

MYRA STARK: SPECIAL REPORT

MYRA STARK IS A LEADING THINKER, RESEARCHER AND PROVOCATEUR IN THE SAATCHI & SAATCHI NETWORK, AND IS A MEMBER OF THE STRATEGIC PLANNING GROUP IN THE NEW YORK AGENCY. THIS IS HER SPECIAL REPORT ON THE STATE OF THE U.S. CONSUMER POST SEPT 11.



mstark@saatchiny.com

Introduction

September 11 was a point in time that sharply divided before and after. "Everything's changed," you hear people say. Messages saved on your answering machine from before that date seem unbearably poignant; the book you were reading on that Monday reminds you of your former innocence.

The enormity of the events of September 11 has called our "before" lives into question, causing us to reconsider the value and meaning of the work that we do. How can you go to a restaurant or watch a ball game with the same enjoyment as before? Does theatre really matter, or fashion, or brands or advertising?

Nowhere is this reconsideration more apparent than in communications. In the first weeks after the attacks, radio stations pulled off the air songs such as the Gap Band's "You Dropped a Bomb on Me" and Soundgarden's "Blow up the Outside World". The movie industry turned from violent films of destruction such as Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Collateral Damage*. TV's *Saturday Night Live* agonized over opening the show with its famous line, "Live from New York, it's Saturday Night", until Mayor Giuliani stepped in and made the words an assertion of the city's spirit. The magazine industry is talking about the triviality of gossip and the irrelevance of celebrity culture. Companies pulled advertising that seems to be in questionable taste, such as Coca-Cola's happy, upbeat TV commercials, and substituted expressions of sympathy and altruism, unity and patriotism for traditional product advertising. Every communication is being held up to new standards: Is it insensitive? Frivolous? Trivial?

At the same time, people yearn to "get back to normal," to get on with their lives. There is a desire to turn away from the TV and the papers and return to life as it was before. We're trying to speed up the stages of mourning that follow a loss so that we can resume daily life. But can we do that? Or can we return only to a semblance of normalcy? Don't we have to redefine normalcy?

This is an important question for brands. Everyone in marketing is scrambling to discover what September 11 means for brands and for the relationship between brands and consumers. Will consumers return to before (business as usual) or has everything been changed after the tragedy?

The short answer, of course, is that nobody knows for sure. The attacks constituted what scenario planners refer to as a "wild card" - an event, such as an earthquake, that no one can predict. And if we have more wild cards, if the economy goes into recession, if the layoffs continue, if consumer confidence continues to erode, if we experience a lingering war, "after" will be very different from "before". For all the imponderable eventualities, some things about consumers, post-September 11, are beginning to be clear. They can serve as guideposts for brands as they try to return to whatever normalcy is possible.



The (Emotional) State of the Consumer

We have to start with people's emotional reactions. Americans have suffered a trauma, some obviously more than others, but all of us have been affected by the enormity of the attacks. People feel frightened, anxious, helpless, often overwhelmed and unable to cope. They have difficulty focusing and can be irritable, if not downright disagreeable.

Underneath these feelings are unconscious but powerful emotions, even less easy to handle: anger and a feeling of betrayal. How could this have happened to us? Where were the government, the intelligence services, the people who were supposed to protect us? A recent Roper survey suggests that these feelings are filtering up to consciousness. Most Americans (57%) think that "at least some organization could have prevented the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 or could have done more to minimize the magnitude of the attacks." Among all our other losses, then, is a profound loss of trust in those we thought were our caretakers.

These are uncomfortable feelings and so we erect defenses against them. We compartmentalize (it happened in New York, not where I live); we deny (life is back to normal in the rest of the city above downtown); and we disassociate from our feelings.

People may feel they have these feelings under control, but it's much too early to resolve them. Besides, the threats remain. Since the anxiety cannot dissipate, we bury it, but we're all feeling anticipatory anxiety, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

That's the emotional state of our consumers. It may look like normalcy, but it's far from it.



A Shift in Sensibility

Catastrophic events can precipitate abrupt cultural change. Frequently, fashion is a sensitive barometer of change. Before the French Revolution, for instance, fashion favored the elaborately constructed gowns and immense powdered wigs of Marie Antoinette; immediately afterwards, women wore simple Empire dresses of gauze-like fabric, and natural hairstyles. Right after World War II, the New Look with its long, flowing skirts and tightly fitted jackets was a reaction to the austerity and deprivation of the war. Of course, it's much too early to tell, but there is evidence that just such a shift in sensibility (fashion aside) has occurred. Some elements of the shift are already apparent.

- **The return of the hero.** We have heroes again (not to mention a whole new set of bad guys). Except for celebrity heroes, the heroic has been out of style in this country since Watergate and Vietnam. And the new heroes are everyday people. The Doonesbury cartoon of October 2 captures this point. It concerns two people talking about how trivial entertainment and sports suddenly seem. "Everything's changed," they say. The last frame, titled "Everything", depicts a young boy saying, "I want to be a firefighter."
- **New stories.** There are new narratives in the culture, especially those driven by the rescue fantasy, embodied in the mayor and the firefighters as well as ordinary people doing extraordinary things, such as the passengers who seem to have turned one of the planes away from the White House.
- **Reexamining styles of expression.** The editor of Vanity Fair has pronounced that irony and cynicism are dead. Certainly the detached, amused stance of the ironic and the critical, flip attitude of cynicism seem out of keeping with our need for heroes.
- **The acceleration of the consumer's reordering of priorities.** In many areas, the events of September 11 will accelerate the growth of values that became major themes of consumers' lives in the '90s: **home, family, community, and connectedness.** Like the Millennium, the trauma will be a catalyst for Americans' continued **spiritual search**, even if the return to religion proves to be transitory.



Brands in the World after September 11

No question but that brands will have important roles to play. As the institutions of our society have weakened, brands have assumed increased importance. Look at the use teens and young adults make of brands of jeans or sneakers or beverages to see the role brands play in an individual's growth and development. Look at the way brands have become woven into the everyday rituals, the everydayness of our lives. Look at how consumers are investing their relationships with brands with some of the emotions typical of interpersonal relationships - Starbucks, for example, or Harley Davidson.

Given the emotional state of the consumer and the shift in sensibilities beginning to take place, how should brands respond now?

- First of all, brands have to **Stand Up and Be Counted**. They have to **acknowledge** what has happened and the changes the attacks have caused. This is no time to "hide in the barracks." Otherwise, brands risk being seen as irrelevant or callous. Of course, being perceived as opportunistic would be equally damaging.
- **Open a dialogue with consumers**. If ever there was a time to listen and talk with consumers, to open a conversation, this is it. Brands need to monitor these shifts in sensibility. Communications must avoid making people feel abandoned, helpless, out of control. Any communication that triggers anticipatory anxiety or evokes memories of the trauma must contain a resolution. This is new territory for all of us and we're without maps. Only consumers can guide us.
- **Pay attention to the company and the people behind brands**. Well before September 11, consumers were asking a new question of brands: What do you stand for? We saw the moral and ethical dimension of brands grow in importance and find expression in cause marketing. The increasing importance of the company has brought a number of values to the forefront. The **integrity** of a company and brand becomes critical to consumers suffering a loss of trust and experiencing feelings of betrayal. **Authenticity** and **sincerity** are now seen as the critical signposts of integrity. It's as though a new definition of political correctness were emerging.
- **Reassure**. The most important role for brands is to provide reassurance. Suddenly, consumers have refocused from the higher-order needs on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, such as self-actualization, to the most basic of needs: security. People feel vulnerable, insecure, and anxious. In their constancy, consistency, and familiarity, brands can reassure and comfort. It's important to note that the rescue heroes we have turned to, the mayor and the firefighters, combine the so-called traditional masculine qualities of strength, leadership and action with the so-called feminine qualities of nurturing, compassion, and empathy. People, clearly, need both.
- **Provide a sense of control and order**. Part of our rush to normalcy is a desire to deny the uncertainty and chaos we face. People feel out of control and need structure. That's why they've been turning to cleaning closets and organizing desks. Such actions give them the illusion of control and help to calm their anxiety. The very dailyness of the brands so bound up with our lives makes them feel solid and enduring and can reflect some of those qualities back to us. The fact that people rushed to participate in some way - giving blood, donating money, volunteering, attending memorials, even wearing ribbons - also provides direction. Participation, while motivated partially by the human capacity for altruism, is also a way to feel more in control, less helpless.
- **Be familial**. Everyone's immediate reaction after the catastrophe was to call family and friends. Of course, we wanted to find out if they were okay, but we also needed to make contact, to be with someone, to connect. We all have a need to **huddle around the hearth**. We crave intimacy. Reaching out to family, friends, and community is a way of dealing with feelings of abandonment and betrayal. We need to feel united with others. Brands can provide rituals of intimacy and comfort for us.

- **Give permission to escape.** People need to escape from anxiety into laughter and fun without feeling guilty. Certainly, there's enough survivor guilt out there already. The technical term for this is "regression in the service of the ego," but we all know this as taking time out from the demands of life to have fun. We always return refreshed and recharged. Even brands that have not traditionally used wit and humor might well consider using these techniques now.
- **Look forward. Whistle in the dark.** Provide a sense of hope. Give people a sense that there is something to look forward to, that they can hold on to a positive future.

It may be that we need to consider a new classification of product categories based on the emotional state of the consumer at present. Clearly, some brands are high-anxiety brands now: airlines, hotels, and travel-related sites, some financial services, especially brokerage firms. Others are low-anxiety or no-anxiety. People are turning to comfort categories at the moment: cell phones, insurance, anything connected with home offices or the home itself. For the affluent, private or corporate jets spell comfort. The classification a brand falls into will provide directions for communications. For example, high-anxiety brands have to be front and center using mass communication to acknowledge and reassure. For other low-anxiety brands, such as cereals or laundry detergent, a web site might serve the same purpose.

So, yes, we all want to get back to normal, but we need to redefine what we mean by normal in the world after September 11.