

The world has changed...

Are **you** still relevant?

a Brodeur Partners
white paper
April 2011

BRODEUR
P A R T N E R S

Executive Summary

Organizations spend billions of dollars to get people to buy a product, embrace a brand, follow a candidate or join a cause. Unfortunately, the world is constantly shifting under their feet. The mind of the consumer and the communications environment that shapes it are radically different from 10, five, or even one year ago.

This new tumultuous reality is why advertisements, public relations campaigns, marketing programs and social change initiatives are often less effective than they could be.

Organizations desperately need help forging a lasting bond with the people they hope to influence. Organizations need a single, reliable guiding principle to ensure that all their public efforts make a sustained impact.



This guiding principle, an inevitable consequence of our times, is **relevance**.

Unlike other ideals to which marketers have aspired – e.g., engagement, “eyeballs,” alignment, buzz and clicks – only relevance has the power to change not only minds but *behavior*. Relevance brings power, depth and sustainability to relationships with companies, brands and causes.

Unfortunately, many organizations have no idea whether they are relevant. Worse, they have no way to find out. This paper examines relevance in all its complexity and outlines ways for generating and, ultimately, sustaining it.

Situation

The world used to be a simpler place. Organizations offering a product, candidate or cause were in the driver's seat. People had far less choice than they have today. A few trusted institutions guided decisions and enjoyed people's loyalty. There was often just one bank, one car dealership, one department store and one pol everyone knew. If an organization had a good story or product, that was typically enough to earn a sale, vote or commitment to a cause.

That world has gotten complex. Organizations face a new and daunting challenge. People are awash in choice about how to spend their money and entrust their loyalty. They have an expanding universe of options,

new ways to select them, sophisticated decision-making processes, terabytes of information at their fingertips, and networks upon networks to discover their friends' preferences. Individuals reflexively question traditional "authorities," and economic uncertainty tests our patience.

People are awash in **choice**
about how to **spend their**
money and **entrust their**
loyalty.

As attention spans shrink, messages, channels and touchpoints are proliferating. Cultures are fragmenting. Communities arise, despots fall. Organizations need a reliable way to communicate effectively in this complicated new world, a way that is agile enough to adapt to dynamic conditions going forward.

Fortunately, more than ever, people yearn to connect, and connect more deeply.

Connect to what?

Every product, brand and cause presents an opportunity for connection, but what will a person select? Facing a staggering range of alternatives, they will connect with what is most meaningful to them. What seems most important. What is most *relevant*.

Logic **alone** rarely invites
deep connection.

Relevance, often overlooked and certainly undervalued, has emerged organically from this new, unpredictable communications environment as the ideal guiding principle for creating effective communications programs. Merriam-Webster defines relevance as “practical and especially social applicability.” This definition hints at a couple of important truths about relevance: first, logic alone rarely invites deep connection. And second, relevance has social dimensions.



It's about meaning

In simple terms, relevance is *that which provides meaning in one's life*. Relevance is the full experience of a product, brand, candidate or cause, an experience that not only changes minds but, importantly, changes *behavior* – and sustains that change. The new behavior could be buying a product, supporting a candidate, telling a friend, donating to a charity or losing weight.

Relevance is the **full experience** of a product, brand, candidate or **cause**.

Consider the first-year high school student who challenges her teacher: “How exactly is geometry *relevant* to my life?” Her grades suffer until she discovers the thrill of student robotics competitions, which reveal a promising career path. Suddenly, geometry has meaning. It's in the elation of building something wonderful with her own hands and competing with best friends. Geometry has become relevant. The new behavior is rededicating herself to learning it.

The key to understanding relevance is knowing that it's spawned by many factors beyond logic. For example, everyone knows on an intellectual level that smoking is harmful, but that information is irrelevant to a person who relishes nicotine's calming effect, whose friends and family smoke, and who savors the earthy aroma of fresh tobacco.

Relevance is not trendy

Relevance may not be the first concept that comes to mind when considering communications programs. It doesn't wave its hand in your face and make you look up from your smart phone. It's not eager to please. Though imbued with new meaning for a new era of communications, it's a serious, sober word that speaks to the importance of deep, ongoing, honest relationships – meaningful commitments to products, brands and ideas sufficient to change behavior.

The human brain
yearns for relevance.

Nor is relevance a trendy word. Although the formula for achieving relevance may change as continuously as the culture, the relevance imperative does not. It is a time-honored truth in an increasingly pre-fab, disposable world.

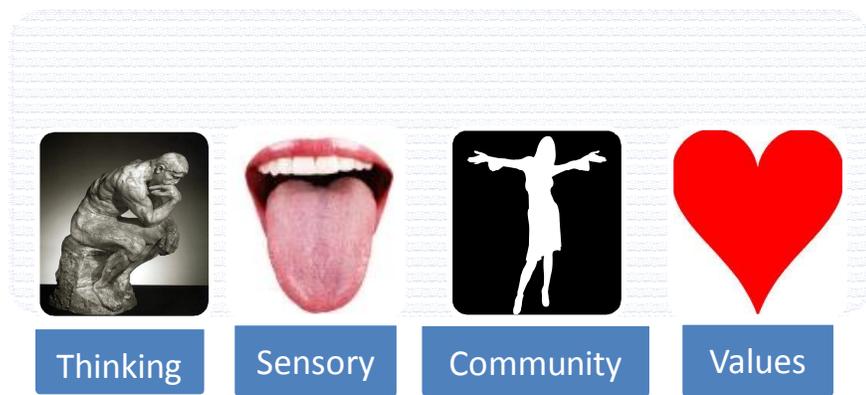
The human brain yearns for relevance. "Attention and thought processes ... automatically turn toward information that seems relevant: that is, capable of yielding cognitive effects," linguistics scholars Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson write in describing their seminal 1987 relevance theory paper¹. "[T]he more [capable of yielding those effects], and the more economically, the greater the relevance."



In other words, the mind is always ready for fresh, relevant content to spark excitement, triggering an infusion of meaning.

Pillars of relevance

The cognitive effects Sperber and Wilson mention are only a fraction of the relevance experience. Although cognition may be necessary for the behavior change communications programs seek, it's not sufficient. Cognition, which we'll call *thinking*, is only one of four relevance pillars. The others are *sensory*, *community* and *values*.



The four pillars of relevance

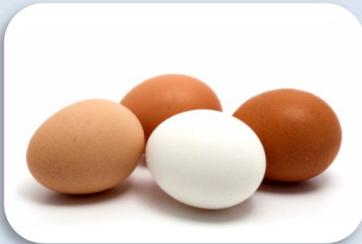
Imagine it's raining and you have no umbrella. *Thinking* tells you you need to buy one. How does each umbrella feel in your hand? That's a *sensory* consideration every bit as important as the thinking. Now, if everyone in your profession carries a black umbrella, you might not find relevance in the pink umbrella with the unicorn on it. That's a *community* consideration. So you want a black one, but which one? It may be important to you that the umbrella was designed with sustainability in mind, that it comes from a local retailer, or is the same brand your father and grandfather carried. These emotional elements reflect one's *values*.

Real relevance

How did shopping get so complicated?

Buying a dozen eggs used to be a matter of white or brown. Today, we have more decisions to make:

Are the eggs organic? Are they local? Are they freshly laid? By free range hens? That are naturally fed? Is the package made of paper or foam? Is it recyclable? Is it recycled or from virgin stock?



Today, a simple purchase has more facets of meaning, and therefore, facets of potential relevance. Today, the packaging material might be the trigger that prompts the sale. Yesterday, it was the mere availability of eggs on the store shelf.

So much more is relevant today it's amazing we get out of the store.

The advertising industry has considered the insufficiency of cognition at some length: “ ‘Rational’ cognitive processes are not the primary drivers of purchase behavior through which advertising operates,” researcher Bruce Hall wrote in 2001. “They are, in fact, outcomes of a complex process of perception, experience and memory, a process that is driven primarily by emotions and feelings.”ⁱⁱ

Similarly, author Simon Sinek stresses the importance of values (emotions) in changing behavior. “**People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it,**” he says. “The goal is to do business with people who believe what you believe.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These nuances only scratch the surface of behavior change.

The relevance challenge

Here are three axioms describing the increasingly steep relevance challenge:

Relevance is more difficult to establish today than yesterday.

Thanks to technology, individuals now have an astonishing array of choices in the marketplace and tools for evaluating them. And people have a greater ability to act on those choices. All they need to do is click on what they want, regardless of where it resides on the planet.

Relevance is more valuable today than yesterday. Because choice has disrupted the conventional merchant/customer relationship, and organizations no longer know where their next competitor is coming from, there is both a greater need and greater opportunity to be more relevant.

Relevance is more complex today than yesterday. Because people have more choices of products, services and ideas – and more access to information about them – the matrix of what is and can be more relevant becomes more expansive. This is the crux of the relevance challenge. Fortunately, the technologies that have complicated relevance can also help us identify, draw out and engage with different elements of meaning.



Real relevance

Smoking out the truth

For decades, antismoking activists warned teens that smoking kills. And teens kept smoking.

Then a few smart adults sat down and got to know some teen smokers. The adults quickly learned that preaching at teens is the worst thing you can do.

Teen smoking is largely about rebellion. Ironically, no institution is more “establishment” than the old-line, buttoned-up, manipulative tobacco industry.



Thus was born “the truth” campaign, which shows teens the ways big tobacco tries to manipulate them.

That was relevant. The teens took the facts about tobacco business and ran with them, rebelling against the industry. This response created a new social norm that smoking isn’t cool.

In just one year, youth smokers declined by 300,000. Since one-third of smokers die of a tobacco-related disease, that’s 100,000 lives saved.

More dimensions of relevance

Relevance gets even more complex. There’s relevance of **content**, **context** and **contact**.

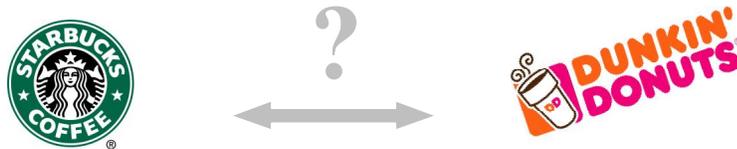
The content of a communication – say, words and pictures on a Web page – is the primary vehicle for delivering relevance to an audience. Context, by which we mean time and space, is another factor. What is relevant in the morning – a double espresso, for example – may not be relevant in the evening. Contact is a third factor: Relevance depends on the communication’s source, be it a child, a doctor, a business or political party.

There are five channels of relevance: family, personal, economic, community and societal. From the perspective of a citizen living in the United States, democratic protests across the Middle East are most certainly societally relevant, perhaps economically (oil prices), yet perhaps not personal. Decisions about what clothes to buy? Personally relevant.

Even more dimensions of relevance

Relevance for any given product, brand or idea also correlates with demographics. Whether one connects with, say, Wal-Mart or Target, is based, at least in the aggregate, on factors such as age, gender, geography, income, education, political orientation, lifestyle, faith, family, and one's outlook on energy and the environment.

Then there is *brand* relevance, a science in itself. Although one can buy coffee and baked goods at Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts, they are two very different brands. At the risk of stereotyping, Starbucks has a particular social relevance – it's a place to hang out, meet and get free WiFi – while Dunkin' Donuts has personal relevance – satisfying cravings.



Even our very selves have varying relevance. A form of relevance-seeking, personal branding, “is the key to personal success, and it's the positioning strategy behind the world's most successful people,” says guru Hubert Rampersad.^{iv}

Yet another interesting dimension of relevance is new media relevance: Communications experts are refining ways to spark online conversations and seed communities to trigger behavior. What was once an art is fast becoming a science.

Relevance needs to hit a moving target

There are five stages of behavior change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance.^v In a study of people trying to change smoking habits:

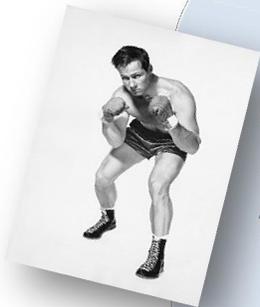
Once in the contemplation stage, people were most likely to respond to feedback and education as sources of information about smoking. Preparation stage folks were committed to changing and seeking a plan of action. Those in the action and maintenance stages were actively changing their smoking behaviors and environments and found that social reinforcers were important. Those who had relapsed were found to cycle back into earlier stages as they geared up to quit again.^{vi}

Similarly, the message to early adopters of a product will vary from that to laggards, as will the message to an energized political base from that to the disaffected voter.

In so many cases, it's just not enough to have the right message. To be relevant, it must come from the right source and arrive at the right time to the right person in the right place.

Real relevance

GM's soul-stirring comeback



If this commercial didn't get your attention, you don't have a pulse.

On Thanksgiving 2010, GM thanked the country for bailing it out with a powerful TV ad showing a fighter getting knocked down, Evel Knievel tumbling across the tarmac, and a rocket falling back to the launch pad.

Then the fighter got back on his feet, Evel Knievel brushed himself off, and a new rocket soared toward the heavens.

"We all fall down," read the ad. "Thank you for helping us get back up."

It was emotional: you rooted for the underdog. It was sensory: you felt like you were taking the knockout punch. It was social: the images flowing across the screen embodied our collective experience.

But did the commercial change behavior? What we do know is GM deliveries in December were up 7 percent over December 2010 and 50 percent over the previous month. Forbes predicted GM's Chevrolet will be a "comeback brand of 2011."

Relevance is the
guiding principle
of our company's
behavior change
programs.

Are you relevant?

As you can see, relevance is a profound concept with major implications for any communications program. In fact, it is probably the new century's most urgent communications imperative. That's why Brodeur Partners has made it the guiding principle of our company's behavior change programs.

Origins of our platform

Brodeur's insights around relevance arise from two sources. First is Brodeur's decades-long fluency in the newest technology, both in using it and promoting it.

Secondly, a fresh analysis of client needs indicates that now, more than ever, organizations require tailored programs that span multiple audiences, and that mix and match the disciplines of branding, communications, PR, marketing, advertising, content, social media and corporate responsibility. Clients need flexible, integrated behavior change programs that drive purchases, downloads, votes, community creation and healthier habits. Brodeur has tailored such programs for decades by buttressing its core integrated communications practice with agile partners participating in its Open Possibilities network.

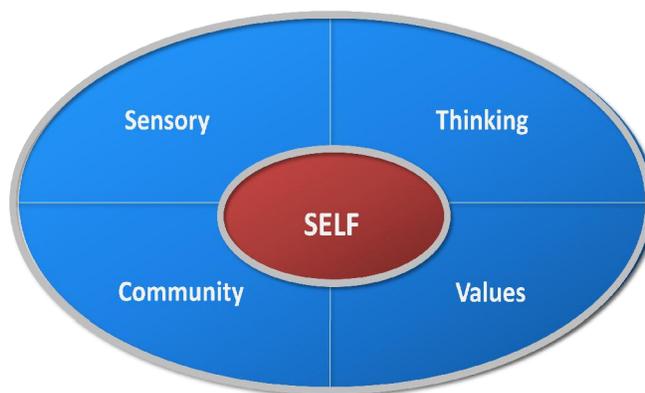
The relevance risk

We understand the danger for an organization that simply assumes it is relevant. While an organization might see steady success today, its customers or constituents may be preparing to switch to other vendors or causes. To remove this risk, Brodeur clients can now pinpoint relevance gaps and trigger their brand's relevance potential through Brodeur's innovative research, methodologies and tools for health care, technology, clean tech, consumer products and social cause organizations.

The **secret sauce** is
mastery of relevance
mechanics.

The secret sauce is Brodeur's mastery of relevance's mechanics. Too often, organizations assume logic alone will prompt a desired behavior. They fail to account for the full experience of emotions, senses and social impulses. Brodeur fills this gap with insights drawn from original research, behavioral science, politics, branding and economics, all combined with common sense.

Brodeur's proprietary diagnostic tools include relevance surveys, structured interviews, indexes, quotients, scorecards and, most importantly, triggers. All are based on the relevance model:



Relevance Model

Relevance research in action

As much as we value the third-party research in this paper, we needed to find out some things for ourselves. That's why we performed our first survey on relevance and the consumer in February 2011. In the survey of 2,022 American consumers, we found that:

- **Many companies appear to have specific “leading relevance indicators.”** Companies such as Apple, Target and Red Bull are distinctively “interesting and exciting.” Ford scores high on values. Google and Wal-Mart are distinctive in their ubiquity and would be missed most if they were gone.
- **Several companies that are much smaller in size and scale appear to be more “relevant” to the consumer than their much larger competitors.** Among the automotive, retail and telecommunications companies we looked at, smaller companies scored higher than industry leaders across five relevance dimensions tested.
- **Companies with high relevance scores appear to correlate with superior growth and performance despite being much smaller than their competitors.** It is unclear whether the high relevance scores lead to superior growth or whether superior growth and performance lead to greater relevance.

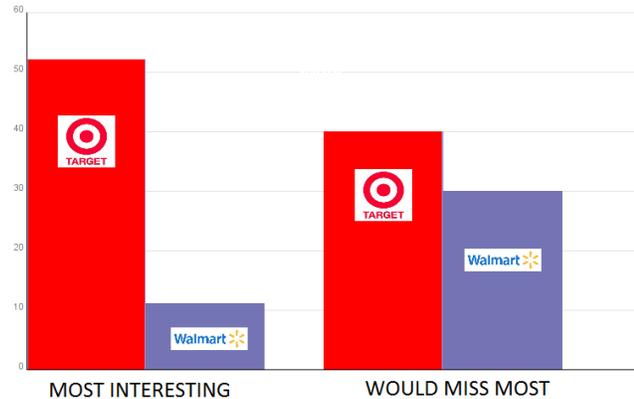


A closer look

At one point in our survey, we asked respondents to consider sets of named organizations in a range of categories and in each case select the **one** that they felt was:

- Closest to my own values
- Most interesting and exciting
- Would miss most if it were gone
- I would most want to be publicly associated with it
- I would most want to do business with it

Here's how Target and Wal-Mart compared:



Source: Brodeur Partners Survey of 2,022 consumers, February 2011

This type of research is even more powerful when we apply it to a client's product, person or idea and its potential market. We discover insights, relevance pathways and potential behavioral triggers.

Getting it done

To execute relevance strategy, Brodeur has developed new services led by pioneers in their field, including:

Brodeur Communications, offering integrated branding, marketing, public relations, communications and social media services. Led by core teams of Brodeur Partners and its subsidiary [Beaupre](#), a leading communications firm jointly operating a clean technology practice with Brodeur.

Brodeur ShiftPositive, dedicated to creating innovative social change programs that advance healthy living, environmental stewardship and other social causes. The group is led by EVP Rob Gould, director of the Washington, DC, office, EVP David Zucker, director of the New York office, and senior advisor Robyn Castellani, all award-winning leaders in the social change field.

Brodeur Digital, harnessing social media and other online tools to power relevant communications. The group is led by Executive Vice President Jerry Johnson and [Joe Trippi](#), one of America's most influential political strategists, known for his pioneering work in digital and social media.

Brodeur Strategies, providing C-level counsel to transform an organization's customer experience. This group, led by seasoned executives from Brodeur and its strategic partners, is steeped in brand planning, research, customer segmentation and internal alignment.

Conclusion

Now that we've explored relevance – its definition, origins, dimensions and implementation possibilities – only one question is left. How is relevance *relevant*? What is it about relevance that makes it a meaningful concept in a noisy world? What makes it worthy of an organization's full attention?

It's time for **authenticity,**
transparency,
humility, mutual respect,
and relevance.

First, relevance focuses on the results: the behavior change. Old-school concepts of awareness and engagement are the potential means, not the end. Relevance is about the ultimate goal – triggering the desired behavior.

Secondly, relevance is right for the times. The world has moved beyond buzz, flash, glitz, shock, schlock and decibels. It's time for substance.

That's why we've made relevance our core product. Our unique perspective will produce unique insights into the relevance – and potential relevance – of your product, brand or idea.

Then we take these insights and cut through the complexity of reaching your audience. We create new pathways to relevance. By following these pathways step by step, you arrive at your destination: the behavior change you seek.



ENDNOTES

i Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1987). Précis of Relevance: Communication and Cognition. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 10, pp 697-710

ii  New Approach to Measuring Advertising Effectiveness,+ Bruce F. Hall; Howard, Merrell and Partners, June 2001.

iii TED Talk, May 2010: <http://tinyurl.com/29nuvxh>

iv  Authentic Personal Branding,+Businessweek interview, Sept. 29, 2009.
http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/sep2009/ca20090929_228578.htm

v Carlo DiClemente, PhD, and James O. Prochaska, PhD
American Psychological Association article, Dec. 3, 2003,
<http://tinyurl.com/4kd5go6>

vi Ibid.

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