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Why Are You So Afraid of Conversation?

The following chapter has been written in full by anyone who cares enough to answer the question posed in the chapter title. In true communal fashion, I opened up this chapter to my readers, to my community . . . to you! Through a wiki (a community-powered and completely editable collaborative tool), people not only contributed to this chapter but edited other people's contributions as well. The chapter is reprinted here with only length-related edits. You can view the chapter in its entirety, as well as the historical and chronological evolution and development, on www.jointheconversation.us/wiki

I kick off the chapter and then *you* take over!

You've just seen the figures . . . the stats suggesting that organizations (yours) are not equipped to deliver against the promise and potential of conversation. You certainly feel it is important, and yet you are hamstrung by inactivity, indifference, and insecurity.

If you think about it, all our professional lives have been spent trying to understand our consumer, trying to get closer to our consumer, trying to connect with our consumers. In many respects, these efforts have been a series of guesstimates, combined with artificial techniques such as focus groups, syndicated research, and various number-crunching exercises. After all of this, what do we really know about our consumers?

We are so afraid of our consumers that we feel the need to place them behind a one-way mirror as we nervously stuff our faces with M&Ms, hoping that the group doesn't become unruly and decide to "storm the castle." We've treated our consumers like caged animals

and taken unprecedented steps to ensure that any communication between us and them is controlled, contrived, and largely one-way.

Only now consumers have awakened from their slumbers; rising from their artificial cocoons, they are reaching out to us to make first contact.

And yet here we are—petrified, paralyzed, beside ourselves with indecision and angst, fearing the wrath of legal affairs and the paranoia of actually responding to the “gullets whose only purpose in life is to gulp products and crap cash.” Perhaps it’s time to face our fears.

Perhaps it’s time to come out of hiding.

Perhaps it’s time to deal with the realities of “first contact”—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Perhaps it’s time for us all to realize that consumers do have power. They control their own decisions and are not afraid to turn on us at any moment.

So let me ask you: Why are you so afraid of conversation?

John Wall (Ronin Marketeer) on Taking the First Step

People fear the conversation because it is new. It is different. It’s like the trepidation of a new golfer facing the country club for the first time. You’ve been practicing your skills (marketing, your swing, whatever), and here’s this place where the pros live, play, and chat. They have their own language, customs, procedures, rituals, and inside jokes. You scare yourself: *Will I get kicked out if I put my golf shoes on in the parking lot? Or What if someone comments that my posts and opinions are ridiculous and stupid?*

The irony of it all is that once you have made it past the first step you find that it’s much easier than you feared. Most people are astonished at how many crappy golfers are at the country club (and others will argue that it’s not even about the golf). But you won’t know who they are and who the next billionaires are unless you get inside and look around the club.

If that carrot doesn’t get you, remember the stick: If you are a professional, it’s your duty to learn about how to do your job more proficiently. If not, your business will eventually go to those who do.

There are only three kinds of people: bus drivers, bus riders, and pedestrian targets. Who do you want to be?

Seek out the experts. Unlike the 100-year-old country club, these groups tend to be 20 minutes old or less. There's always a person willing to explain the secret handshake and give you the tour.

Kevin Behringer (Fly-Over Marketing) on Walking the Talk

There are two main reasons that people are scared of conversation. One very real fear is summarized by John Wall: People are scared of looking stupid. It's the old "don't raise your hand in class" concept of not being confident enough in your ideas, your beliefs, or your opinion to put it out there for others to read/view/critique/criticize. Letting people possibly criticize you is a scary thing because they're not just criticizing your idea, they're criticizing *you*. This often becomes a reason not to join the conversation.

The second reason is the concept of the "digital memory." With the advent of social media and the shift from traditional "control you by talking at you" media, when you put an idea out there—when you join the conversation—you not only lose control, but that loss of control is there for everyone to see . . . forever. For many people, it's a fearful thing to go "on the record" and potentially embarrass themselves, their family, their company, you name it. With the unfailing memory of the Internet, these fears are even more real because the record of your failure (or idiocy) is there for good. It's nearly impossible to take it back.

That said, it's important to move beyond these fears. It's very obvious when talking to "old marketers" (not age old, but philosophy old) that the concept of giving up control by joining the conversation scares them. The old way of putting out a sterilized message that really doesn't say anything only works if you don't look out into the world to see if it's working! What really happens is that these marketers put out this message that they want people to believe and then go on with their lives or business, not living out that message. Then every customer who sees the dissonance between their words and actions says to themselves, "That company doesn't walk its talk." This has gone on forever, but companies used to be blissfully

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ignorant because no one heard the opinions of those customers. Now the customers are talking, and if you don't "walk the talk" down to every last period and comma . . . they're gone.

It's time to treat people as people. If you treat your customers like numbers, they'll act like numbers. Numbers without loyalty. Numbers who don't care about you or your company. Numbers who base their decisions on the things you have no control over.

And they'll become someone else's numbers.

Roman Mandrick (KsanLab) on Risk and Inertia

First of all, marketing VPs are afraid of conversation because they don't want to risk. They play not to lose because their career is at stake. Why do I have to be worried about conversation with my customers if all I have to do is to fulfill plans and achieve goals that are being set by top managers? What if our product is not good enough? What if the customers tell the truth and it's not very nice to hear and report to my bosses?

The point is that there is no choice. You have to start a conversation; otherwise, it will eventually be started by your consumers and you will be out of the room. If your product is not ideal and has significant flaws, don't lie please. You better tell the truth to your customers. You have to be honest, or you have to be very, very afraid of any conversation with your customers.

The second reason why even CEOs are afraid to start a conversation is inertia. It's inertia that kills new mind-sets, new approaches to get your customers happy. It kills your future incomes, growth, and development. It can't be seen right away. Today you're paralyzed by inertia; in one or two years, you'll find yourself and your company trying hard to sell your product.

Lee Hopkins (Better Communication Results) on the Insights of the Internal Market

Of course, the conversation is both external to the company as well as internal. Marketers traditionally focus on the external market (naturally, because it is far larger in size than the number of com-

pany and key supplier/partner employees), but the conversation paradigm/philosophy that now governs how the Internet works (and has always governed how people relate to each other) means that both in front of and behind the corporate firewall there are conversations occurring that marketers need to be paying attention to and contributing to.

However, most medium-large companies are not able to quickly reengineer their internal IT structures to help marketers facilitate these conversations. And even if the various departments (IT, marketing, finance, and so on) *were* able to work seamlessly together, many marketers would be highly apprehensive about contributing—because they can meet the person they are electronically conversing with down at the water cooler or in the parking lot. If the online conversation becomes heated or there is disagreement, it can be easier to hide behind a monitor than behind the water cooler.

But it is the internal conversation that may turn out to be the most important to marketers, and the one they should be focusing on first. Employees have a vested interest in ensuring that the business does well, and thus they often have ideas about a product's marketing, packaging, design, build, or usability that are crucial to hear before the world at large says the same things but perhaps not so politely.

At the end of the day, marketers may eventually have no choice but to join the conversation with the external market, but they may also choose to miss out on the richness of the long-term face-saving insight that comes from the internal market. Which would be totally understandable and very sad.

Sivaraman Swaminathan on Why Conversations Are Never Assembly-Line

Perhaps it is a good idea to trace this to the history and growth of organizations in the industrial age. This was the age when efficiency was the focus. Organizations were built around driving productivity. People were trained to do things over and over again—faster and quicker. For over a century, people worked in an era of mass production. Hence, they forgot the ability to develop conversations.

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They worked in large organizations that told them what to do rather than get them to explore what to do.

We therefore moved from:

- An era of the “inventory of goods” to an era of the “inventory of ideas”
- An era of “scarcity” to an era of “insatiable choices”
- An era of “information poverty” to an era of “information overload”

Imagine the kind of shift they would have to make for this new ecosystem. Companies were not ready for a conversation era and an environment where one has to express, empathize, engage, enable, and empower. The mind-set a marketer must have is not to “inform at any cost” but to “spread at no cost.” This is a new marketing paradigm that demands new thinking, new rules, and new ideas.

Conversation at the end of the day is two-way. Conversations require:

- A capability to accept reality, as it were, because that’s how consumers talk among themselves
- The ability to listen and respond in an unbiased manner
- Skills to experiment, learn, and develop
- The ability to change the course of one’s action swiftly, even if the decision was wrong

Most marketers are used to the good old one-way communication where a message is sent and lots of fingers are kept crossed, hoping that the message sticks. In a conversation, it won’t. It will bounce right back, and it won’t look anything like what you originally sent; it will be a breathing human being’s response to your initial action.

Sean Ammirati (Profitable Signals) on the Corporate Disconnect

In my interactions with senior VPs of marketing at organizations of all sizes, there seems to be a bigger disconnect. That disconnect is

that most aren't actively monitoring or "reading" the things being written about them on the Web.

Marketing executives need to listen to the conversation and act on what they hear before they can join the conversation. So why aren't they listening?

Listening to the online conversation is much easier than focus groups and phone surveys ever were! There are literally dozens of online tools to monitor the conversation for mentions of a company's executives, name, and industry.

Acting on what you hear becomes *essential*! The suggestions, complaints, and new product ideas will be so compelling, and if you care at all you'll have to act. Blog posts and comments become natural opportunities to "write" into this emerging conversation. You don't need a blog or social network to do it! You can just comment on other people's posts and join the conversation. As that becomes more comfortable, it gets easier and easier to participate.

John C. Havens (PodCamp NYC) on Misuses of Conversation

I actually don't fear conversations. I fear the unwelcome stepchildren of true conversation, including:

- Small talk
- Demeaning language
- Corporatese

We all converse. But we shade it according to our needs and desires. Sometimes we hide—hence the small talk. We parry any genuine jabs at connection and stick to "safe" subjects while waiting for our drinks at the bar. At best, these pleasantries can fill gaps in time much like a stint at Tetris brought to life. At worst, the vacuum of gray matter and lack of effort made at conversation can tarnish the soul and wound the artist within.

Demeaning language can be the bailiwick of the boardroom, with barbed jibes intended for levity cutting at the core of one's character. Veiling their tongue-poison with phrases like, "Don't take it

personally,” or “Just kidding,” purveyors of negativity galvanize the erosion of true conversation by instilling fear instead of fellowship.

Corporatese contradicts the reality that all humans and their institutions are fallible. While branding can be an opportunity to creatively present your vision to the marketplace, corporatese condescendingly spins where it wants for buzz. This hyperbolic language replaces reality with rhetoric and alienates the audience it should embrace.

I used to fear certain conversations until I learned that there’s valor in speaking truth with a purpose. It’s a risk to speak your heart/mind when your sole purpose is to improve the life of your listener; they may not like what you say no matter your intention. But if they’re willing to take critique and transform rather than retreat, they’ll welcome your counsel.

The true wisdom of a conversation lies in listening.

Ironically, we tend to fear silence in a conversation, but we all seek out the people who’ll let us bend their ear. Perhaps to help curb our fear of genuine connection while speaking, we should treasure the communion of shared discourse not dependent on words.

Debra R. Murphy (Vista Consulting) on Learning New Tools for Conversation

It is not fear that is keeping corporate marketers from joining the conversation. It is lack of knowledge.

The evolution of the Internet into a medium that encourages interaction and socialization has placed more burdens on marketing. It’s a new game once again, and marketers are now faced with the challenge of applying the second-generation technologies to their marketing mix. They have an enormous learning curve and are bombarded with an overwhelming amount of information that needs to be absorbed before they can feel comfortable employing this new media as a marketing tool. Change has happened at such a rapid pace that those who are not early adopters have to totally immerse themselves to figure out what to do. To find the time and energy to learn about the technology, experiment with the tools, learn

the etiquette and culture, comment, socialize, and become part of the new social networking world is massive.

It takes the new media visionaries to apply these technologies in ways that make them more relevant to all types of businesses. Now many will be trying to figure out how to take advantage of this channel, quickly, in order not to be left behind. More will enter the conversation; it is just a matter of time.

Peter Stephenson and Fred Madderom (On Communications) on Having Something Interesting to Say

Why be afraid of conversation when it can lead to genuine engagement?

We've all been at the client working session where the facilitator "rabbits on" about "who would your brand be if it were a person." You can't stop thinking about a boring and mind-numbing conversation with your tedious uncle, who you always get caught with at the obligatory family barbecue.

To engage in conversation you need a story to tell. One that is engaging. Now ask yourself: How many multinational brands could hold an interesting conversation with their customers today at a barbecue?

Consumers are moving on from brands that are unable to engage with them. With increasing consumer control and the growing importance of brand authenticity, it's inevitable that marketers will need to join the conversation or, quite frankly, consumers will move on without them.

The more in control we are, the more out of touch we become. But the more willing we are to let go a little, the more we're finding we get in touch [with consumers].

—A. G. Lafley, Chief Executive Officer, Procter & Gamble,
ANA conference.

Good conversations are surprising. They are engaging, intriguing, and about opinions and ideas. They challenge and inspire you.

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But above all they are a natural part of life. In most conversations, you only need to introduce yourself, have a point of view, and be a good listener to achieve a meaningful relationship.

Marketers, agencies, and media need to think differently. They need to become inclusive. The language of conversation needs to be reinvented as well.

The funny thing is that we often find that our tedious uncle actually did have something interesting to say. It's just that people need to have the patience to dig hard to find it, a quality not all consumers have in this fast-paced world today.

Frans Jan Boon on Being in Control

Old habits die hard. For years and years, marketers have been used to communicating one-way. The rare online response in the early days of the Internet was handled by the online agency or, worse, by the internal IT department.

Afraid of losing control. Marketers used to be in control, to a certain level, of the communication process. Marketers who want to maintain a certain level of control have to join the conversation. But above all, marketers need to realize that they will never have total control anymore.

Attitude and experience. Many marketers have heard of MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and others but have never really experienced any of them. This leaves them unaware of both the positive and negative influence these can have on their company, brands, products, or themselves. To be fully aware of that, they have to join this networked society and gain experience. Get to know the online etiquette, culture, and common phrases. Know how to interpret online conversations and how to (re)act. Only then will they be able to decrease their fear of conversations and start one or participate in one.

David Levy on Being Human

It's ironic that anyone would be afraid of conversation, since human beings as a species are hard-wired for it. Our ability to communicate and to tell stories is one of the handful of tiny incremental differences in our DNA vis-à-vis other mammals that makes us human.

That said, one of the reasons we are so afraid of conversation is that these roles we play as marketers, whether on the agency side or the client side, get in the way of our essential humanity.

Ultimately we are all *human*, but when you attach titles like “VP of Marketing” or “Account Executive” to our humanity, sometimes our good sense goes out the window. We start thinking about “measures of success,” “risk,” “making our numbers,” minimizing our “burn rate,” and other sundry worries that attach to us like barnacles in the workplace. Not to diminish such concerns—most of us have to put the pork chops on the table.

But we often go too far in our method acting. We get too into playing these roles, and we find ourselves intermediated, disjointed. Our various roles jockey for position and fight for our own attention. We lose site of the basics: talking, listening, writing, narrative. That is us.

So joining the conversation might be another way of describing a pathway back to our essential selves. To reintegrate them. The “joining” is the key. The more we can participate and experiment, the more we can forget about the roles we play and remember that “the conversation” should come naturally.

Elizabeth Harrin on Why Size Matters

I think it is interesting to look at the characteristics of organizations that appear afraid to start a dialogue with their consumers. Utility companies are good examples: You get an automated phone line, a bill, and maybe a newsletter and no hint that the company wants to hear what its customers think. Small companies, on the other hand, appear to be more open to conversation.

So if there are companies that are conversing, what makes it so

hard for the others? Larger companies have their own specific challenges:

- The larger the company, the larger the pool of clients. Where can you possibly start? Listening in to the online conversations already taking place about your company (or competitors) is a toe in the water. But when you want to dive in, commenting on other people's blog posts really isn't enough.
- Large organizations are unwilling to put their reputations in the hands of low-level employees. Blogosphere conversations are etched in society's electronic memory, and blogging has the potential to make every employee a journalist. In companies where only the top directors are allowed to comment to the press, and only then through the curtain of their PR department, it's a very large leap to blog posting, online forums, and podcasting.
- Marketers in large organizations move slowly. It's not their fault. Large organizations move slowly—it's just how they work. The time it takes to research, present, have approved, and implement a conversational marketing strategy means that large organizations are by their nature less agile than their smaller counterparts.

Mitch Joel (Twist Image) on the New Power of the Individual

I don't think marketers are afraid to join the conversation. I think they're afraid of the new reality. The new reality is simply that an individual—someone like you and me—can have real power. Marketers spend their days worrying about losing control of their brand. They should be much more focused on the fact that they never had control of their brand. They were simply able to scream louder than the individual.

All of these social media tools have democratized the media and given rise not just to citizen marketers but to the core truth that if you do indeed have voice, then you have control. When one individual can create a blog posting called "Dell Hell," that forces a major

corporation to look at its customer service, because said individual is now able to scream as loudly as the corporation by leveraging simple Web-based tools that gave him access to voice, access to a community, and, more importantly, access to the collective wisdom of people who share a similar point of view.

Marketers should stop interrupting the conversation with their benign messages and should start getting involved in the conversations by providing unique content, care, and authenticity through transparency. You know, start acting like human beings.

In the end, maybe that's what they are truly afraid of: being transparent, authentic, and human. The days of hiding behind a strategic public relations campaign or a multimillion-dollar ad campaign may be coming to an end, and that end may be evaporating faster because the average person is commanding real power through social media and simple online tools to harness the voice and the community.

Austin Kronig (Fresh + Squeezed) on the Demands of Conversation

When it comes to Web 2.0 and joining the conversation, marketers are too concerned over the amount of responsibility and maintenance required to initiate and monitor consumer dialogue. Call it complacency, but marketers worry that by joining the conversation they have eternally wedded themselves to their consumer. In a space eminent for immediate outbursts and widespread consumer havoc, marketers worry about the representation of their brands and don't want to deal with the myriad of consumer sensibilities.

Today marketers can more effectively persuade through two-way conversation. However, this form of communication requires marketers to have something important to say on a regular basis. Meanwhile, two-way conversation tests a marketer's ability to listen. If attention isn't placed on the consumer, all conversation and ideas are thereby lost. Under this new model, then, marketers must become facilitators of new ideas with the understanding that "the consumer always knows best."

Michael Seaton on the Client Side

Who's afraid of the big bad conversation? Not me.

I believe that the fear of conversation ultimately stems from being frightened of hearing “You failed” or “You made a mistake” from one's peers and superiors. Perhaps chances are not taken because no one else has previously taken chances within your environment. No one has witnessed any radical departure from the conventional wisdom or challenge to the status quo. Why? Because the prevailing perception is that support on these types of initiatives will not be there. Anything out of the ordinary, or beyond the tried, tested, and tired, will be frowned upon. *Unfortunately, the phrase “think outside the box” applies only to thinking, not to actually doing.*

The real problem is that fearless leaders are far and few between. Most individuals never even try. So the game for many becomes one of sitting on the sidelines, waiting for other brave souls to take the leap. Some other “sucker” whose mistakes we can point a finger at. Begs the question: Why is it that way?

Sir Ken Robinson has brilliantly spoken about how children are born with vast creative talents that are then systematically squashed from the earliest opportunity. Through the education system and through negative reinforcement from parents, mistakes are made out to be very bad things. However, mistakes are fundamental building blocks in the learning and growing process. Robinson points out that creativity in education is as important as literacy and should be treated as such. Yet it is not made a priority. Kids in school are taught to be average, to regurgitate and not deviate—to suppress the urge to be creative.

He has said that “to take chances is to not be frightened of being wrong.” In other words, those who are not prepared to be wrong will never come up with anything original or be creative. Wrong has bad consequences. And unfortunately, this is the model of many organizations—where the stigma of making a mistake looms large.

So there you have it. That is the basis of the fear of conversation. Blame it on the system and don't worry about it any further. Whether you believe that consumers are not able to handle the truth of conversation or not does not really matter. The system has made

your mind up for you. There is no fear of making a mistake as long as you let someone else get into the conversation and you remain silent. Protect yourself from ever hearing anything bad and don't change, just do what you are used to. Being insulated is good.

But wait a minute. What if not joining the conversation is really the mistake?

Duane Brown (Creative Traction) on Looking at Conversation from the Consumer's Perspective

The enemy of both business and creativity is fear. People are afraid of messing up and having it become public knowledge. Fear is what stops people from following their heart and passion. Fear is what kills off a good idea because it's different. Fear is the one thing we shouldn't be using as to why we don't join the conversation. However, there are four other reasons why people don't join the conversation:

People are lazy. My generation is lazy; yeah, there I said it. Sure we do MySpace and Facebook, but they don't require real work or brains to have a conversation. Society is lazy as a whole, and this needs to change.

Respect of your peers. We don't feel like we are respected at times. I know I've felt this way recently from people older than me. Say what you will about my generation, but respect and speaking to me as a person and not a kid goes a long way. I think the ad agency Crispin Porter + Bogusky said it best for their truth campaign: "Teenagers can't stand being manipulated; they do not like being 'played.'"

Standing out from the crowd. No one wants to be different—so says the majority of people in the world. Having a viewpoint that is different from the vast majority of people is a frightening thought, but it's a thought that needs to be embraced. When I look online and see that I'm the only one who thinks or feels a certain way, it's hard to hit Publish and let my thoughts out in the open, because more times than not I will get flamed for

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speaking out. The online world has made being different wrong, and this needs to stop.

People seem to start just saying what the majority has already said even if they don't feel that way. We need to embrace radical ideas and opinions because that's how the Internet has gotten to where it is, and that's only going to push it forward.

No one is out there and listening. When I don't feel like I'm being listened to, it gets under my skin. Even if you open the channels of communication and don't walk the talk, your community is going to know and be insulted. Now that we have the Internet, that has changed, because I can gather with the collective and voice our concerns as one. It's one thing to be out there, and it's another to actually listen. Listen to what we have to say, and we'll guide you to the promised land.

There was a reason I wrote this from the perspective of the consumer. Regardless of whether you are a communication expert by day, we are all consumers by night, and we need to keep that in mind. They can smell lies from a mile away, and if you don't write with passion, honesty, and integrity, we will know. Never underestimate the intelligence of the consumer—it's insulting. Some would say my thoughts are nothing new, but it's a reality for more than some people.