

The Face-to-Face Manifesto

Back to the Future

Ed Keller & Brad Fay



he heyday of the “manifesto” was probably the late 19th or early 20th centuries. Think of *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848, or *Mein Kampf* in 1925. Whether for good or evil, they tend to signal the beginning of something important—social or cultural change, new religious movements, new forms of government.

We now live in the social media age of Facebook, Twitter, and their brethren. Who foretold the current new age?

In 1999, *The Cluetrain Manifesto* went live—first on the website Cluetrain.com and then a year later in the book, *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual*. Its 95 theses (purposely reminiscent of Martin Luther’s 95 theses) laid out a vision of how people will live and why business must change in the Internet age. It began with these words: “A powerful global conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. As a result, markets are getting smarter and getting smarter faster than most companies.”

The message for business was that as networked markets learn to speak in a natural and genuine voice that “can’t be faked,” respect is being lost “for companies unable or unwilling to speak as they do.”

Was *Cluetrain* correct that we had entered a new era? And was it correct that the conversation era that it proclaimed was coming upon us was as a result of the Internet? Or was it more a story of “back to the future”?

Thesis #1 of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* set the stage: “Markets are conversations.” For most of human history, it declared, people did business face to face, in open markets, where conversation between buyers and sellers was valued and motivating: “The first markets were filled with people, not abstractions or statistical aggregates; they were the places where supply met demand with a firm handshake. Buyers and sellers looked each other in the eye, met and connected. The first markets were places for exchange, where people came to buy what others had to sell—and to talk.”

With the rise of the industrial revolution and then the age of mass media, *Cluetrain* argued, person to person connection was lost, to the detriment of consumers and of business: “Consider the distance we’ve come. Markets once were places where producers and customers met face-to-face and engaged in conversations based on shared interests. Now business-as-usual is engaged in a grinding war of attrition with its markets. No wonder marketing fails.”

But with the rise of the Internet, said *Cluetrain*, people are returning to the “era of conversation.” Businesses that seize the opportunity and change will thrive; those that fight it will struggle.

The keys to business success in this new era: “Loosen up. Lighten up. And shut up for a while. Listen for a change ... By listening, marketing will re-learn how to talk.”

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The Cluetrain Manifesto was prescient in many ways. It gave an early voice to many of the mantras that businesses practice, or are beginning to practice, today: “Listen before you speak,” “engage customers in two way conversations,” and “embrace rather than fear consumer-generated content” were all espoused (albeit in somewhat different terms) in *The Cluetrain Manifesto*. But it took many businesses almost another decade to become comfortable with the idea of being “open” and “social.”

However, Cluetrain was incorrect in one fundamental way. It was not the Internet that caused us to return to an era of conversation. People are social animals, dependent on one another from the moment of conception through our teenage years and ultimately throughout our lives.

Our survival as a species depends on our being not merely the strongest or most aggressive, but on being collaborative. This is a phenomenon that has been documented by authors across a variety of fields, spawning a growing literature including Daniel Goleman's *Social Intelligence* (2006), Mark Earls' *Herd* (2007), *Connected* by Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler (2010), *Join the Club* by Tina Rosenberg (2011), and *The Social Animal* by David Brooks (2011). These books focus on the implications of social interactions for human relations, education, sociology, public health and medicine, social movements, and even politics.

The Internet has provided powerful new ways to interact with people, as *Cluetrain* predicted. So has the compulsion of text messaging. But these are far from satisfying replacements for the face-to-face contact for which the human species was designed. It is important to remember the megatrend “high tech, high touch” identified in 1982 by John Naisbitt in his bestselling book, *Megatrends*. Naisbitt argued that each new innovation in technology, to be successful, must be coupled with a compensatory human response. You can't stop technological progress, according to Naisbitt (nor would you necessarily want to), but for technology to be embraced it must be coupled with a high touch response. For example, FedEx and UPS developed high reliability and efficiency based on modern electronics, but the success of each is built on a form of high touch hand delivery.

So it is with modern communications and connections, and their impact on business. The press and the business community are abuzz over the marketing power of Facebook and other social networking sites such as Twitter, Four Square, and Pinterest, and whatever will be the next “game changing” social networking service. Online social media is “word of mouth on steroids,” it is said; others call it “word of mouth at scale” What they mean is that online social media facilitates lots of people talking to others, sharing their experiences with a very wide reach, a heap of credibility, and a lot of impact. This view is consistent with the view of the *Cluetrain Manifesto* that the Internet is causing a rise of conversation.

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It is undeniable that Facebook, the king of the social media hill, has accumulated a huge number of users who spend growing amounts of time on the site. Its growth and ability to attract a loyal and highly networked audience is to be admired. For brands, however, it is far from the Holy Grail of marketing. Facebook and other online social networks represent merely one channel out of many that marketers can tap to spark a powerful word of mouth wave.

And when looked at in the context of the “total social” opportunity, it is but one very small part of the overall picture and needs to be seen as such. And true to Naisbitt’s “high tech, high touch” megatrend, the fact is that online social networking is no substitute for the power and impact of face-to-face communications. Real world conversations—most of which take place face-to-face—are still the dominant mode of communication, and they are the most trusted and persuasive.

Consider the following. When it comes to online brand conversations, it is estimated that there are 256 billion brand impressions created each year. An impressive number indeed, although it must be noted that this figure really reflects more of an opportunity to see an online post, rather than an actual measure of how many people saw a post or Tweet, which our firm estimates may be 10% or less. And leading brands such as Coca-Cola, Disney and Starbucks have accumulated tens of millions of fans on Facebook alone. The assumption is that these fans represent a ready corps of brand advocates who want to receive brand information and will then share it with their vast online networks.

But when our firm, the Keller Fay Group, looks at word of mouth in the real world—which is sometimes harder to count and therefore not as often reported in the press—we find that there are about 750 billion brand impressions each year. A far greater sum, revealing that social media represents just a fraction of the total.

Further, we know from our firm's research that each of these conversations—most of which happen face to face—brings with it greater credibility, a greater desire to share with others, and a great likelihood to purchase the products being discussed than conversations which take place online.

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Key to the argument that social media is word of mouth on steroids is a belief that online conversations will spread to hundreds or thousands of people (and maybe more) with the click of a mouse. But, as it turns out, while that is theoretically possible it is not the way online sharing usually works. Most links that are shared reach only between 5 and 10 people. And the huge legions of Facebook fans, it turns out, are not so actively engaged with the brands they once “liked.” Fewer than 1% of brand fans on Facebook have any type of active involvement, bringing those huge numbers back down to earth.

So if not via Facebook and other social networking sites, what can brands do to get conversations started? There are lots of ways, and brands that truly wish to be social should think about them all as they plan their social marketing strategies. It is important to fight the urge to start with a particular tool or approach, but rather begin by asking “what’s my story?” What are the messages about your brand and category that make you talkworthy? Emotions are what propel people to talk and share, and you need to determine what the emotional connection is between the consumer and your brand or your product.

Next it’s important to know who the people are who are already talking about your brand, or can be encouraged to do so. Who are the consumer influencers in your category, and your brand advocates? When and where do they talk, about what, and why?

Once you have an understanding of the stories people might tell about your brand and the people who will tell them, only then does it make sense to focus on the best channels through which to reach people. And it turns out, the biggest and most productive channel to spark conversation is not online social media, but advertising. Fully one quarter of conversations include an explicit reference to ads. People might say they no longer trust advertising, but it definitely gets them talking, and the closer they get to purchase decisions the more they talk and the more they talk about ads.

In addition to advertising there are a number of other channels that spark conversation—for example, owned media such as a brand’s website, or promotions such as coupons, in-store displays, or even product packaging. And yes, sometimes social media is the channel through which to reach and distribute such content, but more often it is television, print, or other online media such as search, or a brand’s own website. In fact, television advertising is far and away the single biggest driver of consumer conversation. And not just for big events such as the Super Bowl or the Academy Awards, but day in and day out. Far from being a dinosaur, television and other traditional media play a key role in today’s social marketplace.

In 1864, gold was discovered in California, setting off a frenzy that sent men and women from across America out to California in search of fortune. The Gold Rush brought wealth to a few, but most went away empty handed. Meanwhile, California turned out to be a place of many other bounties—agriculture, trade and commerce, tourism, and invention—all of which were helped by the gold rush-induced explosion of population and discovery.

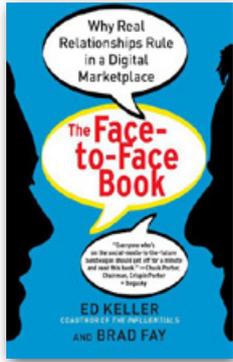
So it is with today’s social wave. Facebook has tapped into a mother lode that was there all along, but ignored by many. It proved the power of social connections to the world. People flock to Facebook because it meets a social need that was previously underserved online. But people’s desire to be social manifests itself in many other places as well, creating multiple opportunities for businesses that wish to participate.

Today's consumer marketplace is highly social, but not because of particular platforms or technologies. The businesses that will be most successful in the future are the ones that embrace a model that puts people first—rather than technology—at the center of products, campaigns and market strategies. Those who achieve the greatest success will recognize that there are many ways to tap the power of today's social consumer. Those marketers who are mining only one vein—namely, social networking tools and technologies—are not seeing the full scope of an enormous opportunity and will not fully capitalize as a result.

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The great social wave is an opportunity that no business can afford to ignore or look at myopically. **It's happening all around us—and much to the continuing surprise of many, it's mostly happening face-to-face, in the real world, with all forms of media and marketing having the opportunity to contribute.** 📍

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS | Ed Keller and Brad Fay are coauthors of *The Face-to-Face Book: Why Real Relationships Rule in a Digital Marketplace*, published in May, 2012 by Free Press. They are also principals of the Keller Fay Group, a market research and consulting firm specializing in word of mouth.

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