Trust: sinners, saints and Terry Pratchett; and Nick Clegg's real job

Posted by [Derek A. Lackey, Editor](#) / February 04, 2019

A new report shows a public crisis of trust caused by a host of advertising sins. Dominic Mills picks them apart in the search for a cure. Plus: Facebook regulation and a Super Bowl alternative.

Im not a big fan of Terry Pratchett although I recognise he is, well, a secular saint to many. But theres a quote from[Carpe Jugulum](#)that I like.

Last weeks AA LEAD conference put trust - not for the first time, and it aint going to end soon either - front and centre of the issues adland must deal with.Heres . There are other issues too, HFSS principally as[Tom Watson brilliantly articulated](#), but trust is the big one.

Picture credit: Bronac McNeill

At the heart of it is the ongoing and now near-precipitate decline in favourability towards advertising amongst the public. Credos Karen Fraser charted its decline in a picture I found alarming.

On the chart itself, there are two points worth noting.

One, broadly speaking, favourability was at its peak in the mass-media era. Some might say this was a golden period of creativity, some that this was a function of the limited number of media channels available to advertisers.
The second, again generalising, is that the rot sets in more seriously around 2009 (bar a curious uptick around 2015) and has continued since.

Hmmm...2009...well that was the period of the rise and rise and rise of Facebook and Google. This is not, however, a duopoly bash; that was also the period of the financial crash, which may have had an effect.

You can read, informed by going out and talking to people (yes, kinda old-fashioned, but it works). Ill paraphrase it, but essentially she identifies six problems or sins.

Sin #1, bombardment, which translates as the sheer volume of ads to which we are exposed.

Sin #2, repetition i.e. seeing the same ad over and over.

Sin #3, obtrusiveness which I take to mean getting in the way and/or buggering-up the user experience.

Sin #4, irrelevance meaning not just any lack of targeting, but also an poor execution or a failure to align with context or environment.

Sin #5, intrusiveness stop chasing me everywhere I go.
And Sin #6, a catch-all into which you can put manipulation, opacity (including when is an ad an ad), ads targeting vulnerable groups and in sensitive sectors (like gambling, pay-day loans and, possibly HFSS), and body image idealisation.

(Not much mention, by the way, of the ASAs hobbyhorseof [harmful gender stereotyping.](#))

Now whats interesting to me about this is that Sins #1-3 and #5 are products of the digital era, while Sin #4 is supposed to be rendered obsolete by the rise of adtech.

But, to simplify, they are all what you might call media-side sins, rather than having much to do with the ads themselves.
But, to acknowledge Sir Terry, all sins have a root cause: treating people as things.

Quite rightly, in his capacity as president of the AA, Keith Weed says adland must fix these problems in order to rebuild consumer trust. Its no quick fix, he warned: trust arrives on foot and leaves on horseback.

Right now, it feels like the horses are galloping away.

Lets start with #1. Is that solvable? I cant really see how. Its a function of almost infinite supply, cheap-as-chips or PPC inventory, and publishers so desperate for cash they overload their pages with ads.

#2 is about frequency capping. Some of the repetition may no doubt be a function of #1, but if ad tech is about pinpoint accuracy and all that, how come it cant do

frequency capping? Answer: because the system itself is failing.

#3 is a product of the modern era. But just because you can reach people anywhere, doesnt mean you should.

4 irrelevance I find fascinating on a number of levels. Essentially, its about targeting or, to be more specific, bad targeting. The industry is obsessed with personalisation, and holds it up as the holy grail. The tech is supposed to help. But, even if you think its a good thing -and the its a puzzle that the industry is so bad at it.

The only way it might improve is through more data, but is that really the direction of travel for consumers? After all, they are becoming more, not less, concerned about privacy. So I dont see this conundrum being resolved anytime soon, or unless marketers focus less on personalisation and more on context and environment.

#5 intrusiveness. This one seems to me to be driven by some of the factors we see in #1, #3 and #5 and derived from the ubiquity of inventory, opportunity and data.

6 manipulation, opacity, vulnerability targeting and so on. I think we can summarise this as bad behaviour generally, or to borrow from a damning comment from one of Frasers Credos interviewees Is there any ethical foundation in advertising? the answer seems to be that the industry, or parts of it sufficient to tar everyone else in it, has either lost it or never had it.

Of course we shouldnt give up, and thus the AA is absolutely right to make this a critical part of its mission. But to succeed, it will need patience, a strong will and fortitude.

Oh yeah, and to treat people as people, not data points and target shooting.

And Nick Cleggs real job is...

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