

Making meaning from our own stories (Selflore) in the age of discontinuity

By Ray Podder

Right now I'm into the future of mobile commerce. eNums, bank-less transactions, redefining the concept of credit using models like zopa.com and the evolution of VOIP. I'm also into finding the world's best dark chocolate, cruising up the Amazon, luxury lodging while I chill in Helsinki and learning about the people and innovations working to eradicate poverty, hunger, environmental distress and other ailments of our planet.

I'm also into reading everything from Matt Ridley to C.K. Prahalad yet I'm also into Cheech & Chong movies, overplayed pop music from the 90s and Bollywood babes. I dream about Chicago deep dish as well as Phuchka from street vendors in Kolkata and think about developing new designs for eco friendly transportation systems. Think you have me figured out enough to sell me what I'm looking for? Think again.

Because apart from not knowing in what context I make these choices, what exactly I'm into will also inevitably change tomorrow, next week, next month, next year and indefinitely as I discover new things and ideas in the way forward to the story of my life. What I've shared so far is just a thin slice of the bigger story I'm continuously authoring and editing for myself.

This is my "Selflore." (the stories about us we are continuously authoring for ourselves)

Yours is undoubtedly different. The person next to you different yet, but one thing is absolutely certain, we all have them: The stories we tell ourselves in the ever-evolving context of ourselves. This is about understanding how our own stories affect the way we relate to each other and find relevance in an interconnected world free of context, precedence and other previously established means of deriving meaning.

Making Meaning Minus Context

What we are into is always of the utmost importance to us because it is how we define ourselves at this very moment. Of all the things we humans desire like security, community, order, respect or certainty, the underlying pursuit we are all seeking is meaning. More specifically, what it means to be "me" right now. Other than those of us who are self-absorbed (you know who you are) we are usually doing this all the time without being conscious of it.

Just think of how you choose things when you go shopping. Every item you browse, consider, avoid, recommend, give or purchase for yourself is consciously or subconsciously a choice to make meaning for yourself. You choose brands because of how they make you feel about yourself, in other words make meaning for you.

Think of how you search on the Internet today. When the results come back from your search, do you generally click on the very 1st thing that comes up, or do you continue digging until you find something that is meaningful to you? If it's not, you usually repeat the process with more exact parameters, right? Why do you do that when your results are already ranked by popularity? Is it not about the search for personal meaning?

The philosophical and technical obvious aside, looking for meaning today has taken on renewed importance in a world where the lines between perception and reality are not only increasingly blurred, but often heavily confused.

For example, why do celebrities become actors before actors become celebrities? Why is it that if you're famous you can become an artist but it becomes increasingly difficult to do it the other way around? Why do people who connect you to important things often become more important themselves? Why is Oprah more powerful than the topics she covers, why are personalities like Jay Leno more recognized than the people they interview? What is really the difference between artist and scientist? Between advertising and editorial? Between biological systems and information systems?

What do words really mean now in the age where our alphabet is not so much English, Hindi, Arabic, Russian or Chinese but binary (0s and 1s)? Is there really a standard for language, or have we bought into the "marketing's version" of language for so long we've actually deluded ourselves out of a common context? I mean, can anything really be both "New" and "Improved"? The same word like "Tight" means something different to a pipe fitter than to someone versed in hip-hop vernacular.

So what's "real" then? Today's reality is that there really isn't one. Real is now relative to your own context. You can believe either side of any issue to be true and you'd be right. Why is that? Why is the most relevant context today defined by the individual not as society or collectively? Perhaps it's not that our world has become devoid of meaning, but that meaning is no longer something that is fixed or fixable. It's relative to your own version of it; your "Selflore".

Why Selflore?

Overpriced coffee with pretentious names from a place where the self-involved hold office hours aren't the reasons you nurse your daily latté habit there. Neither are some leather, rubber, foam and plastic assembled under questionable conditions why you dropped two C notes on your footwear. You don't ingest that carbonated sugar water concoction because you're impressed with the fact that it can strip the grime and rust off of a dirty coin, so why do you continue to patronize them?

The marketing community would like to believe that it happens because of the stories they've told well, and that you Mr. or Ms. Consumer have bought into it. But is that the whole story? Do all of us buy into the marketer's version of the brand's story? Will we really belong to some rebel tribe by buying a motorcycle? Does every woman identify with Audrey Hepburn because her gift came in a light blue box?

It is true that we think in stories. Everyone you know or ever met wants to hear a great story, tell a great story and be part of a great story. It is one of the key reasons why we operate from feelings over facts, respond to emotion over reason, and choose great brands over their service or commodity substitutes.

A great story is marketing gold. A billion plus dollar industry thrives because we're willing to believe in the story of tap water being so bad for us that we actually pay good money for the bottled variety. Without any scientific evidence, the difference between a free range and caged egg is basically about 2X in price in favor of the free range one, essentially due to the difference of their respective stories. But in the age of the empowered "consumer" is that kind of storytelling really working?

The short answer is yes.

However, not because of the reasons most marketers may think, and that's a very important distinction. Because without that understanding, the instabilities inherent in the evolving marketplace will render your brand marketing options obsolete before you've even had a chance to respond to them.

Today, the "marketed to" are largely rejecting the definitions of them set by marketers.

Just as teens reject marketing "cool" as fast as it is sold to them, adults too are rejecting the pre-segmented marketing definitions of them. "Don't label me" is a common cry everywhere, and unexpected combinations like a golfer who is also a punk rocker is rapidly becoming the norm and not the exception.

So is the brand story becoming irrelevant?

Hardly.

However, *why people buy into the story* is becoming less to do with the story creator, a.k.a the brand marketer and far more to do with the story enabler like your buddy Gianni who recommended you pick car stereo brand X because he happens to be just as much into car stereos as you, and therefore someone whose recommendation you can trust.

Notice, I didn't say whether or not Gianni was an "expert". Because an expert's opinion is not necessarily needed in a world that's struggling with defining context. That's the distinction I'd mentioned before. It's the insight needed now to redefine what the essence of marketing has always been about: conversations about the exchange of value.

That value is becoming more and more context specific. If I'm looking for a particular restaurant, it can be for finding a place to eat, finding a place to meet, filing a report for the health inspector, looking for potential clients if I'm a restaurant supplier... amongst multiple other variables in time and space. What creates meaning in my search is specific to my context in time and space. I could further expand on why suggestions made by adware today is almost always wrong, but it really doesn't need more explanation. "...If

you like this you will also like...” is an option most of us turn off as soon as its made available to us, for good reason—it doesn't fit our present context!

The bottom line is that not only is there is no room for mass manufactured stories now, there is very little tolerance for context-irrelevant marketing of them. We need to instantly make meaning to find something useful to author the current pages of our Selflores with. By now we already know technology alone is not the answer. Most of us don't have the time to find relevance by filling out social networking profiles or searching tag clouds to get instant meaning and for all the cool connectivity tools out there now, we are probably not going to.

The feeling you have from knowing that if you just got what Gianni gets you're going to be happy is something still missing from online spaces. To get to that, I believe we need to understand what really creates relevance in a context free space. As our realities get sliced thinner, the nature of expert opinions that influence us are also qualifying themselves much differently than they ever did before.

Realities & Expertise Sliced Thinner

With shared contexts nearly non-existent, the ability to trust the decisions we make often comes down to the “gut-level” calls we make on a daily basis. Just as Malcolm Gladwell so eloquently illustrated in his bestseller *Blink*, our understandings based on unconscious processing are called upon more frequently as the luxury of stable variables and long-term planning become a scarce resource few of us can afford; at least definitely not as often as we'd like.

Whether or not you agree with Malcolm's insights is not the point I'm trying to make here. Instead, just ask yourself when did you last have the luxury to read through all the user reviews on Amazon before you bought that book, or read through all the related Social Networking profiles before you clicked on a suggested link, or visited most of the 100s of bookmarks you thought you'd get to on your browser? Today, we are inundated with so much data that unless you have nothing but time on your hands, or you are paid as a researcher to do so, you can rarely afford to make meaning of any available choice by thoroughly examining the details. In short, you make decisions (buying or otherwise) based on information you process within thinly sliced versions of your reality.

Our reality is also getting sliced thinner because the bigger questions in processing media have changed as well. We don't have time to visit “What happened?” and we care less about “Who's happening?” and have moved our focus almost entirely on “What will happen?” Yet for all the trendwatching, countless top 100 lists of what's next, our ability to trust the things we choose still comes down the basics of human nature.

We trust expert opinions.

But in a world of thinner sliced realities, who really is an expert? Does popularity equal expertise? If that were true, why aren't we all happy with the choices “America” makes

during “American Idol” voting? But isn't everyone an expert at something? Possibly, but why would someone care about self proclaimed expertise if they had no other measure to judge the effectiveness of their decision other than popularity? Back to how you Google. You really don't click on the 1st thing that comes up unless it's meaningful, right? Google ranks by popularity, so if popularity was the measure you'd always click on the 1st result right? My point exactly.

Isn't it true that our affinity for something really doesn't allow us to make expert opinions until we understand a subject in depth? So isn't expertise then proportional to not only our passion for the subject but also being able to channel that passion into a quantifiable analysis? In a thinner sliced world, it seems that anyone can be an expert, and anyone can vote, but real meaning comes from the opinions of those who share our passion and quest at the same time and place context as us. Those that think like us, at least for this particular circumstance. They understand us in our current context and they share our thinnest slices of reality right now.

Getting into the World Ahead...

The nature of information is biological in that it (ideas/info) wants to connect, mutate and make meaning by moving about freely into a sustainable organism. It is only fitting that our interconnected paradigm of civilization we're now participating in resembles its biological counterparts. The Internet is kind of like our collective global brain and it's developing much in the same way as any biological brain. It is making connections, learning from them, establishing pathways without redundancies (you wouldn't want to re-learn to walk everyday, so why would you want to repeat the same search again?). The established principles we'd used to get meaning like precedence based on experience, fixed or fixable context is becoming non-existent. We are all seeking our individual versions of meaning at a time when marketers and others are trying to get us to buy into versions of theirs. So how do we manage relevant meaning in a world of increasing choice, technology and connectivity?

Maybe the answer is not in the complexity the Internet affords us, but rather in the simplicity it can enable. In a truly interconnected society, our choices are not only accountable, but instantly relevant to those who also happen to share our thin slice of reality in the very moment we make them. They become our “Gianni's picks” in real time as in the previous car stereo example, and they become experts when the lack of context makes experience and credibility non-existent in your current scenario.

I believe that is what needs to happen next. Connecting to those who are into the same things we are at the same time we are—to create real relevance in time and space.

Could this be a potential revenue model for free middleware like IM and web browsers? Is it a kick starter for mobile commerce? Can it eventually answer the age old “Which half of my ad budget is wasted” question marketers have been struggling with? Maybe, but that's not why I'm sharing this perspective.

The reason I'm sharing the "into" perspective is because I truly believe that *you can't really share meaning until you've shared context* .

We are living in a media fragmented landscape where shared contexts are in short supply. Here, in our concept driven society, thinking about existing things differently not only gives us perspective to identify “What will be” but it can actually make that reality come true. Just as the late Peter Drucker once said: “The best way to predict the future is to create it yourself.”