Larry Weber, an internationally renowned expert in communications and marketing, is passionate about the convergence of technology, the web and communications. He is the Chairman of the W2 Group, an ecosystem of digitally driven marketing services companies including A2a Media, a leader in outdoor digital display.

INTERVIEW WITH LARRY WEBER

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Having the opportunity to interview you about the issue of media façades and advertising is for me a special situation. On the one hand you make a very convincing case for the argument that traditional advertising - with its simple aim of direct selling - has little future. You are a supporter of the social web, in which consumers are directly involved in the development of content. And yet on the other hand you are a strategic partner of A2aMedia, a company whose area of operations is the marketing of urban screens. And urban screens usually show a linear series of advertising clips the role of which is to aggressively encourage the passer-by to make a purchase. This is doubtlessly not the aim of A2aMedia, but it is the reality, because the closed system of the media agencies permits no other concept.

I could of course question you here about your vision of advertising with electronic media in the public realm. But my fear is that your response would be very cautious because media façades are certainly not the focus of your work. For at the end of the day the success of the social web is not dependent upon mediatalized architecture, which is relatively cumbersome in comparison with the World Wide Web: not only because architecture cannot alter its physical position, but also because the technology behind media façades is complex – which differentiates them very clearly from web hardware.

But if we assume that a media façade is something different from an urban screen and, furthermore, that the content of media façades should offer investors some sort of financial return, then we can certainly discuss how media façades can support the creation of social networks. Do you have some ideas?

Lots! I believe that marketing in the future will be fully aligned with the search for experiences. The task will be to get people to experience something as a means of encouraging them to do something. It is this encouragement that I describe as “emotive”, meaning that the experience must be increasingly emotional. This sensual experience can even go as far as using the sense of smell. Hence it is important that the media façade frees itself from being a form of one-way communication and becomes, instead, a bridge. Media agencies have believed up to this point that media façades are places for selling impressions but my view is that the media façade will become much more an experience in its own right which must be used as an interactive bridge. The media façade can be used to carry paid messages – but not in the way that this has happened for the past 75 years. This means that firms who operate both digital and real time strategies must now synchronize the various building blocks of these communication
strategies – in just the same way that they must synchronize the buildings and other locations of their clients.

But the observation that social media are growing so fast - faster than any other form of media has ever grown before - is much more important. One only has to think that Facebook alone brings 400 million people together. Just imagine what it would mean if media façades could carry Facebook-updates and render such communication between people visible. Just imagine if the themes being discussed on Facebook could also appear on media façades.

But who will pay for this?

That is a fair question. Facebook presents itself as a “concept call global conversation” and that it also what we (w2group) are talking to Facebook about. Say that we go to Facebook together with, for example, General Electric with the idea of starting such a concept call global conversation. General Electric wishes to position itself as a Green Company. We guarantee that 100 million people will witness this communication and that 50 million people will actively take part. We could arrange that, for example, the CEO of GE has a conversation with Al Gore and then (for – say - 500,000 dollars) we could broadcast this communication on our media façades. In such a way media façades become part of a global strategy in which communication becomes visible in the public realm with people using their iPhones and Blackberrys in order to spontaneously make their own contribution.

The result is that, rather than being driven by advertising, content is driven by sponsoring: which, in turn, can naturally be accompanied by logos.

I also believe that media façades can work in the interests of “social goodness” by supporting communities of local groups and highlighting, for example, local heroes who are notable for their sporting achievements or social engagement.

In addition to this I feel that brands must develop their presence in all dimensions. An example: if I buy a book from Amazon I can look at a video of the author, read something about the book and even write my own criticism. That is to say that I remain for some time in a specific virtual context – and this is something which a media façade can, in some reduced way, also enable. More than anything, a media façade can be part of this comprehensive brand presence.

Away from the world of brands it is necessary that a framework emerges which permits media façades to develop an organic structure. In the resulting data-flow an editor could build in – just as an example – an image of an artwork such as the Mona Lisa and program it to appear 30 times a year as a means of establishing a certain atmosphere. This would simply be one basic element in a collection of planned content. This content would be organized - but not simply, as if by some random generator. Rather the content must make sense and be structured according to a specific set of rules which guarantees output which entertains and informs as required - as well as encouraging consumption.

I like this organic description of content design. Indeed it is a theme which I would like to address in more detail – albeit from another direction. You support the creation of communities. A community is something very alive and you describe in your books that it makes no sense to want to control communities. But as an architect or, better, a mediatect I have more affinity with symbolism, as a result of which I am interested in the creation of identity. I interviewed a historian and we agreed that the usual principles for creating identity – such as the meaning of home - are less effective today than they used to be. And I was surprised when my interviewee identified our consumption patterns as a key element of our creation of identity. Being a fan of a particular brand codes me in a way that other people can understand. But the meaning of this brand may for me be very abstract in that it has no face and I cannot communicate with it.