

Godin, Seth – Permission Marketing

Pocket Books, 1st edition 1999 – paperback edition 2007, [Business] Grade ★★☆☆

This is a book from the recent past about the future of marketing. With remarkable foresight the entrepreneur, Internet guru and author Seth Godin in 1997, when he wrote this book, foresaw the change in marketing practices that some in the profession still struggle to understand. In some aspects all that the author writes about is fairly off mark. In an online world of e-mails, Alta Vista search and web page banners it was impossible to foresee the impact of mobile, social media, big data and cloud services – obviously. Still the notion that marketing would move away from intrusive mass marketing towards personalized interaction is spot on.

Marketing - today still - mostly centers on the idea of attracting the customer's attention away from whatever they are doing – which is presumably something they want to be doing. According to the author such old methods of advertising has become less effective in the modern world where information is overloaded. The signal-to-noise-ratio of traditional marketing is decreasing, rendering it unprofitable. Time to pay attention is an increasingly scarce commodity. So, Godin comes up with the concept of permission marketing. Instead of interrupting the customer with unrequested information, permission marketing aims to sell goods and services only when the prospect gives consent in advance to receive the marketing information. It's online relationship marketing that reaches out to those who have expressed interest and aims to build long-term relationships based on trust and awareness. According to Godin, to qualify under the headline permission marketing it must be anticipated, personal and relevant. This is obviously what Amazon, Facebook, YouTube et al tries to do today.

To me the perhaps most useful discussion was on the various "levels of permission", i.e. levels of customer acceptance for a vendor to supply something, and on how to move to the next level. At the very start the permission is only to come into contact and in the fifth step a function of some sort is fully outsourced to a supplier. I think it could be worthwhile for any supplier to reflect on what the permission levels in their type of customer relationships look like, what a move to the next level is worth and how to create a personalized service that sustains the current level of permission and ultimately takes the customer to the next level. In a way it's a B2B-marketing process, but in the book put into an online context.

The paperback from 2007 keeps the dated examples from ten years prior. In my opinion this is perfectly fine as it points to principles instead of the current validating in vogue case studies. It also makes it obvious that Godin's vision of what the marketing environment will look like is still ahead of us. The signal-to-noise-ratio of public communication has deteriorated massively since the time of writing and the major newspapers are still trying to grasp how they should tackle the new environment. Godin writes in a relaxed and entertaining way. At times he repeats himself once too many trying to sell his vision to the reader and the book isn't very specific in practical details, but overall it's a genial and convincing read. The concept of permission marketing has certainly been validated by the passage of time.

If you want a how-to-manual on B2B or online marketing look elsewhere. Read this book for inspiration. It was truly visionary at the time of publication and it still shows the way forward.

Mats Larsson, November 15, 2014