pandora's smart TV app and on their Android app? In one context the consumer is in their home and a bit more sedentary while in the other he/she may be on the go. And is one context better suited for brand vs. retail messaging? You get the point.

Simply put, technology is creating micro-fragmentation within properties and thus multiple contexts for brands to consider when developing messaging. It's not as simple as aligning with content anymore; we now have to think about content plus context. Great - as if we didn't have enough to worry about.

So there you have it. There are many questions we need to ask ourselves as we move into an age of accelerating technological innovation. But despite these looming questions I truly believe that technological innovation is fantastic. It enhances the lives of consumers and opens up new opportunities for brands. But with these new opportunities come new challenges and dynamics that must impact the way we think. We need to interrogate technology and figure out how it's impacting the lives of consumers, how it's changing the way we need to market and how it can enhance a product experience. If we're not willing to do that, don't be surprised if one day in the near future we're all standing around looking at each other asking, "What the hell happened?"