

Making a Love Connection:

Four Ways To Build Sustainable Relationships Between Brands and People

By Doug Levy, CEO



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Elvis Costello asked the world, “What’s so funny ‘bout peace, love and understanding?” I’ll ask a different question, “Why shouldn’t brands establish relationships with people that are based on trust, respect and genuine concern?”

By now, the suggestion that we should think of consumers as *people*, as opposed to *targets*, isn’t exactly a revelation. While marketing is an admittedly human activity, our industry hasn’t quite made the next leap -- the idea that perhaps relationships between brands and people should be more like those in our personal lives.

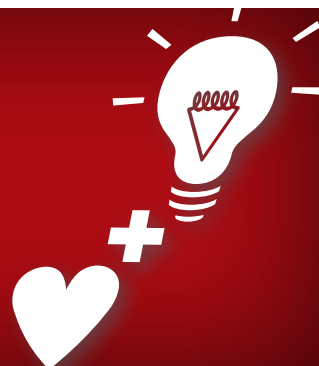
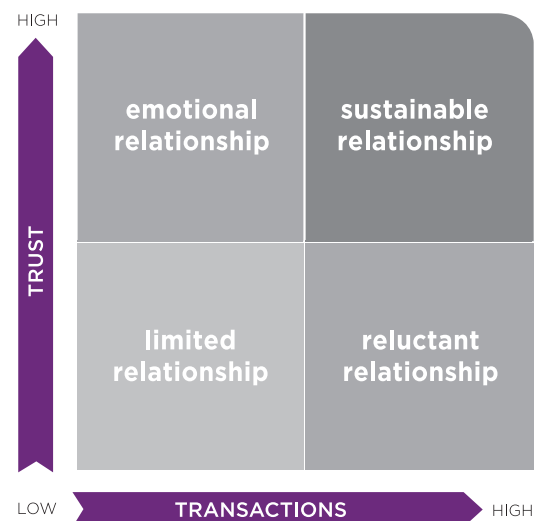
Brands that are creating sustainable relationships with consumers are transforming industries and redefining the marketplace. By sustainable relationships, I mean relationships that have both high trust and high transactions -- emotional commitment and share of wallet. My agency, imc², believes that both high trust and high transactions are necessary for brands to thrive long-term, and we use the brand sustainability map below as a reference. Like TV gameshow host Chuck Woolery’s signature intro for commercial breaks, the map is also “two and two.” But in our case, it’s two axes that plot brand performance against trust and transactions. The most sustainable brands are those in the upper right quadrant.

I suggest we think more *love connection* than *hookup* when considering how brands should relate to consumers. People can often see through a brand’s short-term tactics as a kind of brand booty call (think *immediate gratification*), and they’re happy to use these brands until something better comes along. An exclusive focus on short-term thinking is expensive and drains the life out of brands. We need to strive for connections that exist on a deeper level. Of course, resonating with people isn’t about tools, technology, or tactics. Much like our personal relationships, it’s a commitment and an approach over time.

Here are four ways brands can make love connections with people and keep the fire burning long after the honeymoon is a distant memory:

1) To thine own self be true: It may sound counterintuitive, but the best way to connect with people is to know who you are as a brand and what you’re trying to achieve in this world. We think of this as *purpose*, and understanding why your brand exists is a critical first step.

imc² Brand Sustainability Map™



Authenticity comes from knowing your brand purpose and intentions and acting in a way that's consistent with your values and goals. Do you have a compelling point of view about your industry? Is there some special need or challenge you're trying to resolve? You can create a natural or organic constituency by being something unique and honest -- a group that [Seth Godin](#) might call a *tribe*.

[Zappos](#) is an interesting example of how to create powerful relationships with people by first focusing internally. The company believes that if it gets its culture right -- a very internal commitment -- everything else will follow. Zappos also does some remarkable things with customer service, and the fact that 75 percent of the company's business is from repeat customers should tell us something.

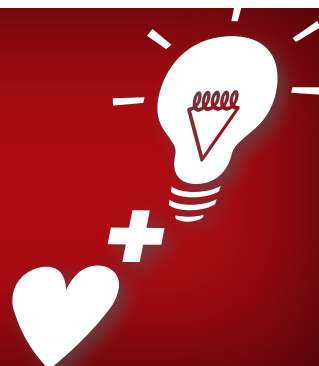
2) Forget her birthday: Brand engagement needs to be constant, not a little promo once a year. Sure it's nice to get the annual postcard in the mail that gives me 20 percent off my next purchase, but it would be more powerful if I'd had more frequent interaction. Getting a "birthday" coupon to a store I haven't visited in four years is like getting friended by someone I apparently went to school with years ago but can't, for the life of me, remember.

Occasions are a nice way to remind people about your brand, but it's the everyday interaction that builds long-term value and affection. Again, think of it like a personal relationship. If you only tell your spouse that you love him or her once a year, it might be a nice moment, but it's what they see, hear, and experience every day that tends to define your relationship.

Pizza Hut is a great example of how brands can show the love and create opportunities for more frequent interaction. Using its website, Facebook, mobile platform (including the new iPhone app), stores, and more traditional assets, Pizza Hut has gone out of its way to make ordering a convenient and easily repeatable process for its customers. Being where your people are and enabling engagement through their preferred channel is a simple way to encourage more frequent interaction.

3) Live in the moment: Brands should occasionally throw away the script and be spontaneous. Acting with purpose and being spontaneous are not mutually exclusive. In fact, if you know who you are and where you're headed, it's much easier to temporarily shift gears.

If you think back to the last presidential election, candidate Barack Obama was confronted with a dilemma -- serious questions about his attitudes and thoughts on race. "Brand Obama" was about hope and change, and keeping people focused on his vision meant looking ahead. He momentarily stepped off the express train to tomorrow and gave a personal accounting of his life experience and thoughts on the highly charged and very complicated topic of race.



Whatever your personal reaction to his dialogue, it resonated with his followers. It didn't satisfy the entire country, but it wasn't intended to. His willingness to go off the script for a while had a profoundly humanizing effect, making Obama -- the social, cultural and political icon -- something that people could understand and appreciate in a new way.

4) Don't tell people what they want to hear: With technology and all the readily accessible research, it's easy to think that we know more about the consumer than they know about themselves, but we don't. Instead of telling people what we think they want to hear, we should use interaction to demonstrate genuine respect for what they've communicated and an appreciation for their point of view.

A lot of people are just curious about whether the face that a brand shows the public is the real deal. And they can respect an authentic or genuine brand even if they occasionally disagree with something the company says or does. Thinking that we can create (read: *fabricate*) a story that will resonate with people, while tempting, is short-sighted and will ultimately do more harm than good.

You can also give people a peek behind the curtain occasionally. I recently wrote about an email that I received from a local small business owner that stood out because he simply admitted that his business, like so many others, was struggling in a tough economy. He wasn't complaining. In fact, he expressed optimism that things would improve. It was a natural, compelling and unexpected moment of candor. Letting me in on the secret we all knew didn't cost him a dime and has actually helped strengthen my relationship with the company.

Are these the only things you need to think about? Definitely not. But if you start with one or more of these ideas, you can begin building the kind of sustainable relationships that have short-term sizzle and a viable future. Over time, you'll find new ways to turn customer flirtations into something more serious and enduring. Who knows, if you play your cards right, people might take you home to meet their parents and introduce you to their friends, neighbors and co-workers. And in my opinion, the only thing better than a love connection, is a lovefest.

Please contact us for more information or visit imc2.com.

Dallas

12404 Park Central Drive, Suite 400
Dallas, Texas 75251
214.224.1000

New York City

622 Third Avenue, 11th Floor
New York, New York 10017
212.430.3200

Philadelphia

1100 E. Hector Street, Suite 100
Conshohocken, Philadelphia 19428
610.729.1310

