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SIDESTEP THE MEDIUM- AS-MESSAGE TRAP

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As recently as five years ago, the notion of a soft-drink company's Web site being a popular destination for do-it-yourself music mixing would have been unheard of. The idea of designing your own auto or athletic shoe online was equally remote. And watching your favorite TV shows on your music player?

Technology is helping transform our society and culture. It has generated tons of ink about an increasingly “in-control” consumer who wants to be informed and entertained (and not necessarily in that order), and expects to be marketed to in a very personalized and individualized way.

If it's all changing the nature of consumers, it's also changing the nature of marketing. And the challenge facing the profession is not just one of keeping pace with the way technological change is forcing a shift in the mix and makeup of tools in their arsenals. It's figuring out how to make all these tools work together most effectively to drive business—

without falling into the trap where the medium is the message. And without compromising the most fundamental rules of good marketing.

Consider the tale of two alternative reality games, or ARGs. They're a hot marketing technique where a virtual community of players is brought into a gaming plot, with members interacting with the characters and helping each other. Of course, there's a product to be sold, but because that's woven (ideally seamlessly) into the interactive and entertaining plot, it's a delivery method that can work quite well with certain customer demographics.

Last year, Audi unveiled its comprehensive “Art of the Heist” mystery campaign around its new 2006 A3 model, “stolen” from a Park Ave., New York, dealership. With a detailed plot, the players were encouraged to help solve the mystery. Audi involved them by using virtually every known available medium, from print ads and TV commercials to e-mail, blogs and Internet Relay Chat.

The three-month campaign captured the public's imagination: Within days, enthusiasts created seven fan Web sites. More than 500,000 people were involved in the search on an ongoing basis. Web

traffic to audiusa.com jumped 40% from previous-year levels, with a 79% increase in qualified leads (click-throughs to the A3 buying-indicator pages). It generated more than 10,000 leads to Audi dealers, including nearly 4,000 test drives. And it's increasingly held up as a best practice of bringing new and old media together to reach customers in a relevant way.

Then there's Sharp Electronic's ARG, “The Legend of the Sacred Urns,” (rather obviously) designed to promote its Aquos liquid-crystal TV. The plot revolved around a hunt for a rare artifact: the grand prize, a Sharp Entertainment Center. Clues were embedded in oddball TV commercials, and traditional print was also used. The plot unfolded via an interactive Web site where ads could be seen again and new clues were unveiled. Interestingly, all of the game play took place on Internet bulletin boards.

Despite notching up 1 million visitors to the Web site during the life of the campaign, the campaign may have relied too heavily on the technical bells and whistles and not enough on staying relevant to customers. Post-campaign coverage judged that three of the four targeted audience segments—“aesthetes,”

“sports enthusiasts” and “entertainment junkies”—were turned off by the campaign's complexity; it was a campaign only the “techno-geeks” got into.

Technology is opening up a new and wonderful world to marketers in terms of vastly expanded ways and means for “touching” customers that respond to their specific preferences and interests. But the best of the old world and the new need to be combined to drive the best results, as Audi's A3 campaign showed. The marketers that succeed in this brave new world will be those that understand what combination of media and messages will create the desired effect with customers.

To that end, the old stand-by of “know your customers” has never been more important. And technology has something to contribute here, as well. Technology has made it possible, through advanced research and information-gathering techniques, to forge a deeper understanding of what matters most to customers. When these insights are translated into the right offer, delivered at the right time and right place, then technology realizes its most important value: driving the brand and business forward. ■