

A ratcheting up of existing trends

By Janice Spark

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Looking forward, we can expect a ratcheting up of existing trends throughout 2012. Whether you're a politician, an executive or a consumer, the odds are strong you're going to need to hang firmly onto your hat.



2011 was the year of rebellions and revolutions, from the Arab Spring to the abstract destruction of the London riots through to the Occupy Wall Street movement. But the structure of nation states was only one half of a tumultuous equation equally influenced by a buckling Eurozone economy.

It is no understatement to say that the political events of 2011 were made possible by new generation communication channels and tools. Equally, digital communication continues to impact profoundly on the world of business and the daily lives and experiences of consumers.

1. Crowdsourcing

In 2011, the momentum behind crowdsourcing really picked up thanks to rapidly advancing digital communication tools. Whether it's NASA's initiative to measure crater sizes, Proctor & Gamble's attempt to thread crowdsourcing into its approach to innovation or an ongoing quest to leverage public power to [decode whale linguistics](#), harnessing collective intelligence is now open to all.

In 2012, expect a snowballing of new crowdsourcing initiatives. But remember, sometimes the reality is a little more prosaic than the hype would have us believe. Standard reality TV fare, including staples such as Idols, also illustrates the crowdsourcing concept in action.

2. Cloud computing

The hype is that cloud computing will transform the way that businesses use ICT services within the next two years, as uncapped ADSL products finally come within a reasonable price range.

South Africa still faces the challenge of expensive telecommunications costs, and as long as the status quo remains, the cloud could stay tantalisingly out of reach in the wider economy. New trans-Africa fibre optic cables are set to come online in 2012, which could change the cost calculation involved quite fast. But potential savings still need to be passed on to consumers before the cloud has genuine impact.

An often-ignored reality is that most corporations are already using the cloud extensively, via the informal use by staff of services such as Facebook and Twitter [*and Gmail, Google Docs, Dropbox and accessing work email via smartphone-managing ed*]. Few have experienced major security breakdowns as a result, which tells you all you need to know about whether cloud-based services are viable or not.

3. Viva Britannia

2011's London Riots threw an unprecedented spanner into Brand Britain's master plan, impacting significantly on London's ability to take full advantage of the forthcoming 2012 Olympics. Nonetheless, the city has moved swiftly on and appears to taking all the necessary steps to deliver on its vision of the most open and accessible games yet.

The on-going economic blight that is the Eurozone could well dampen the general vigour of the event. It's also possible, however, that London 2012 will provide urgently required positive vibrations within the UK.

Whichever way it pans out, there's no doubt that the year will have a distinctly British tinge to it.

4. Local is lekker

Globalisation, powered by digital communication tools, is forging a homogeneous global identity. But it's also important to remember that the reverse holds strangely true. Ordinary citizens are using communications tools to connect and interact locally, and are loving the results.

Facebook is particularly effective for members of a community looking to interact on practical, local levels. The popularity of emerging portals such as Foursquare testify to the fact that localisation matters more and more in our globalised context, across real world and virtual spaces.

Thinking and acting with a local focus will gain increasing traction in the year ahead.

5. Conscious consumerism

The 'occupy' movements that proliferated in 2011 demonstrate quite clearly that global consumers are unhappy with the capitalist status quo. As a result, corporations are being forced into levels of transparency and disclosure that would have been unthinkable a decade ago.

The rise and rise of the vigorously conscious consumer means that brands able to clearly demonstrate their triple bottom-line credentials will be operating on the strategic front foot. Brands now simply have to be aware of the community in which they are operating, and also how their operations are impacting on that community.

Rolling out the standard community-focused verbiage isn't going to cut it for much longer. Visible, verifiable community action is required.

6. Austerity backlash

Expect a subtle evolution in the broad European austerity narrative as a deeper reality takes shape.

Austerity on its own, without the increased productivity levels required to boost GDP growth over the long term, will not solve the Eurozone slump. Europe needs to stop spending too much in some areas, but it also needs to make sure that it doesn't kill off all prospects of growth in the process.

This paradigm is likely to influence governments, brands and consumers alike as they attempt to balance the complex requirement to cut expenses while still spending.

7. High touch - online and offline

Mobile internet access is booming via smartphones and tablets, and new real-world 'connecting technologies' are emerging at pace, all of which means the distinction between offline and online is blurring by the day:

- consumers are scanning QR codes while in the shop to read reviews, access discounts and compare products and costs
- research also shows that increasing numbers of consumers research products online before purchasing in-store
- brands are now using the check-in features on social media platforms such as Facebook to promote their offerings and products, and
- geo-marketing and augmented reality are new marketing buzzwords that describe the on-going integration of offline and online experiences.

Consumers don't just want to shop...they want to experience. They want to touch, feel and be entertained.

In an age where so much of our lives is high tech and impersonal, the ability to deliver high touch has become a serious differentiator. And high touch will increasingly be delivered seamlessly, across real world and virtual spaces.

8. Cashless society?

[Near field communication \(NFC\)](#) looks set to influence one of the fundamentals of commerce - the checkout. NFC allows for simple and secure short range communication between devices. A maximum range of 20cm, in combination with a normal pin and password process, assures high levels of security.

Consumers can pay for purchases via NFC devices by simply touching their mobile phone to pay points. NFC can also be used for coupon and loyalty systems. Companies such as [Molo Rewards](#) are already implementing systems that allow users to download electronic coupons onto their phones, and then use these at pay points, via NFC.

NFC is expected to become a dominant force in the US soon, thanks to its ability to circumvent the traditional failures of technologies such as Bluetooth, which are notoriously taxing on battery life.

MasterCard and Visa are already part of the NFC Forum, while the latest BlackBerry smartphones are NFC-enabled. Samsung's Galaxy S II will ship with NFC, as will the Samsung Wave. Most Android 2.3 phones will include NFC and Nokia has said its smartphones will ship with NFC. iPhone NFC rumours are also bubbling under.

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