

Paradox

Feeling Machines and the Rise of Post-Modern Marketing

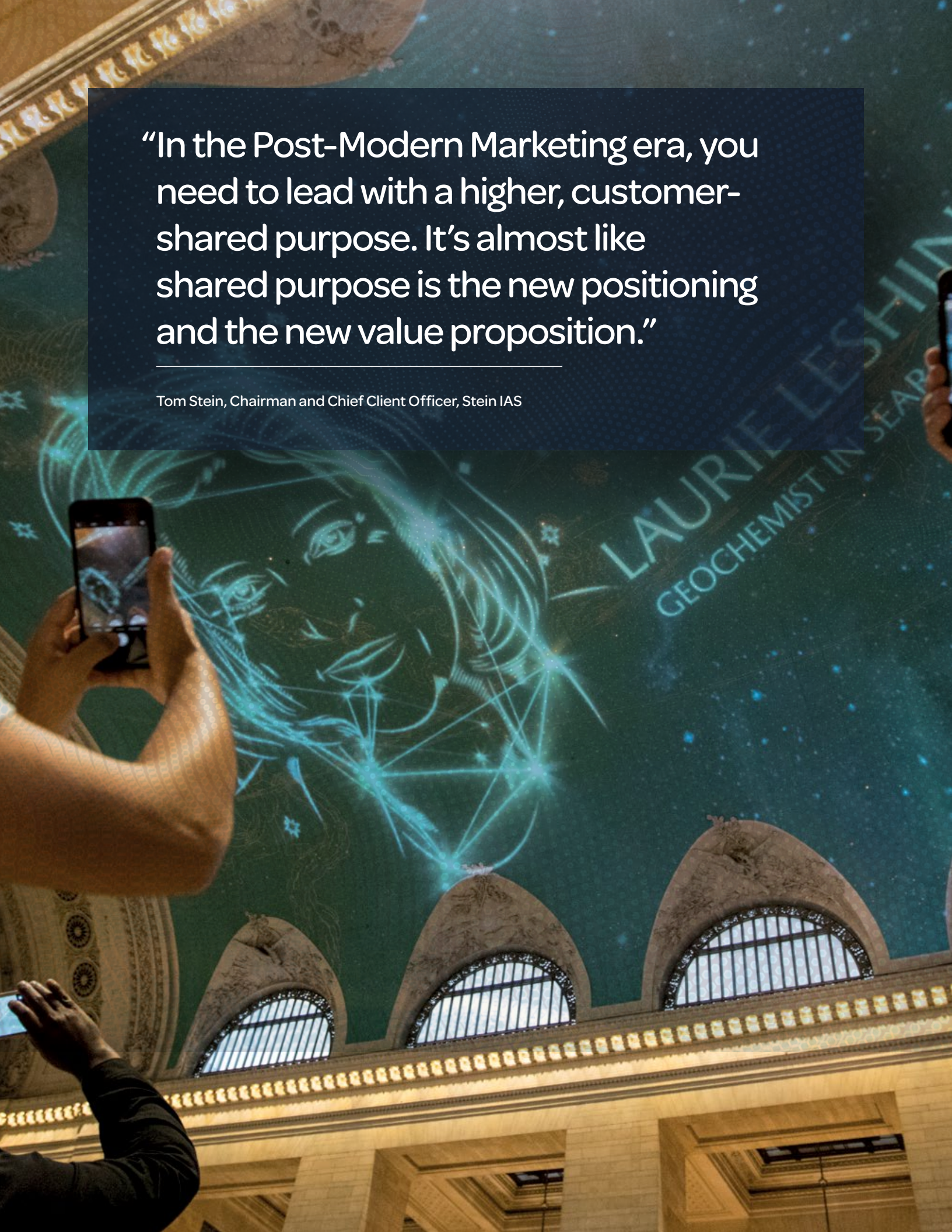
Post-Modern Brands: It Takes a Brand Village

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Chapter 5

“In the Post-Modern Marketing era, you need to lead with a higher, customer-shared purpose. It’s almost like shared purpose is the new positioning and the new value proposition.”

Tom Stein, Chairman and Chief Client Officer, Stein IAS



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Purpose is not new to brand marketers. For decades, purpose has been embedded in mission statements, brand promises and, more recently, corporate social responsibility campaigns. But there’s something qualitatively different – and extraordinarily important – about a brand’s purpose in the Post-Modern Marketing era.

“The role of business in society has never been more important,” wrote Bob Moritz, the Global Chairman of PwC, in an article for the World Economic Forum last year. Moritz notes that chief executives responding to PwC’s 20th annual CEO survey “emphasize the growing importance of establishing a strong corporate purpose and reflecting that purpose in their organizational values, culture, and behavior... When businesses effectively articulate their purpose, act transparently, and stand by their values, trust and success can go hand in hand.”

Derek Stewart, Stein IAS’ Chief Strategy Officer, is even more explicit. “It’s well-documented that customers are bringing more of their personal beliefs into their buying decisions, even in B2B. So we believe the influence of authentic purpose is becoming critically important vis a vis generating growth and profits.”

Businesses and their marketers are responding already. State Street Global Advisors’ quest for greater female representation on corporate boards led to “Fearless Girl” and elevated the brand to greater heights. General Electric’s “Balance the Equation” crusade to hire 20,000 women to fill STEM roles by 2020 transformed the iconic celestial ceiling of New York City’s Grand Central Station into a planetarium for “Unseen Stars” – light-show portraits of a dozen women who made world-changing contributions to science and engineering.

Yet many companies remain on the fence. After all, companies publicly devoted to a particular purpose end up dealing with tensions in the marketplace because every purpose, it seems, has opponents who are vocal in their opposition. Why alienate one group to please another? The answer is, you don’t – unless the purpose you’re devoted to is a bona fide belief shared by your brand’s core customers.

The experience of Honey Maid's #ThisIsWholesome campaign is instructive in this regard. The much-heralded, much-criticized campaign relaunched the century-old brand as more relevant to families than ever before by depicting same-sex, blended and biracial families in TV ads and online video. Bold enough to forgo market testing, Honey Maid anticipated – and got – a polarized reaction. But out of true belief in its posture, it had pre-planned to stick by its “wholesome” position.

Honey Maid hired artists for a follow-up video acknowledging the criticism it received. The artists printed every negative tweet, post and email to create a paper sculpture of the word “Love.” Says Gary Osifchin, Honey Maid head of marketing: “It’s catapulted the brand to the emotional level. Historically, the brand’s always been used in recipes, but we’ve gone from that to a brand that people want and choose to use because of the message we’re putting into the world.”

These examples are the merest leading edge of a giant Post-Modern Marketing sea change in the relationships between brands and their customers. It’s happening to consumer and B2B brands alike but can be even more critical for B2B, where research has shown that customers’ emotional stakes in decisions are higher than consumers’. And it comes down to something more than creating business value, or making an emotional connection. Brands at that leading edge are finding common ground on which to project purpose that resonates with customers’ rational left-brains and their emotional right-brains – both at the same time.

“In the past, too many companies thought about purpose cynically,” says Tom Stein, Chairman and Chief Client Officer of Stein IAS. “But in the Post-Modern Marketing era, you can’t afford to approach purpose cynically or artificially. You need to lead with a higher, customer-shared purpose. It’s almost like shared purpose is the new positioning and the new value proposition.”



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How Customer-Brand Dynamics are Shifting in the Post-Modern Marketing Era

Driving the changes between businesses and their customers are all the ways in which digital technology has fundamentally altered how people become aware of, engage with, and absorb information. That change has empowered customer voices and shifted brand-customer relationships from one-way broadcasts to two-way conversations.

Everyone knows that – but there’s more. The ripple effects of this one foundational change go far and wide.



Image source: Photo by Ricardo Rocha on Unsplash

Anthropological Insights

Customers are educating themselves and, often, engaging with brand content without the brand’s knowledge. Brands must be prepared to meet customers wherever they happen to be, and at any point along each individual customer’s journey. That demands deeper discovery and research to yield much richer customer understanding. To Stein IAS’ Stewart, “Everything else becomes secondary to customer insight. It’s more important, today, to have the deepest possible understanding of the customer before you think about positioning the client’s business.”

“These nuances are accumulating into unexpected changes in how people interact with brands,” says Stewart. “We have to go deep to factor these changes into how we plan, develop, and structure our creative content and market activation. Ultimately, it informs us about how best to connect with both hemispheres of every customer’s brain in the post-modern, myriad-channel world.”

To help achieve such extreme customer understanding, Stewart is closely following the work of University College London’s Center for Digital Anthropology, which is investigating the deeper ways that interaction with digital technology is altering human behavior, society, and culture. Other research suggests how profound such digital effects can be: a joint study by U.S. researchers from Columbia University, Harvard and the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that brains of heavy Google users have less recall of detailed information than the average person, but enhanced recall for where to access it.

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'Radical' Transparency

With customer (and other stakeholder) voices present in public digital forums, transparency will eventually become absolute – there will be no way for businesses to hide less-than-stellar experiences or actions that are out of alignment with their stated goals, values and purposes. Some brands have gone to the extreme of “radical transparency”: Consider Rubrik, a four-year-old cloud data management company based in Silicon Valley that has been called the fastest-growing technology infrastructure company, ever, and has won several customer satisfaction awards. All 600 employees are invited to attend all board meetings – for better or worse. And most do, in person or via teleconference. Says CEO Bipul Sinha, “These moments can be scary, but if you are true and transparent it creates trust. It creates empowerment.” That trust flows to Rubrik’s customers, too, as those customer satisfaction awards attest. The reason being, that transparency to 600 employees is equivalent to transparency to the world. Rubrik is only one of many examples of companies recognizing transparency’s key role in their business success.

The authors who wrote “The Cluetrain Manifesto” in 1999 stated presciently: “There are no secrets. The networked market knows more than companies do about their own products. And whether the news is good or bad, they tell everyone.”

As Stewart likes to explain, “We weren’t more stupid as a society back when the cigarette companies were telling us that smoking was good for us. We just didn’t have access to the information ourselves, or to opposing views. Today’s customer has much more knowledge and, therefore, much more control over their own decision making.”

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Emotional “Human” Buying Criteria

Greater information access, two-way public conversations and the concurrent rise in information transparency they generate brings Stewart’s thinking about the primacy of customer insights into sharper focus. Customers are bringing more of their subjective “humanity” to decision making, ultimately choosing to do business based on a broader set of emotional

and rational criteria. These include things like social responsibility, sustainability, and political views – information about which is becoming fully transparent to them via various social and other networked channels.

Notes Scott Brinker, editor of the Chief Marketing Technologist Blog and program chair of the MarTech conferences: “It’s not just, did the product or service do a good job, did I enjoy it, was it a fair price? It’s also, how do you spend the profit you make? Do you give back to your community? What’s diversity like in your organization – are the women on your staff filing lawsuits? All these other things will be factors that people have access to and, given the fact that people have choice in who they purchase from, almost certainly will play a role in how they make their choices.”

Adds Stewart: “Don’t forget that in B2B, we are human beings first and business people a distant second. So, marketers must work to understand more about the emotional human in the customer, not merely the business role.”

Of note, both sides of Stewart’s statement are reflected in Carl Sagan’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, “The Dragons of Eden.” In it, Sagan explains that the emotional right hemisphere is the brain’s intuition engine and primary decision maker, but that its choices are optimized when scrutinized by the left hemisphere. According to Sagan, “Mere critical thinking, without creative and intuitive insights, without the search for new patterns, is sterile and doomed. To solve complex problems in changing circumstances requires the activity of both cerebral hemispheres: the path to the future lies through the corpus callosum.” The corpus callosum is the structure of the brain that integrates the right and left hemispheres.

Experience Rising

The importance of customer experience will continue to increase in brand relationships, especially since, in the digital age, public conversations mean that anyone's experience can influence everyone else's buying decision – at scale. Quality of execution at all brand-customer interaction points will rise, of necessity, to fuel the emotionally satisfying experiences customers crave – because brands that can't achieve appropriate execution quality will disappear. In this regard and in many post-modern instances, brand experience is the most important differentiator of all.

"Post-modern customer experience is about creating value for customers in the context of long-term relationships," says Stewart. "It's not creating a relationship to sell them something, and then trying to rekindle the relationship six months later to sell them something else. It's about embedding transactions within emotionally satisfying long-term customer experience built around shared purpose."

A critical insight, says Stewart, is that customers, too, are developing their own sense of "right message, right time, right channel" expectations – not only marketers. Customers are becoming savvy to what digital technology makes possible, and their expectations are rising rapidly for individualized interactions that make efficient use of their valuable time and resources.



Bona Fide Brand Purpose

What all these ripple effects point toward is that, as the information age continues to evolve, markets really are becoming conversations (to borrow “The Cluetrain Manifesto” idiom). Conversations, the Cluetrain authors remind us, “are conducted in a human voice.” And, when all customers and other stakeholders join that conversation, “there are no secrets.”

Thus, brands have no choice but to become more authentic in defining and hewing to a purpose that resonates strongly with both sides of their customers’ brains.



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Reinventing Brands Around Shared Purpose and Brand Community

But exactly how will brands reinvent themselves around employee- and customer-centered purposes in the Post-Modern Marketing age of continuously evolving customer expectations and desires, radical transparency, emotionality, and public conversation?

For starters, Stewart cites an influential talk at the ANA Business Marketing 2017 Masters of B2B Marketing conference in Chicago. In it, consultant Mark Boncheck explained:

“If most of the action is happening among people, not between the institutions and the individuals but among individuals, then the role of the brand and the company has to change. Because now it’s about how well the brand can enable and empower those connections. And the trick there is, now they’re not an audience; they’re a community. You have to find a way to have influence when you’re not in the room.”

Stewart adds to this thinking, noting that shared purpose provides a brand with the foundational principles for influencing its community.

Consider Google’s stated mission: “To organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.” No monetary transaction takes place in the vast majority of interactions people have with Google’s search engine. But people get tremendous value out of those interactions; then, we talk to each other and share information we’ve discovered through Google; we’re grateful to Google. And yet, Google earns plenty on the fraction of interactions that do generate ad revenue; and when we discover desired products via search, our gratitude to Google rises with the speed, ease and simplicity of satisfying our immediate purchasing need.

Or consider Republic Services, the second-largest U.S. provider of solid waste collection and recycling services. Republic Service’s devotion to sustainability in the many communities it serves earned it a spot on the Dow Jones Sustainability-North America Index and the counterpart World Index. Republic Services operates facilities in 69 U.S. communities to capture methane gas from its landfills, using the gas to generate electrical power; it constructed a solar energy farm on three former landfill sites to power thousands of homes in Massachusetts; and on and on.

When Republic Services became a client, the Stein IAS agency team was struck by the passion for recycling shared by everyone they talked to, from drivers to the CEO (Donald Slager, who started as a driver and in 2017 was named among GlassDoor’s highest-rated CEOs). That spirit drove development of the agency’s “We Work For Earth” integrated national campaign, which rolled out in June 2018, based on research showing how much Republic Service’s shared purpose around sustainability would influence small business decision makers.

On a smaller scale, Boncheck talks about the shared purpose developed by a company that makes nurses’ scrubs. That company built a large Brand Community around a shared purpose of nurse appreciation, “So patients could thank their nurses, and nurses could support each other.” The Post-Modern Marketing payoff comes when a member of the Brand Community considers whose commodity scrubs to buy – and feels real emotional gratitude. Tom Stein believes these examples speak to the heart of the left-brain/right-brain connection: “In commoditized markets, emotion has more power because there’s not a lot of product differentiation.” For Stewart, the key to Brand Community – and to genuinely articulating the right shared purpose – goes all the way back to his favorite subject: knowing customers deeply, intimately, completely – better than the customers know themselves. “It’s an audacious goal, to know customers better than they know themselves.



But it's possible, by understanding them as people, first; by bringing in digital anthropology to understand how technology is altering their primary behaviors; by studying their digital body language, which tells us about their immediate context and intent; and then viewing all of that framed by a client's market and its Brand Community."

Only from such insight can there emerge a shared purpose with the left-brain/right-brain power to unify a Brand Community and drive a brand's affinity and affluence, both at the same time.

Notes Tom Stein, "When businesses build a Brand Community around an authentically shared purpose, they end up in an enviable position. Demand is seeking them; they're not having to constantly seek demand."

But wait; there's more! By building Brand Community, a brand surrounds itself with everything it needs for continuous self-renewal. As the world evolves, and as customers' needs, wants and interests evolve in relation to the brand's offerings, the interaction among community members and between them and the brand is constantly generating information the brand can use to continuously re-assess its shared purpose and business mission.

Concludes Stewart: "Brand Community built around a shared purpose is the key to unlocking the kind of intrinsically deep customer insights you're going to need to thrive in the Post-Modern Marketing era. And it's equally powerful in terms of helping your brand, and its purpose, evolve in sync with its customers as post-modern time marches on."

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