It's a short ride with your own wind in your sails

By Vincent Maher   6 Apr 2011

Let's debate the value of anchors to the "real world" for digital businesses and why hyper-reality leads to verbal incontinence.

There is a kind of certainty and humility that you find in people who do business online but are still firmly grounded in the world of bricks and mortar. If you speak to the teams who run sites such as Private Property or Yuppiechef, they lack some of the BS that you find in many start-ups that sell digital goods, services or access to attention.

Why is that?

I could start by saying that the entire technology start-up world has been driven by a group of investment banks operating with the same death-wish as those who funded the dot-com bubble and later the sub-prime crisis. In many cases, these are the same companies that simply moved from technology to mortgages and back to technology again. That would be cynical.

Although the term "bubble" has risen to the top, perhaps as a communal attempt on the part of the tech industry as a whole to second-guess fate, there is a deeper cultural and perhaps epistemological problem with what many of us are doing: we are working in a space where physical reality has little or no impact because we are so far removed from it.

This is not because we're idiots: there is something fundamental to technology itself that makes it the way it is, something deeply hyper-real.

Truth is much simpler

It may sound more mysterious to say there is something in the kool-aid we drink that makes us lose touch with reality. The truth is much simpler: we work using virtual tools in a virtual environment that do things to virtual people. Very often we sell services using virtual money that solves some need that is also virtual.

And underneath all of this are the virtual imperatives of a global economy that has long-since lost its basis in real currency and the heavily gameified world of the stock markets, exit valuations and venture capital.

Full disclosure: I am 36 years old and as a result I no longer qualify as someone who knows what they are talking about. What I mean by that is fairly inflammatory: young people can no longer tell the difference between the real and the virtual because there are simply too many layers and, assuming they never accidentally exit this dark cave, they never have any reason to question the way things are. That's one way of looking at it.

The other way to understand all of this is that there is no distinction between an impulse that satisfies itself with a virtual, as opposed to physical, response and that making this distinction implies a sentimentality that belongs in the previous century.

Looking inward

Ever since I spent a month in Gabon hanging out in the evenings with a group of friends who did a variety of things, ranging from avocado farming to teaching, I've been left with doubts about my own life and, to an extent, everything that I concern myself with on a daily basis.

I'd sit under a massive moon on a dark Libreville night, enjoying the company of men who had no idea what I do and who thought, for the most part, that my digital world involved a kind of terrible evolution that is at once revolting and deeply desirable. While they were infused by a sense of community that I have never been exposed to, I was worried about servers I have never seen.

Of course, nothing has changed. It is the tension between the city and the country, the romanticizing of the pastorale. Shakespeare did it and we're still doing it. The virtual/real dichotomy is the city/country one by another name.

You can see it in business

On the one hand, I'd love to say that balance is something you need to create and maintain in order to run a great business but it seems this tenet is only true for personal and mental well-being. Businesses, on the other hand, need to be run with obsession. This is why you could argue, if you really wanted to, that most corporations are governed by the institutionalisation of the most pathological types of human behaviour and declare it the neutral zone of "business".

But obsession has many potential areas of focus and the one thing that is evident to me is the following: businesses that have a strong presence in the world of the real, the kind that see digital as a channel rather than their whole world, have the customer as the focal point of the obsession. Businesses that are more virtual tend to have *metrics* rather than people as the focal point for their obsession and this is why the former group seem a little less full of sh*t.

As I said at the beginning, you can tell when someone is doing digital as a means to an end or as an end in itself and it manifests in the way they deal with this strange commodity we now refer to as attention.

Digital retailers, as an example, get small volumes of high-quality attention. This is the kind of attention that can turn into a transaction; there are other kinds of attention that are less likely to have the same kind of value. For instance, counting the number of likes your page got on Facebook or flame-baiting the usual trolls on a blog post.

Many different kinds of attention

Almost everyone I have met in digital retail knows that there are many different kinds of attention and only a certain few are desirable. I think this comes from having a real-world touch-point with customers.

To be fair to myself and all the other people out there trying to make a living in the digital industry, we have a unique problem: our entire product and value chain exists only in the form of electricity and light. Getting a sense of the real under these conditions is significantly more difficult.

Perhaps the most insidious problem we face as an industry is that the connection between the physical manifestation of our product and its inner workings is simply non-existent.

Throughout our entire history, humans have been able to judge or form an opinion about a product or thing by examining it. This, in itself, has played a great moderating role in keeping the absolutely terrible products away from the market. Now we continue to use all the language of physical products except that creators can decide how a product presents itself without any analogue to the "substance" of it, if such a term is even valid anymore when talking about binary code.

Digital girlfriends LOL

So does being digital mean our world is one of smoke and mirrors? Does real smoke have more substance than some of the new "cloud" services being announced every day?

Let's take a service such as cloudgirlfriend.com as an example (no, I am not joking). Cloudgirlfriend will provide you with all the social media impact of a real girlfriend - Facebook interactions, retweets and the occasional IM. Is this service complete and utter social media nonsense? The answer is not that simple.

On the one hand, having a real girlfriend is the ultimate gold standard of, well, having a real girlfriend. But, on the other hand, I know many people who felt that their "real" relationships were not real at all, based on some pretence about who the other person in the relationship really is. And we all know that the best way to attract the opposite sex is to get in a relationship and become unavailable. That's just how the world works.

Maybe the search for a sense of substance in this crazy digital space is pointless; maybe it's the most noble thing we as humans can do, our last opportunity to cling to our humanity. Maybe this is an irrelevant discussion because we're all going to hell anyway.

What I do know is that it's a short ride with only your own wind in your sails.

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