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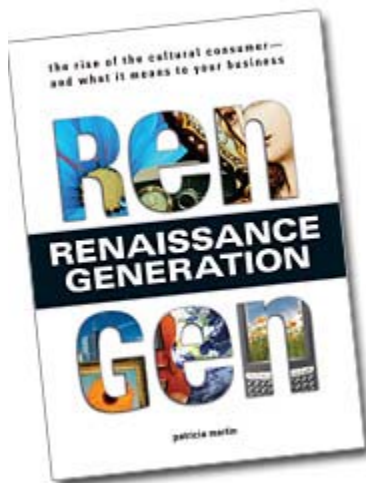
Recognize the Power of the Cultural Consumer

The Segment of Creative-Minded Americans Is Expanding and Creating a Big Opportunity for Marketers

By Patricia Martin

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Here's a riddle for the new marketplace being formed by the convergence of art, technology, business and education: If creativity is the gift of a talented few, why are so many people suddenly creative? CMOs grappling with the transformative power of the internet and the likes of YouTube and Facebook as advertising platforms may be missing the big picture: The internet is facilitating mass creative output from anyone and everyone. And the velocity of change it's churning in our society is gearing us up for something profound. In fact, it looks a lot



Check it out: RenGen. Americans who thrive on content that drives creativity will set the popular-culture agenda and fuel business innovation, Ms. Martin contends in her book.

like what happens right before a renaissance. What we are witnessing runs deeper than fads or trends. It signals a time of vast cultural transformation that is founding a new generation. I call it the RenGen, short for renaissance generation. At its center is a powerful new player: the cultural consumer.

For years, marketers viewed the cultural consumer as an elite market segment, estimated to represent 2% of the overall population. As we witness a maturing knowledge economy, it's become evident that we must enlarge our view of who's consuming cultural experiences and how often. To benefit from the coming era, smart CMOs need

to see that American consumers aspire to be viewed as thinking, expressive human beings. This might seem at odds with the economic facts of the 1980s and 1990s -- a period that gave us reality TV and the proliferation of a fast-food culture. But consider these facts:

- The typical adult attends an average of 1.9 cultural events per month.
- Sixty-eight percent of the American public is interested in independent films.
- GenY-ers (those ages 18 to 29) attend an average of 2.3 cultural events per month.
- More Americans visit museums, historical sites, zoos and aquariums than attend all professional sports events combined, including auto racing.
- In 2006, 65% of households ranked "avid book reading" as their No. 1 at-home leisure activity, according to the Standard Rate and Data Service.

What can a CMO conclude from all this? For one thing, today's empowered consumers are jumping online and foraging for the creative outlets and cultural events that meet their needs. There is no lack of content in the RenGen, just a limited number of pioneers -- Absolut Vodka, Reebok, OvationTV and Starbucks, to name a few - - that are seizing the opportunity. How do you jump in when there are so many trends worthy of your attention?

Here's a lens to help you see the world through the eyes of the cultural consumer:

IT'S ABOUT FUSION, NOT FISSION.

If the last century was defined by fission -- the segmenting and dividing of people and products -- the new century is a fusion of ideas, with consumers embracing a dizzying array of disparate choices.

LESSON: The old rules of marketing by age, sex, income and similar attributes no longer work. The legion of cultural consumers is a behavioral cohort that forms around experiences and genres.

OPPORTUNITY: Fusion energizes a brand. Go where cultural consumers are going. Instigate mash-ups. Cross-pollinate a variety of people, content and ideas. Offer ways for people to connect at events you sponsor based on their passions and affinities.

RISE OF THE BEAUTIFUL MIND.

Knowledge is power. Ideas are the killer app. Learning is the new status skill. This is an enlightened age, and cultural consumers revere brands that teach them new things without pontificating.

LESSON: Offer ways for your customers to "discover" new elements of your brand. Unfold a mystery.

OPPORTUNITY: Tell a human story with a plot twist in which your brand plays a role in the dramatic arc. Host events where clients can learn from authors and experts.

THE VIRTUE OF THE FLAWED.

Cultural consumers take their cues from the natural world. They are united in their concern for the planet. Say goodbye to the perfectionist tyranny of Martha Stewart and hello to products that may be ugly and messy but are natural, such as garden centers with cradle-to-cradle biodegradable planters and the funky Suck UK with its top-selling Sun Jar solar nightlight, recently added to Target's online store.

LESSON: The RenGen prefers products that are imperfect but authentic over perfect products that harm the environment.

OPPORTUNITY: Packaging, hang tags and labels are all places where the RenGen looks for follow-through with a brand. These details speak volumes and can afford to be less sterile and more natural.

The most valuable step you can take in positioning your brand for the rising renaissance is to be aware and to make your colleagues aware. The mounting evidence points to an enduring transformation. Sit down with your team and figure out how these ideas may impact your business, your brand and your job.



Patricia Martin is author of the book "RenGen: Renaissance Generation: The Rise of the Cultural Consumer and What It Means to Your Business" (Platinum Press 2007) and is president of LitLamp Communications Group, a Chicago marketing-communications firm.