



The Elongating Tail of
Brand Communication
By Mohammad Iqbal

In *The Long Tail*, author Chris Anderson lists four defining characteristics of the hit-driven entertainment and mass media culture we all know too well: (a) a desperate search for one-size-fits-all products; (b) trying to predict demand; (c) pulling ‘misses’ off the market; (d) and limited choice.

For us practitioners of advertising and brand-building, all this should sound disconcertingly familiar—just replace the word ‘products’ in the list with ‘brand ideas’ and it becomes clear why.

We seldom think of the brand ideas and advertising we create as something we sell but that indeed is what we do. In a communication marketplace, brand ideas are up for sale—consumers buy some of them by paying with their attention and time.

And we, the manufacturers of the goods in question, create and peddle our wares using the very same devices and tricks the media and entertainment industry have perfected over the last century.

We use pre-filtering as a mechanism to predict and determine what will have mass appeal. We choose between alternatives—only allowing ‘one’ brand idea at a time to make it to the expensive ‘retail shelf’ of media. We pull off air any brand idea that doesn’t connect with each and every one of our identified consumers—even if it has its own small niche of buyers.

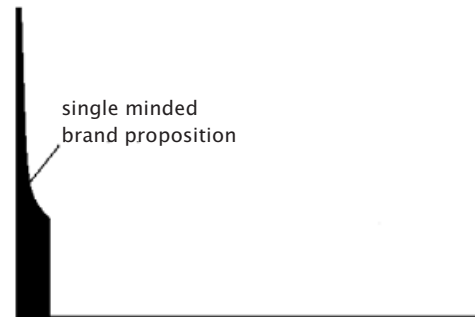


Figure 1

TRUNCATED BRAND COMMUNICATION CURVE.
Traditional brand-building advocates artificially truncating the curve at the head to make the economics work.

Whether we realize it or not, we have been dancing forever to the tunes of shelf-space scarcity and distribution bottlenecks. Even when we self-righteously believe that the single-minded brand proposition is the only right way to build a brand in any situation.

But there's change afoot. By dramatically lowering the costs of connecting supply and demand, the recent explosion and fragmentation of media is "changing not just the numbers, but the entire nature of the market."

As we move from a world characterized by media scarcity to one of media abundance, we are inheriting a world we never imagined existed. A world with abundant media shelf space for our brand ideas, abundant distribution both in media channels and bandwidth and an abundant choice of opportunities to peddle brand propositions tailor-made for niche audiences.

So, how do we adapt to this new communication marketplace characterized by abundance?

In *The Long Tail*, Chris Anderson provides the answer, not just for the world of brands but for anyone staring at a long tail wild west. "In scarce markets, you've got to guess at what will sell. In abundant markets, you can simply throw everything out there and see what happens, letting the market sort it all out."

Applying this first principle of long tail thinking to brand-building yields an essential truth—one more in harmony with the way the world works than with the artificial construct of advertising and brand-building.

In essence, in a world of media abundance the single-minded brand proposition is an anachronism.

In fact, in markets of abundance it is the wrong strategy to follow. Instead of choosing one single idea to represent the brand (and desperately hoping it'll be a 'hit'), we are better off making every probable proposition for the brand available to the consuming audience. Some of these will be hits and the rest will find niche audiences—the aggregate of which might even rival the hits.

In the world of long tail brand-building, the communication for every brand represents an individual market in which different messages for a particular brand compete for consumer attention and time. The task of the advertising agency here is to generate all the myriad communication messages with which people could relate to a brand and create communication for them all. (They will definitely need all the help they can get to pull this off, but we'll come to that.)

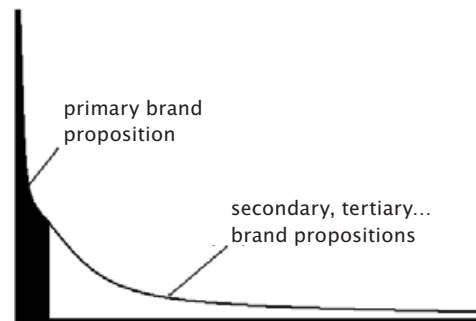


Figure 2

A HEALTHY AND COMPLETE LONG TAIL OF BRAND COMMUNICATION.

The primary proposition still draws the hits. But abundant shelf-space and low distribution costs enable the brand to connect every niche idea with its own set of loyal consumers.

Of course, the streamlined and aerodynamic economics of mass media would still mean that one brand proposition may have to lead the overall communication. But no longer should it be allowed to dominate all the communication for the brand. The fragmentation and abundance of media has now helped lower the barriers between the supply and demand of more brand messages—theoretically of all possible brand messages.

SO, HOW DOES ONE GO ABOUT CREATING AND HARNESSING THE LONG TAIL OF BRAND COMMUNICATION?

According to Chris Anderson, two imperatives summarize the secret to “offering mass customization as an alternative to mass market fare.” They are:

- Make everything available.
- Help me find it.

Here are some practical and simple steps that translate the above two rules to make your brand communication tail a thriving marketplace of messages.

1. Seek help in populating the curve. However deep one’s pockets, populating the entire tail with customized messages can be the quickest way to bankruptcy. Thankfully, help from those willing to work for pleasure, and for free, is readily available. In fact, user-generated advertising has already arrived—with recent high-profile competitions for brands like Dove. While the temptation to filter out entries (as many as 30,000 in some cases) can be overpowering, the real opportunity here is in making everything available to everybody. This can be achieved by providing the aggregated audience the tools to sort out what’s good from what’s not (like Flickr does for photos.)

2. Time is a natural elongating-agent. Every single brand message used by a brand in the past is, by default, a resident of the tail. Its glory days over, it has given way on the shelf to the current brand proposition of the day—but it still exists, forgotten and archived. Making these brand messages simultaneously available in secondary media could be the quickest and most cost-effective way to elongate the communication curve. The longer the brand has been in existence, the longer the tail can potentially be.

3. Ones and twos add up to quite a few. Long Tail markets leverage the abysmally low cost of shelf-space and distribution to convert unprofitable customers, products and markets into

profitable ones. Traditionally, these niche audiences would be lost to a brand's advertising either because they don't relate to it or because it's too mass-market a fare. By reducing the costs associated with customized communication with these consumers, the long tail effectively multiplies the potential audience for the communication for a brand.

4. Employ recommendation and word-of-mouth buzz. The stuff in the tail is useful only if it can find its way to the consuming audience. While pre-filtering tries to predict demand, recommendations and other 'post-filters' amplify already existing behavior. Because these filters identify an existing pattern in behavior among the consumers of the advertising (as distinct from the consumers of the brand), they are more likely to find a sympathetic audience fit—and meet with a favorable response.

5. Don't predict; measure and respond. In a long tail world, all possible brand messages are simultaneously available in the market. Armed with real-time data about how they are faring, all one needs to do is to continually adjust and respond in quick time, tweaking messages or shuffling them around. Therefore, the role of a brand custodian becomes that of an active agent investing in the communication market of a particular brand. Keeping a keen eye on the market and how a suite of messages is faring, the agency should continually alter its portfolio of messages to ensure maximum returns for the brand.

6. Context is more important than content. The economics of mass-media ensured our individual differences were ignored and our collective similarities were addressed. On the other hand, a plethora of brand messages and the corresponding post-filters to navigate them enable consumers to seek and find the message that best suits them—in their current context. The very same consumers will return to consume and relate to a different brand message, when the context changes—with time or situation.

7. Build negative databases. In a long tail communication market, while all messages are theoretically possible—not all are practically compatible. Association with one sometimes means disassociation with another. In a long tail communication market, the need will be to carefully create and fashion a negative database of messages—a minute subset of messages that cannot work for the brand. It is this negative database that'll guide and help identify which messages cannot and should not populate the marketplace.

8. Trade control for influence. Unlike tried and tested mass media advertising that we can take 'off air', future media vehicles will not come with an off switch. When we pay very little to run them, we are actually relinquishing our control over when, where and how they will run. Effectively they are on their own.

Examples of these 'persistent advertising vehicles' are viral videos increasingly hosted on publicly shared sites, podcasting, in-game advertising, online virtual worlds, blogs, social networking sites, etc. These new media vehicles work in a paradigm very different from the familiar ways of 'slow, expensive and in control' advertising.

What all these media vehicles (and the ones to come) will do is embed our brand messages into the very fabric of our collective lives—making them 'searchable', 'findable', and 'experience-able' for eternity.

A brand could have made a clean-cut with the past and sport a new strategy, new look, new ideas and new direction—but there will be no way to recall these 'miniature bots' already out there. They have a mind—and a lifespan—of their own, outside our control.

We'll have to learn to set our brand messages free and let each seek its own path. In return, this overlapping symphony of 'fast, cheap and out of control' messages will reach out to more people, at more times and with far greater effect than we can otherwise manage.

EPILOGUE: BRAND COMPLEXITY IS A DIY KIT.

One conundrum facing contemporary advertising practitioners is: can simplicity in communication yield complexity of brand character in perception?

Trying to communicate a complex message is a task that involves great risk and great expense. Great risk because the message may not reach the audience at all. Or even if it does, it might not be understood. Expensive because a complex message requires more media bandwidth—and many many more repetitions to get across.

A better model to communicate complexity is to let the consumers assemble it for themselves at their end. Just ensure that they have all the essential ingredients—a long tail of diverse yet simple and easy to communicate brand messages—and they will eventually put together a complex, layered and nuanced understanding of the brand.

One of the most surprising and desirable side effects of long tail brand communication is that by merely contemplating more than one message at the same time, your consumer is assembling the complexity you sought to communicate, but wisely didn't. 🧩

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mohammed Iqbal works as a Sr. Planning Director in a leading advertising agency for a living. His life's work, however, is a grand treatise tracing all of the known universe as an overlapping series of Darwinian symphonies. To contact him via [email](#) or visit his [blog](#). The ideas expressed in this manifesto were first elaborated in a [paper](#) titled 'The Elongating Tail Of Brand Communication: An approach to brand-building incorporating long tail economics.' The paper won the Atticus Award 2006 in the Branding and Identity category. The Atticus Awards are handed out by WPP—the world's largest communications company—for best original published thinking.

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