The Manifesto on Monday Morning

*How to put the wisdom of Cluetrain into action when you get to your office*

by Peter Hirshberg, Technorati, and Steve Hayden, Ogilvy, with contributions by Doc Searls
1999: “Markets are conversations.”
The Cluetrain Manifesto

2007: “Conversations are about talking, not announcing. They’re about listening, not surveying. They’re about paying attention, not getting attention. “Driving” is for cars and cattle, not conversation.”
Doc Searls

It’s been eight years since Chris Locke, Rick Levine, Doc Searls, and David Weinberger nailed The Cluetrain Manifesto’s 95 theses to a door on the Web <http://cluetrain.org>. Today the first and best remembered of these—the one we’ve nailed to the top of our paper—has become a mantra. (A Google search on the words “conversation” and “marketing” yields 36 million results.)

But getting a concept doesn’t mean one knows what to do about it Monday morning. Today there’s a widening gap between markets that have become more conversational than ever and marketing that mostly is not.

That business practices are still catching up is not surprising. Such lags are common in times of major social transformation. And to be fair, Cluetrain was ahead of its time. When Cluetrain came out, blogging had barely begun. Syndication was still off in the future. It wasn’t possible to subscribe to feeds of anything, much less syndicated URLs or searches for word strings.

Today it is. For marketers, the rise of the Live Web—where real people talk to each other in real time—is by far the most important development in what we’ve come to call Web 2.0. The Live Web is where marketers connect with their markets. They have an open invitation to join the conversation, as long as they’re respectful, don’t try to take control and are willing to behave like real people.

In this paper, we offer practical guidelines on putting conversational marketing into practice. Like everyone else, we’re trying and learning. Here are some of the techniques we think are working best. Here are some examples of companies and organizations that have launched successful conversational marketing initiatives. Here are some of the tools and processes they’ve used.

To advance the conversation around conversational marketing, we’ve included an interview with Sun Microsystems CEO Jonathan Schwarz, one of its earliest practitioners, who discusses rethinking the concept of brand control. We’ve also drafted a “Conversational Advertising Code of Conduct,” which we invite comment and discussion on. We hope this draft will help to evolve a set of mutually crafted, self-generated standards we can all embrace. Such standards are especially critical at this “All aboard!” moment of industry transition.
The latest thinking from Doc Searls:

The framing for conversational marketing should be conversation, not marketing. Think about what you want in a conversation, and let that lead your marketing.

- The purpose of conversation is to create and improve understanding, not for one party to "deliver messages" to the other. That would be rude.
- There is no "audience" in a conversation. If we must label others in conversation, let's call them partners.
- People in productive conversation don't repeat what they're saying over and over. They learn from each other and move topics forward.
- Conversations are about talking, not announcing. They're about listening, not surveying. They're about paying attention, not getting attention. They're about talking, not announcing. "Driving" is for cars and cattle, not conversation.
- Conversation is live. It's constantly moving and changing, flowing where the interests and ideas of the participants take it. Even when conversations take the form of email, what makes them live is current interest on both sides.

What this means for conversational marketing is that brands must be living things too. Not just emblems. Those that succeed will be as live—as open to the flow and diversion of ideas—as the market conversations they participate in.

Live brands participate in market conversations in a manner that is:

**Real.** Conversational marketing is carried out by human beings, writing and speaking in their own voices, for themselves—not just for their employers.

**Constant.** Conversational marketing's heartbeat is the human one, not some media schedule. Brands need to work incessantly to be understood within the context of the market conversation and to earn and keep the respect of their conversational partners.

**Genuinely interested.** Intellectual engagement can't be faked—at least for long. Current interest is what keeps conversations going, and it's the key to sustained brand presence.

**Intent on learning.** Every participant who stays with the conversation learns. Humans are distinguished by their unlimited capacity to learn. This should be no less true of brands than it is of individuals.

**Humble.** The term "branding" was born in the cattle industry and borrowed by advertising and mass media at the height of the Industrial Age. In those days the power to inform was concentrated in the hands of a few giant companies. Now it's in everybody's hands.

**Attentive.** In the old days, brands wanted everybody else to pay attention to them. Now brands need to pay attention to everybody else.

**Personal.** No individual outsources their conversation or their education. This is no less true of brands than of people. Because brands today are people. Smart brands reward individual employees for engaging in market conversations.
What works best—the view from Technorati and Ogilvy

How does a brand actually enter a conversation? Just how do you make advertising—traditionally the epitome of highly crafted, approved-at-every-level communication—include your customer? What does it mean when the people you used to think of as your “audience” have now become publishers with their own readerships?

These are some of the questions we’ve been wrestling with at Technorati and Ogilvy, and working through with clients. We don’t have all the answers, but we do have a point of view and the first outlines of some emerging best practices.

Once marketers have done the fundamental thing of finding and respectfully participating in market conversations, they have an opportunity to do more. They can contribute real value by using their resources to concentrate and syndicate market conversations in ways that make them more visible. And this act of building visibility creates a virtuous circle benefiting everyone involved.

Why is creating more visibility a winning conversational marketing strategy? Because the liveliest part of the Live Web—where people are talking in real time to each other and the conversation is always changing with fresh ideas—is not fully visible even to participants.

Much of this is happening outside of the realms of the top bloggers marketers often think of first. These celebrities are widely read and usually have thousands of inbound links, but they operate much like mainstream media. Mostly they write, and their audience reads and sometimes comments.

To get to the real guts of the Live Web you have to go deeper. There are about 400,000 bloggers out there with between 20 and 1000 inbound links (sources that refer to them), and significant and growing readerships. We often call this grouping the “magic middle” because it’s where you find the most knowledgeable, well-informed and consistently engaged folks in the conversation. These are people who invest huge amounts of time and passion in the topic or cause. They’re bloggers who link to other bloggers, carrying on an intense multidirectional exchange of ideas and points of view, which is a powerful force in moving and shaping market conversations.

Then there are millions more bloggers with just a handful of inbound links or none at all. While they have limited influence individually, they’re still publishers with readerships. They’re often the source of ideas and issues bubbling up into the conversation. And they have the potential to be a massive market force when galvanized around an issue.
The highly distributed nature of the conversation at the magic middle and below is the source of its very potency, but dispersion also makes it difficult for all conversational partners to find each other. And it's difficult for marketers to fully recognize the scale and power of these market conversations.

A case in point: At a prescreening of the film An Inconvenient Truth, Al Gore was worried there might not be enough word of mouth around the movie to ensure a strong opening weekend. At the time, he had no visibility into the fact that there were already tens of thousands of posts about the movie—a force that touched off a tidal wave of attendance not only opening weekend but well beyond. The marketing behind the film, and later the Live Earth concerts, went on to embrace this conversation and make it increasingly visible and potent.

That campaign is one of the case studies in this paper. In these snapshots of what companies and organizations are doing with conversational marketing, you'll see that it's possible to engage with different segments of the blogosphere for different purposes. If you're trying to build a campaign around thought leadership, you may want to showcase top bloggers. If you're trying to foment new ideas and creative exchange, the magic middle will provide the most yeast. If you’re trying to launch a movement, you’ll want to reach out to bloggers of all types, and even go “off the chart” to read-only participants.

These are some of the things we and our clients are trying and learning. If you haven’t yet started, jump in and join us. While the effort to find new ways of marketing is deeply challenging, it’s also exhilarating. And potentially very rewarding. In fact, there are several qualities that traditional marketing campaigns often struggle to achieve which are much more easily attained through conversational marketing:

**Interest.** The real spoken language of peers is so much more interesting than copywriting. By embracing market conversations, marketers benefit from this natural force of attraction.

**Credibility.** Studies show that people believe what their peers say much more than what businesses and authorities say—and this credibility gap affects marketing response rates. Experience has shown that click-through rates on ads featuring conversations are 20-100% higher than otherwise comparable ads that don’t.

**Cost-effectiveness.** A huge amount of effort and expense would be required to try to build a new hub of market conversation from scratch. Paying copywriters to generate “conversational” content, advertising to drive traffic to a site, incenting well-known bloggers to talk about certain topics and link to the company site—that kind of heavy lifting isn’t necessary and it’s ultimately less effective than simply showcasing the conversation already out there.

**Understanding.** Market conversations take place in the context of a community of interest—people who see themselves as sharing a lifestyle or at least some common values, attitudes or concerns. Conversational marketers can help their brands be understood in this context, which is the first step in turning conversations into relationships.

**Sustainability.** Conversational marketing is one of the best ways of ensuring that a brand stays relevant. By genuinely participating in the conversation, which is always changing, brands move with their markets.

Now on to the real-life examples…
Conversational marketing/advertising case studies

An Inconvenient Truth campaign

As powerful and emotional as films are, film web sites are notorious for being “just marketing sites,” typically featuring production credits, trailers, downloadable images and perhaps an interactive promotional activity. The producers of an independent truth knew they had a topic that was inherently topical, controversial and conversational. Working with Paramount Classics, Technorati syndicated all posts about the film onto a staging system from which Paramount chose the most interesting posts twice daily and published excerpts and links to them on the site.

The film gained tremendous word-of-mouth momentum. In March 2006 the number of posts per day with the phrase “an inconvenient truth” was between zero and 10. In early June, when the syndicated blogs appeared on the film’s web site, it shot up to between 600 and 800.

In addition to conversation about the film, the site included posts about global warming, creating a “big tent” for all sides of the global warming controversy. While Paramount edited out posts that were abusive or contained personal attacks or bad language, contrarian views were welcome under the tent, and posts questioning the validity of global warming were among the most visited links. In fact, in the days after the film first came out, one could go to the site and watch how both sides of the issue were framing their arguments and developing their messaging. The site truly showed the live, moving conversation.

LEARNING/BEST PRACTICES: Concentrate the power. You never know how many friends your cause has until you “get them all in one place.” Word of web, when concentrated, can become extremely powerful. At the same time, don’t try to control the conversation by blocking out those who disagree with your point of view. Authentic, inclusive conversations work better for your cause.

Three types of conversation are featured
Microsoft-sponsored Live Earth site

Microsoft created a social media mini-site to support the Gore organization’s Live Earth global concerts. The site aggregated blog posts with articles from mainstream media as well as photos and video of concert performers. In an advance over the An Inconvenient Truth campaign, the conversation not only appeared on the Live Earth mini-site, but was also syndicated out into conversational ad units that ran on the Technorati site. These ads featured headlines from the latest posts and were always changing. They drew attention to what people were saying about Live Earth right now, helping to attract eyes to both the mini-site and the concert.

This process fueled word of mouth, helping MSN and Live Earth achieve their goal of increasing awareness and urgency around climate crisis. By displaying the growing, changing conversation as the one-time event kicked off in one location around the world after another, it also helped to create the feeling of connectedness, the “we’re all in this together” realization, which was another key goal of the concert organizers.

**LEARNING/BEST PRACTICES:** Event-based conversational media strategies can eliminate boundaries to involvement and create the sense of taking part in something big. Making the real-time conversation around the event visible and concentrated erases time and geography differences, and it’s vividly effective at giving global events human scale by connecting them directly with the experience of an individual participant.
**Shut Up and Sing campaign**

This campaign, also for an issues-oriented film, went beyond embracing conversation in its advertising to explicitly inviting it.

The film is a documentary about the trouble and censorship the band The Dixie Chicks faced after they criticized President Bush and the war in Iraq. Online advertising for the film posed the question “Should there be limits on freedom of speech?” and provided a textbox in which to respond.

The *Shut Up and Sing* page on MySpace.com then combined what people wrote into the ads with posts from across the blogosphere about the film and the Dixie Chicks and freedom of speech. Opinions input into the ads were also syndicated back out into the body of the ad, keeping them fresh and representative of the evolving conversation, and prompting people to respond to the latest talk.

**LEARNING/BEST PRACTICES:** Give even non-bloggers a way to be heard. By making it easy for everyone to join in, you get the introverts as well as the extroverts, enrich the conversation with more points of view and expand the critical mass of people who feel they're personally affected by what you're doing. People who spend a couple of minutes to share their beliefs are more likely to become involved in the conversation around a movie, spread worth of mouth and later spend a couple of hours watching the film.
Scion and the indie film community

Scion’s just-launched online guide to indie film festivals is part of the company’s broader strategy of identifying the car brand (a division of Toyota) with underground urban culture. In this context, it makes perfect sense for the company’s market communications to embrace the web conversation around indie films, and in particular, the “magic middle” of bloggers whose names may not be widely known, but are film mavens with considerable and growing readerships. As Hector Gonzales, a San Jose underground MC, wrote in Silicon Valley De-Bug, “Scion doesn’t attach itself to big stars. Instead it captures the local scenes, because that’s where urban culture really takes place.”

The Guide, presented as a “Café” page on the Technorati site. (Cafés are pages on the Technorati site devoted to a particular topic or issue and sponsored by a company or organization.) It concentrates the posts of these bloggers, allowing their peer-trusted voices to do the guiding. By bringing this rich and diverse pastiche of voices into the Café, Scion provides a place where people can go to efficiently find inside and on-the-street information, knowledge and opinion.

Ads, which are constantly updated, featuring the most recent and popular posts from the Café, run on Technorati and elsewhere, drawing traffic to the Guide. Because these ad units feature the latest conversation on film and festivals, they also provide valuable content for the film blogging and enthusiast community—content that is made available free to bloggers, MySpacers and the like through syndication. These folks can easily fold the conversation back into their own blog sites using a Technorati-supplied conversational Flash widget.

The Café marketing package includes Technorati outreach to film bloggers and assistance in helping them use tagging and widgets to ensure their content is seen. These efforts not only help Scion build a long term relationship with bloggers, they also help the Café site achieve greater search engine optimization by promoting more links into the community.

LEARNING/BEST PRACTICES: Authenticity is critical, especially in long-term brand relationship building.

The Guide isn’t a gimmick, it’s a tangible, useful contribution to the indie film community. It has an authentic feel because it was conceived from an ongoing, consistent Scion brand management strategy—the company has been sponsoring local hip hop events for years. The people at Scion and their advertising firm working on the effort also have a genuine intellectual curiosity about the topic, which shows.

Scion is creating a “home” where indie film enthusiasts can find each other and using conversational ads to create awareness of the site
Sun Microsystems and its customers

Sun features unfiltered conversation from customers on the product pages of its corporate web site. Blog posts, gathered by Technorati, are syndicated to Sun in real time, showing exactly what users are saying about the company’s products and services.

The company takes this approach because its executives are extremely interested in the opinions of customers—in fact, they say customer opinions have become the dominant source of product reviews, as important or more important than what professional journalists write. In addition, concentrating and making customer word of mouth visible on Sun web pages turns out to be an extremely efficient way for Sun executives, managers and employees throughout the organization to listen to the market—directly, with less need for the traditional intermediaries of researchers and focus groups.

Sun is the best example we know of “walking the walk” about transparency. Although plenty of criticism appears in the mix of posts, the company is respected by its customers and within the developer community in general for having the spine to show all. Many posts express the widely held impression that if the company is confident enough to welcome unfiltered comments, it must be sure of the quality of its products and committed to making them even better.

LEARNING/BEST PRACTICES: You can’t really lose as long as you’re honest and stay engaged. Since the rise of the blogosphere, the handful of disaster stories all have one common characteristic: the attempt of the company to hide by either fudging the facts or going silent.
An interview with Jonathan Schwarz, CEO of Sun Microsystems, about rethinking the concept of brand control in the age of conversational media

There's some fear among marketing, advertising and PR pros today about giving up control over brands to unruly marketplaces. But most of these folks admit that the idea of complete control was an illusion—customers have always been a force in the evolution of brands. What is happening is simply that the part customers play in brand evolution is becoming more visible, and is therefore taking on a more important role. No reason for fear; in fact, there's good reason for optimism, as the following conversation between Peter Hirshberg and Sun Microsystems Chief Executive Officer Jonathan Schwarz highlights.

Peter Hirshberg: Did you feel a sense of giving up control or added risk as you opened up conversation on your product pages and also starting blogging yourself?

Jonathan Schwartz: I think anybody who's trying to shield themselves from the reality of what's going on in the marketplace is in fact doing exactly that—they're shielding themselves from the reality that may befall them 6, 9 or 12 months from now. At Sun, on the contrary, we are now very much right in the thick of it, and we know what people think about Solaris. Why? Because there are 20,000+ people in the community who are talking about it. If they don't like our product, they say so on our front page, and rather than it taking 17 focus groups and $3 million to find out, we know within two weeks because I can read.

So market research is not an episodic thing anymore. Now it's something you do every day when you come to work, and everyone becomes the "head of market research"—they're all paying attention to the marketplace.

PH: You're not concerned about bad things being said about you on your own sites?

JS: There are some things we push aside, such as profanity and personal attacks, but, in general we don't filter comments and we don't filter feedback—and that's for a very basic reason. The more we know, the better we can do, and to me that's a competitive weapon. Besides, people who write irresponsibly or competitors trying to find some way of needling Sun end up losing credibility. Reputation in the community has nothing to do with quantity and everything to do with quality. So someone writing a substantive review, positive or negative, I don't really care. I mean I'd prefer it to be positive, but if it's negative, and it's substantive, then I know what to fix.

PH: Were there people in your organization who were tough to sell, communications people, Board people, for instance who were skeptical?

JS: My favorite story is our general counsel wasn't worried when I started blogging, but I got really worried when he started blogging! Seriously, there was some concern, and we've certainly had little bumps and hurdles along the way. You know, I'll post a blog too close to a quarterly earnings announcement, and so we go do an 8-K filing, and the general counsel says by the way, when you're within this window, can you please just let me know before you blog, and so we now have a basic procedure around that. But frankly, the SEC is just as interested in the progress we're making at Sun as we are interested in changing some of the rules around us, because they actually want more transparency. They want to hear directly from the CEOs and from the senior executives. They don't want to have what we say filtered through filings and intermediaries and information brokers. They just want to get direct access to what's actually going on.

PH: It seems to me that the nature of branding is changing pretty rapidly in a world where technology makes this kind of transparency possible, and there's a new set of values that would appear to be developing around what a great brand needs to be.

JS: If you expect your brand to be static, then you ought to control it. The market's evolving. If you're not out with the market, then your brand's not evolving, and it's going to end up being static. And I don't think anybody who's in charge of a brand is going to say okay, exactly what it is today, that's exactly what it's going to be ten years from now. That's a strategy to become obsolete, not to evolve with the marketplace.
Inside a campaign—mechanisms for finding, concentrating and syndicating market conversations
A proposed Conversational Advertising Code of Conduct

- **Transparency in the use of a publisher’s content**
  Fair use rules offer the legal and ethical underpinnings for including excerpts of a blog post or article in another site. By pointing to a post, an advertiser ultimately increases exposure and awareness of the original content. Nevertheless, we believe any blogger has the right to refuse permission for an excerpt or link to his post to appear in a conversational advertising site. A blogger’s content should never be syndicated in its entirety: headlines, snippets and/or truncated posts are acceptable, but the actual full-length post should only be available on the blogger’s blog or at the blogger’s discretion. The link back to the bloggers site must be maintained in the conversational ad so as to drive traffic to the blogger. There should be a means by which that blogger can opt out if his/her content has been referenced by an advertiser sponsored site.

- **Transparency in the editorial process**
  Advertisers should disclose the filter and editorial mechanisms they use to find and/or display content. If inclined, the audience should be able to understand the degree to which the content they see has been editorially selected: heavily (sponsored and/or handpicked posts), moderately (preset filters and restrictions) or not-at-all (unfiltered streams of content). Furthermore, as a gesture of transparency, advertisers may want to offer a means to view completely unfiltered content (e.g., links to live search results).

- **Transparency in attributing ads**
  If a brand sponsors a conversational ad, the ad should say so. If a brand syndicates conversation onto a site they maintain or pay for, this sponsorship should be disclosed. Syndicating content on topics relevant to a brand and its customers can be an excellent way to facilitate conversation and help foster a community, but a brand’s presence in that conversation must be accurately represented.

- **Transparency in influencing content creators**
  Conversational advertising will fail if it is exploited as a means to cover-up sponsored blogging, pay-per-posting, or any other publishing that is supported and influenced by a brand without being represented as such. Previous instances of undisclosed brand-blog collusion have led to online backlashes for the brands and hurt the reputation of the blogosphere. If an advertiser enlists the assistance of bloggers, compensates them, or starts blogs itself, that advertiser should make its influence over the content apparent, and neither hide that relationship nor advertise those content creators as impartial parties. As long as transparency is maintained, the content created when advertisers work with publishers is perfectly legitimate social media.