CLUE AT THE INTERFACE

THE FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS

Introduced with an accidental book review.

Cluetrain

There's a book which received a great deal of attention in marketing circles when it came out in 2000, the *Cluetrain Manifesto*[1]. The tome begins with a list of 95 theses – statements about how the internet would change business.

The book was published at a time when growth in internet use and computer dependence were noticeably changing our lives. But it was still before the level of dominance that search engines, social networking and do-everything mobile phones enjoy today.

Utopia and hyperlinked people

The authors were talking to the commercial world, in particular marketers and corporate strategists, stating that the internet would radically change how they needed to communicate and interact with their consumers and customers.

They said that the internet would make person-to-person communication so easy, that the effectiveness of traditional marketing and advertising techniques would plummet, because customers would find it so easy to share information and opinion about a company or product with other customers.

An associated concept was the notion that "hyperlinks subvert hierarchy".

This reference was to the connectivity between people and ideas that the internet offers, and that in the future, this would make smokescreens between customers and corporations meaningless.

Reality

We can see now how utopian the *Cluetrain Manifesto* was, though the concepts are no less valid and may still come about.

Yes, social networking, wikis and other Web 2.0 paraphernalia are highly used by large numbers, and their application still grows on a steep curve. The impact

of these types of internet capabilities is what the *cluetrain* was anticipating.

But humans haven't changed much. They still make personal choices influenced by cultural and demographic appeals by corporations, but not so much by councils.

Beyond that, it's all psychology, so the internet has also become the platform for a plethora of powerful and clever ways to understand and target how people respond to a communication and make decisions in response to the pitch.

Public conversations

Now, what has all this to do with Local Government?

If the authors of *Cluetrain Manifesto* had been talking to Local Government like this in 2000, I doubt we would have been inviting them to our conferences and workshops just then. But we might well now.

The internet aside for a moment, the thing that defines a duality is the nature of the exchange between the two parts. *Cluetrain* talked about "human conversations" in a "human voice" as a new form of exchange between corporations and customers, thanks to the internet.

Doesn't that sound familiar? Could that also be said as between Council and community? That's what democracy, services and engagement are about too.

An emerging family

For me, there is a set of Council activities that have the same mother.

They are – governance, community development (including the community plan), corporate planning, marketing, communications, and employee engagement. The mother is the community itself of course, who gives us purpose and things to do.

As it is, our highly accountable organisations tend to be structured to keep these and other functions apart. The brothers and sisters act like services to each other, rather than a whole Council package bearing on the relationship Council has with the community, and how information and ideas are exchanged.

The heart of the matter

I may be biased, but I believe Council marketing and communications departments are at the epicentre of bringing this family together, and there is evidence.

For instance, the exchanges in past months over the LGPro Public Relations Network email group have increasingly been about community plans, Council plan processes, consultation and notably Web 2.0, especially corporate use of Facebook and MySpace for community engagement reasons.

Another way to track the evolution of a profession is through job titles.

In the past year, words such as 'engagement' and 'community' have appeared in Communications Officer titles, and there's been a spate of recruitment of that ilk. Communications Departments with dedicated web and intranet people are now common, but the trend is still growing and there's lots of scope.

The notion of being responsible for two-way communication with the community is now becoming a part of the marketing and Corporate Communications Department's role.

I think the rest of the family will benefit a great deal if this catches on.

What's in a title?

Back to that 'job title tracking' technique, I felt some vindication of my sense that Council marketing and communications was expanding this way when a Public Relations Network colleague of mine got a new job.

Deb Ganderton, former Communications Manager at Bayside and Nillumbik, took on a new position with the City of Boroondara last year as Executive Manager Communications and Community Engagement.

I thought, at last there's someone with a senior communications title that explicitly talked about two-way communication.

So, I asked Deb "what's in a title?"

"Well quite apart from the sheer length of mine which causes some amusement at Boroondara, it heralds to the organisation that 'times are a changin'.

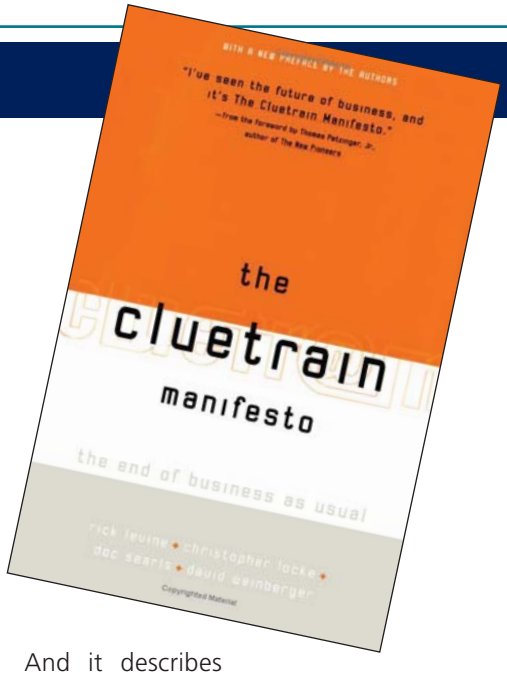
"To establish a senior executive position responsible for communications and engagement lets me influence the way we interact with each other and the community. It is a public statement of our commitment to 'engagement' and listening.

"A title itself doesn't mean much - the work we do and the degree of internal and external engagement we achieve will be the test. I also predict that my title and the names of my departments will shorten and evolve as 'engagement' is better understood."

Taking Deb's final comment to heart and another step, the word communications may itself become secondary.

Clues at the interface

Either way, while some love it and others think it's bunkum, I am a fan of the *Cluetrain Manifesto's* 95 theses because they point out the essence of communication, namely conversation.



And it describes so well how the internet (and intranets) could and maybe should give the public, community, citizens and employees more ways to scrutinize and comment on what corporations and governments do.

If you don't mind the family metaphor, you may wonder how such a silo busting notion could be achieved. This is where the clue comes in. Besides marketing and communications, the kin with the mostest is employee engagement.

The poor partner

Employee engagement, internal communications, line management communications and the social workplace always come at the bottom of the list for time, skills and imperatives.

While major corporations are leading the way with Web 2.0 media as employee engagement tools, Local Government is still blocking staff from accessing anything vaguely suspicious, risky or 'time wasting' on the internet, or they simply don't trust staff to be responsible in this respect.

There doesn't seem to be anyone else around to do the job of employee engagement but the new corporate communicators and marketers. These people are skilled communicating with both the community and the organisation, and will be free to take advantage of all the new technologies we seem to be afraid of.

I feel a Municipal Manifesto of probably 42 theses coming on.

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1 The Cluetrain Manifesto by Christopher Locke, Rick Levine, Doc Searls and David Weinberger, Basic Books (Perseus Publishing) 2000-2001.