

Why Marketing Fails – Lessons from the 2009 Online Poppy Appeal

On Remembrance Sunday, the Twitter ID **@PoppySupport** had 1,757 followers. Another, **@poppy_man** had 84 followers. Yet another, **@PoppyLegion**, had 337. (By way of scale to help comparison, **@BBCQuestionTime** collected 13,656 followers during October).

Guess which Twitter ID was created by The Royal British Legion and guess which wasn't. The answer is that **@PoppyLegion** and **@poppy_man** were created by The Royal British Legion.

Yes, the ones with the lowest impact on Twitter are also the official presences on Twitter.

Modern Marketing Techniques

The Royal British Legion ran a significant online campaign this year to support the Poppy Appeal. It seems to have been an unmitigated online disaster.

As a sense of scale let's note that the British Legion has 380,000 members and 300,000 people organise the Poppy appeal each year, raising around £31m.

The Royal British Legion launched a custom-built "online community" called Legion Live at www.legionlive.com which by Remembrance Sunday had 215 members. (Yes, that's just 215). It links to a blog, with lots of good articles, but by-and-large no comments (two articles have three comments but that's the highest) on those articles.

They run The Royal British Legion YouTube channel which has received 6,226 views. (The Swedish Armed Forces channel has 96,464, the Armed Forces of Malta has 7,565).

They created a "fun" character to represent their activities online, a cheeky girl named "Poppy Legion" who claimed to be "the resident blogger" in the LegionLive community who would deliver us "hot new content". She was utterly mis-cast, in my view. An inauthentic construct entirely inappropriate as part of a very profound and authentic campaign.

They run a Facebook page for Poppy Legion which had no posts up to the remembrance Sunday ceremony, 6 pages and 18 photos with 366 friends. (To give an idea of scale, The Maximum Respect for the British Armed Forces page has 772,661 fans, the Armed Forces Day page has 184,320 fans, the Marmite page has 238,493 fans, the Gillette Venus ladies razor has 116,025 fans). In fact, they've set Poppy Legion's page up as a "Person" and not as a "Group" or a "Page", which is a misrepresentation.

This year's Poppy appeal had everything going for it online: The Twitter ID, the fun "character", the online community, the YouTube channel, blog and Facebook page. There is even a Twibbon, a Facebook app, an iPhone app and a tool to add messages of support to your emails. They had (and always do have) unparalleled TV exposure, celebrity Poppy wearers by the truckload, the dedicated pop single (with YouTube clip), the online competitions, and much more.

They had all the online tools and deployed them. They were clearly committed to online marketing.

But why does their Facebook page look deserted? Why is their YouTube channel barren of life and supporter? Why are their Twitter IDs not seriously followed by anyone?

Not only are the numbers for their online campaign embarrassing, but the successes have not been theirs. As an example, **@PoppySupport** – the Twitter ID with all the followers – is not theirs. It belongs to an unnamed individual.

Old-Fashioned Marketing Thinking

The Royal British Legion has done a number of things which are good, solid, traditional marketing. But ineffective. Their thinking has been wrong.

First, there is their enthusiasm for "content". It's the wrong word. Their YouTube channel has 27 videos. All perfectly competent and appropriately moving as stage-managed TV clips broadcast in hushed living rooms. But they are not good YouTube content. They are not short or shareable.

Then there's the concept of "control" and a "place" which can be controlled. The Royal British Legion forked out a for someone to build the LegionLive community as a place where people would come – to sign up, explore, share. But it is a disaster. It's full of pretence, its commercial, it has no soul and no visitors. It was done in pursuit of control and centralisation. It was not built to support the thousands of enthusiasts already active online – it was built to corral them.

There's "branding", or at least the idea of creating a graphic device, logo and design. The Poppy Legion cartoon character is repulsive. Given what the Poppy Appeal stands for, to have a glib false cartoon character pretending to talk to me and "blog" to me is patronising.

There's the belief that "people will come to you" if you build an online place for them to come. It's not true. It may even be arrogant to think so. They have to want to come to you – you have to offer something of value. You first have to be where the people you want to talk with are.

There's fakery, acting and falsehood: concepts embodied in Poppy Legion. She says "I am the resident blogger and I'm going to bring you hot new content" when she clearly isn't (and who on earth ordered the "hot new content"?).

And there's crass and rampant commercialism. One of the first blog posts on the community by the Poppy Legion character thanked "those lovely people at iChild" and directed us to a website selling private health insurance for kids where we could download kits for "make yourself" poppies and bravery medals. Not only commercial, but crass and offensive to the very community it was trying to support.

So all these elements of marketing came into play with the online Poppy appeal: control, content, place, branding, arrogance, fakery and commercialism.

New Thinking – But It's Not marketing

As a greater percentage our working and social lives moves online, marketing is proving itself to be the wrong approach. We need a new thinking.

Like with the concept of a stage show with an audience. Once the audience can talk with each other during a show, the stage show changes. It goes off-script as it seeks to maintain its link with the audience. It responds. It becomes improvisation theatre. And that imaginary line between the stage and the audience – it's called the "fourth wall". That line has now gone. There is no artificial wall between the audience (customers) and the play (the company).

In many ways, marketing actually built that "stage-and-audience" construct. And modern marketing, if anything, is trying hard to reconstruct that wall even though times have changed. The Royal British Legion's "Poppy Legion" character was just that.

People are "out there" and a company or organisation needs to be out there with them. People recommend and share online. The company needs to be shareable and do things which people can and do recommended. People talk with each other – companies need to talk too. Yes, talk. Not in third-person print or with an actor's voiceover.

So they need people who can talk for them. Genuine people, not cartoon characters. People who love the companies they work for and who can talk honestly.

And if all this happens, then the organisation can eliminate marketing altogether. It can pile all its media spend, print spend and the cash for expensive creative into its Customer Service and HR departments, saying to them: make sure our Firm is great, find people to work with us who also think it's great, fire those who don't, make great products and let our people talk freely with customers about it all. And by the way, let's value every single piece of customer critique we get and change the company and our products as we get it.

Engaging with customers today should not be done by the marketing department. It should be done by the people within the organisation itself.

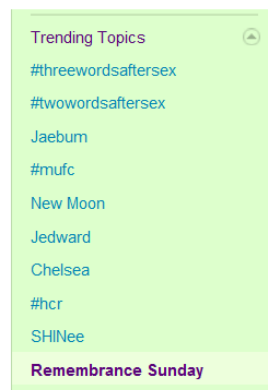
Customers love entertainment. Glitzy marketing will always have the affections of the public. But a significant number at any time want something altogether more convincing. They want facts, background, the real inside track on the organisation they are buying from and building relationships with.

Marketing to those people will always be most effective by stepping out of the way and letting the organisation get in touch with them directly. The future of marketing is less marketing. Real people in real companies beat marketing every time.

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And yes, eventually, Remembrance Sunday did enter Twitter's list of most-talked-about-topics in the world on Remembrance Sunday:



(Twitter: 14:22 on Sunday 8th November 2009)