



The Digital Age of Toba

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The Digital Age, Marketer's Mt. Toba and How Businesses Will Survive the Bottleneck

Seventy thousand years ago, global climate was turned on its head by the explosion of the massive super volcano Toba, in Sumatra. The resulting climate change brought early humanity to its knees and altered the path of human evolution. In much the same way, the explosion of the digital age is turning the marketing world on its head and is likely to bring traditional marketing to its knees and alter the course of business forever.

Marketers today are faced with a fast paced, changing climate which is unforgiving to those that fail to keep pace. This climate is quite similar to that of early humans living in the wake of the Toba event. When Toba erupted, a then burgeoning early human population of close to a million was reduced to a mere 10-20,000 individuals almost overnight. This dramatic reduction in population size over a short period of time created what scientists refer to as a "genetic bottleneck." Luckily, the strategies employed by early humans offers us a glimpse at how marketing will survive the explosion of the digital age and the "business bottleneck" that is sure to come.

Before Toba, early man was able to survive, unchanged, for more than 100,000 years. He used unsophisticated, generalist tools, knew little about the world around him, and gave little thought or planning to his future. Early man used the same tool to take down a bison as he did a fish in the stream. He didn't have to know much about the bison or the fish. When he saw one, he stabbed at it from many angles with his blunt spear and hoped to take it down. The little thought early man gave to his future was basically limited to, "What am I going to do today?" Similarly, traditional marketing has been able to survive, relatively unchanged, since the 1950's using relatively unsophisticated, generalist tools (print, television, radio, etc.) knowing relatively little about its customers, and giving little thought to its long term future. Traditional marketing often uses the same tool whether it's targeting a Baby Boomer or a Gen Xer. Marketers have not had to know that much about their market and have been effective just stabbing at customers from many angles using blunt, generalist tools. The little thought traditional marketing gives to its future is usually limited to "What are my initiatives this year?" The Digital Age is changing many of these practices for marketing much like the eruption of Toba changed early man and his practices.

After Toba, early humans had to do a few things in order to survive. First, they were faced with one simple fact which they had to embrace, change or die. If your village's primary food source is the bison migration across the grassland and all the grass begins to die, is it wise to wait until the buffalo too begin to die before you start looking for a new food source? The obvious answer is no, and the early humans who were able to see that, be they the minority, stood a much greater chance of survival. Marketers too will have to embrace change. As they see their markets begin to shift, they too need to shift, and shift quickly.

The second essential to survival for early man was a new tool kit and more information about his prey. Early man could no longer afford the energy expenditure and low success rate afforded him by his generalist tools and limited knowledge. Instead it was necessary to make new, specialized tools, created for specialized targets, made possible by utilizing a growing information base. For fish he developed the fish hook. For bison and other prey he created the sling, the spear thrower, and the bow and arrow. Each tool developed for a specific target and each designed to limit the energy expenditure and increase the success rate of its user. Marketers will need to develop a new, similar tool kit. They need tools which are designed to accurately target specific demographics and specific audiences. These new marketing tools will be



designed to deliver a single blow and not many costly stabs and will only be made possible by utilizing marketer's most valuable tool, consumer data.

Next on early man's list of survival essentials was the ability to plan for the future. As the climate began to rapidly change, early man was no longer able to survive planning only for the short term. He needed to begin preparing for multiple scenarios that may play out over several months or even years. The early humans who failed to take this path ultimately found themselves at the mercy of their environment. Marketers who wish to compete in the Digital age will also need to begin to view their initiatives on a longer time horizon. They will need to position themselves to take advantage of market shifts instead of falling victim to them. Key to this concept is experimentation.

The final ingredient to early man's survival was a willingness to experiment. The ability to try new things exposed early man to innovative ideas and a new stream of data. The combination of ideas and data enabled early man to develop a new tool kit & plan for the future. The mix allowed him to see he didn't have to rely solely on the bison migration to survive or, instead of staying in one place to wait for the bison to come to him he could follow the bison into new territory. Marketers too will need to experiment. They will need to try new tools and test new markets, models, and strategies. They will need to follow their consumers into new, unknown territories. Failure to experiment for early man and for today's marketer leaves each vulnerable to one key adversary, their competition. On that note, and in closing, I'd like to share with you the plight of the Neanderthal.

The Neanderthal, like businesses which fail to follow these strategies, was left vulnerable to its competition. Neanderthal had carved out his territory in Europe, a climate much too cold for early man to compete. Being geographically further from Toba than early man, he was fairly sheltered from its effects and was not forced to change. He continued to use the same tools, did not begin to plan for the future, and did not experiment. This strategy worked great for Neanderthal in the short run and he was even able to expand his territory in the wake of Toba's chaos. Until a new, smarter, more agile competitor armed with an enhanced tool kit and using advanced strategies took interest in what used to be his and eliminated Neanderthal from the landscape. As it turns out, in a dynamic, changing environment, the riskiest thing you can do...is nothing at all.