

Q&A: Marc Gobé on Social Media and Branding

by VALERIE SECKLER

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Marc Gobe is a man on the go.

A creator of brand images, Gobé has traveled to more than 15 cities worldwide since forming Emotional Branding consultancy 18 months ago, including São Paulo, Brazil, Lima, Peru, Paris, Moscow, Istanbul, Shanghai, Tokyo, Seoul and Vancouver. He is convinced the key to meaningful marketing in the next decade is on the Internet and in urban areas that are expected to be home to 70 percent of the world's population by 2050, or about 6.4 billion people.

Gobé believes commercial branding — like bus wraps, banners and billboards — is becoming too visually dominant in urban settings. Los Angeles, Santa Monica, Calif., and São Paulo have sought to curtail billboards that violate municipal regulations. They are “a sign of our cultural excess,” Gobé said. “From a commercial aspect, brands really thought they could dominate and own our lives. I am against anything that can make brands look bad, vis-à-vis consumers.”

MARC GOBÉ IN SÃO PAULO



WWD: How do you see marketing changing as we move further into the Great Recession?

Marc Gobé: What I see is a six- to 10-year span of lower spending. After the Baby Boom generation of 70-some million people, who supported the economy, we have a Generation X of only 47 million people. The Y generation is still too young to have [as big] an impact on the economy. So there is a gap of 30 million people.

WWD: The Baby Boomers?

M.G.: The Baby Boomers. The marketing of the past — dreams were reachable by anybody — those dreams have to be reviewed in the context of people's reality. Some of those dreams will create resentment or prudence. When the car industry claims to create an American revolution and cannot deliver, it is not making the consumer feel good about brands. People are less inclined to define themselves through brands. They will look at brands with a certain dose of incredulity.

WWD: Are marketing campaigns addressing these changes?

M.G.: Businesses are emerging that are almost under the radar. They don't spend much on advertising. They're built on word of mouth. They have relationships, with a community of customers, that will not be visible anywhere but online. Zappos.com is a young company and it does more than \$1 billion in its business in shoes, fashion, accessories. They have a map of the United States where you can see in real time what people are buying and where. You can see somebody's buying that shoe in Boston. Boom! And there's another shoe being bought in Las Vegas. Boom!

WWD: How is the world of advertising adapting?

M.G.: I've been focusing mostly on social media. I'm interested to see how brands do or do not have a place in social media. Twitter has become a huge tool for small businesses. On Facebook, two people [Dusty Sorg and Michael Jedrzejewski] created a page about Coca-Cola that attracted 3.4 million people — something Coca-Cola couldn't do themselves, with their hundreds of millions of dollars. There are 170 million people on Facebook. What does that mean? We have to listen to people. How do people prefer to communicate? (Coke invited Sorg and Jedrzejewski to Atlanta and collaborated on the brand's Facebook fan page.)

WWD: Do you have a Facebook page?

M.G.: Yes, I have two Facebook pages. It is impossible not to look at your business and understand the relevance of this and how it can teach you how to communicate better.

WWD: Which is the essence of the Internet.

M.G.: The essence of the Internet can be articulated around one word: sharing. Anything that goes on in social media is only interesting because it can be shared. It should be a mantra for any brand.

WWD: Four months into President Obama's term, how do you think people's hopes and dreams have been influenced by the new administration?

M.G.: The impact has been made. When you know what was, the fact that today we have a black president in the United States says a lot about how great this country is. There is something that can change dramatically.

We are living in an era of monopolies. If you take Main Street in Westport, Conn., where I live, there were 50 stores, all different. Now you have six chains. That's it. Our ability to experience new things, to discover, was controlled and limited....The Internet is blowing this thing away. We are entering into a consumer democracy. People who decided what people needed to consume are suddenly finding they have to listen to the things people want to consume.

WWD: Since forming your Emotional Branding business you've been focusing on cities. What inspired you to go that route?

M.G.: Half of the [world's] population lives in urban environments. Most people are gravitating towards cities. I think 150,000 people a day are moving into cities. What kind of roles are brands going to play in this concentration of people?

In large cities where large percentages of the population are below survival level — when people have \$30 to live a month — they're still consuming goods. What do you do when people don't necessarily have televisions, but they do have cell phones?

WWD: You visited recently with the mayor of Santa Monica. Did anything come out of that meeting?

M.G.: Santa Monica was about to control the amount of billboards and outdoor media that they wanted in the city, which was something Los Angeles was not successful at. This is a recession. Excess has affected brands. People care more about the environment in which they live. Consumers care more about the way they want to be communicated to. A lot of brands have not understood that.

WWD: Brands haven't understood this?

M.G.: No. There was a huge billboard on the full side of a building in Los Angeles. It was a promotion for "Dr. Phil." A group of citizens in Los Angeles went directly to Dr. Phil and said "Did you realize everybody hates you because of this, at least in our neighborhood?" And it was down the next day.

WWD: Given the onslaught by brands in cities, visual pollution, do you see any response being mounted by cities because people are turned off, or is it such a revenue stream that this is not likely?

M.G.: The cities don't make much money from this. If billboard advertisers put up 15 illegal billboards in Los Angeles, they would tell the city, "Sue us." The fine is like \$1,500 a month, for a billboard that runs a couple of hundred thousand dollars a month, so they feel it is worth it.

Just the fact that that medium is considered despicable by people — brands need to know that. It is clear that people don't want to have brands forced on them. Now there's an Internet and now people want to have a discussion.

WWD: At a dinner party last year, the hostess mentioned most of the guests knew each other beforehand because they met online.

M.G.: The hardest thing for brands is going to be this transparency. Some aren't going to survive. It's going to be a huge change. Urbanization changed lifestyles. Lifestyles are completely redefined in urban environments, because you have a greater freedom and less pressure from the outside. In 2050 [urbanites] are going to be 70 percent of the population.

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