

1

Power To The People

How tribal activism will fuel bottom-up culture in politics and commerce

The excesses of the early 'Noughties', followed by the widening of financial and cultural fault-lines in the past two years made for a pretty insecure 2010. Now the growing numbers of men, women and young people who feel trapped, frustrated and threatened by perceived failure of the institutions (government, education, health, to name a few) they used to trust feel let down and angry. Really angry. It's only a matter of time before the 'chin-up' understatement of British attitudinal culture turns openly vocal and the floodgates of social, commercial and political activism become de rigeur.



It's no coincidence that the big prints, bright colours and clean, long lines of the 70s are reappearing in SS11 fashion collections. Greying baby-boomers may be more concerned with health care, inheritance tax and the impossibility of retirement, but their kids and grandkids will pick up the mantle, harking back to 1970's style protest. They're angry about the legacy of greed that's left them footing the bill, unable to achieve the standards of living they expected. Now, tired of being in the background, they see the institutions set up to look after the greater good simply can't do so.

This generation has better technology and tools to respond in greater numbers and more quickly to perceived injustices served up by government or corporations. Indeed, the power of like-minded groups can and will be leveraged to for positive activism as well, actively building support for those commercial and social offerings that facilitate lower prices, better quality or greater empowerment.

The Big Society agenda, relying on small government and heavy private sector and community involvement will not prove the social panacea promised by the UK's stuttering coalition government. It will probably soon prove lacking in a clear vision to respond to society's growing problems at home, leaving anger and disappointment in its wake, as austerity measures leave communities underserved. Whilst the UK is not alone in this dilemma, our ailing private sector - itself in need of invigoration - will be unable to foot the bill, squeezing communities, education and local services further. At the first sign of tumbleweed blowing down high streets and through community centres, expect the angry to take matters into their own hands.

Since WWII the UK has been a powerful voice in support of global democracy and social justice in the wider world. Increasingly we expect public support for development efforts elsewhere will wane, whilst the problems – and financial impacts of them – multiply at home.

Rising anger makes for interesting media. In the twittersphere a frenzied deluge fuels ever greater anger, overflowing into the blogosphere and mainstream media. In fact, angry folks are so much more interesting than their coolheaded counterparts that they often get elected.

The measured intellect of David Cameron, or the erudite common sense of Nick Clegg may have felt like the antidote to the panic of 2008-2009, but expect more vocal politics to gather a groundswell of support in 2011. And expect these louder, brasher voices to foster division along cultural and social lines too, affecting not only local and national institutions, but how we identify ourselves through consumption choices.

In short, expect declining faith in institutions to be replaced with people placing their trust in civic and political groups, or indeed with their connectivity groups on and offline, where there is perceived safety in numbers. We expect communities of interest to increasingly affect how media is consumed, how we choose the products and services we consume, even where we buy them. The 'birds of a feather' rule rapidly popularised by Groupon, LivingSocial and a multitude of daily news services is fuelling this new movement already. Brand marketers will have to re-think their methods across the board. Media advertising can no longer be relied upon to appeal to individuals on a rational/emotional paradigm based on the assumption that individual choices are governed by self-interest alone. CRM will require recognition of the individual grounded in his/her existing relationship with the brand, but also on a keen ability to connect with the associations and wider philosophical beliefs of consumer groups.

The Groupon phenomenon is proof positive that brands truly are what people's friends say they are. Originally The Point, a social activism and fundraising site, Groupon has in two years changed how people socialise and pay for social activities. Everything on Groupon is inherently social.

"You want to do it with friends. There's an incentive to share," says its founder, Andrew Mason. Who'd have thought it possible to grow from a standing start to a US\$500 million valuation in two years? With businesses in 35 countries and over 300 markets, Groupon has achieved just that.

In the digital expression of this trend, expect the heavy engineering of websites suited to research and commerce through a single branded environment to be replaced by the distributed media of the API. Already sustainable advantage is challenging and costly to achieve in search and pay-per-click to drive site traffic. Marketers, multi-channel retailers and e-tailers will need to substantially change their outlook as destination-based strategies become outmoded. It's time to think in terms of distributed media, creating relevant and engaging API's that let brands 'fish where the fish are' on the web, with the added complication of platform neutrality. Even news sources will need to be always-on, constantly updated and ever-present in different places on the web, through IPTV and the mobile web. And, lest we forget the über-trend of the decade, it will all need to be consumable in hyperlocal variations.