

Turning
**Audience
Engagement**
from a *Feel Good* **Aspiration**
to a **Core Business Metric**

SINCE THE DAWN OF THE DISCIPLINE OF MARKETING, linking the intentions of various key strategic priorities and activities with the ultimate measures of business success has been much more faith-based than linear and demonstrable. Advertising agencies struggle to connect the dots between a well-crafted ad placed to draw lots of attention, and the ring of a cash register. Digital activities have progressed the conversation somewhat, by enabling a very robust set of behaviors to be measured, monitored, and linked to a referral, preference or sale. However, they offer little insight into “why” they are able to move the needle on any of the most important intended audience actions.

As an audience engagement firm, Cult Collective has doggedly pursued the intersection where brands and their followers meet on common ground, each benefiting from a relationship with the other, without sacrificing anything either holds dear. The firm’s first foray into understanding and reporting on the catalysts behind this ideal brand/audience state culminated in the book [*Fix. Break the Addictions that are Killing Brands*](#), which details the six core principles a brand needs to embrace if it wants to build a cult-like following. This paper intends to outline the tenets of the next important thesis in this pursuit.

Cult believes that, to understand and affect the motivations which drive people to behave in the most positive and mutually beneficial manner with the brands in their lives, we must study, measure, and embrace a metric that is the ultimate engine for meaningful audience behavior: *Engagement*.



TORONTO, CANADA - NOVEMBER 3, 2017: People line up to buy new iPhone X at the Apple store in Eaton Centre.

To understand and affect the motivations which drive positive behaviors, we must study, measure, and embrace the ultimate metric: Engagement.

This paper outlines three key factors in the study, practice and measure of audience engagement:

- 1. What is audience engagement?**
- 2. Why does engagement matter?**
- 3. How is engagement measured?**

WHAT IS AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT?

The debate about engagement—what it is and why it matters—is a surprisingly new topic of conversation. Forrester Research first introduced the idea of a CEA (customer engagement agency) as the primary practitioner of engagement in 2012, with the following prelude:

Forward-thinking agency leaders are adding services and changing how they approach the marketing ecosystem, shifting from a traditional campaign-centric view of the world to one of continuous customer engagement. We call this emerging class of providers “customer engagement agencies” (CEAs) and define them as: Agencies that focus on defining customer-oriented business strategies and mapping them to tactics and execution. They help clients maximize customer profitability and optimize customer experiences by applying data and analytics to every interaction. To be clear, we don’t believe that a true CEA exists today. But CI and marketing leaders are pushing their vendors to develop skills that drive business strategy and help CI take a seat at the executive planning table.

This description suggests that the discipline of audience engagement serves two masters: The audience, as defined by how they desire a personal and ideal experience with brands; and the marketer, as defined by how they can best come to understand audience expectations, and in turn cater to these desires in a profitable manner.

What has contributed to the debate is a level of confusion about the term “engagement,” which stems from marketers and agencies using it to describe different things. The term has been interchangeably used to explain:

Engagement Strategies:

a different approach to marketing

Engaged Behaviour of an Audience:

participation of the audience with the brand.

Engagement as a Metric:

that describes attitudinal (feelings and beliefs) alignment between the audience(s) and the brand

The intention of this paper is to focus on the topic of engagement as a metric, while recognizing that all three of these are worthy conversations, and interconnected.

In order for us to measure engagement we first need to agree on what we are measuring, and with so many practitioners offering conflicting descriptions, let’s start by explaining how Cult defines the measurement of engagement: It is the application of a quantitative measure that reflects the commitment a person feels towards a brand, based on shared beliefs and heightened levels of attachment and advocacy, resulting in mutually beneficial behaviors.

The theory and importance of measuring audience engagement, in particular using Cult’s proprietary Audience Engagement Scoring system (AES), competes with older approaches including brand likability metrics and Net Promoter Score (NPS®), as well as newer models like brand attachment. None of these other models offer the robust set of actionable information as AES.

LIKABILITY

Likability has been a cornerstone of marketing message and product testing for decades. At its heart, these

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studies explore metrics of trust. Some have even deconstructed the word “trust” to represent five key measures: truth, relevance, unselfishness, simplicity and timing. Together these components of trust-building can provide clues for brands to become differentiated, coveted and successful, rooted in being likable.³

NPS®

NPS®, (Net Promoter System or Net Promoter Score) uses a simple question about someone’s likelihood to recommend a brand to a friend or colleague, to extrapolate current and future success. NPS provides a gauge for the degree to which a brand’s audience is loyal, but in order to understand what is driving this loyalty, you must probe further.⁴

BRAND ATTACHMENT

Brand attachment is derived from the brand’s success at creating strong brand self-connections by gratifying, enabling, and/or assuring the audience. These successes are themselves contingent on the effectiveness of marketing activities to foster a strong brand connection through an ideal strategic brand model. Brand attachment is often seen as an academic exercise that struggles to translate into deployable marketing insights and tactics.

In contrast, Cult’s AES approach helps brands understand and measure key emotional attitudes and their affect on a person’s relationship with a brand, today and in the future. AES uncovers key emotional drivers of advocacy, in a way that is clear, meaningful, and most importantly actionable. Cult has created a proprietary approach to our audience studies that allow people to reveal attitudes about their core feelings—which we believe are universal to any brand, and a longer list of beliefs that are prioritized

into the top drivers for a given category or brand. It is these feelings and beliefs that underpin any and all meaningful behaviors an audience will take with a brand.

Emotional attitudes like feelings and beliefs can be pretty fuzzy, subjective thoughts. They are not easily prone to quantification. Even audience-centric marketing research practitioners, like Olson Zaltman, will explain that it is impossible to ask someone to rationally explain how they feel, or what they believe about a brand. But if you know the right questions to ask, how to ask them, and what to avoid, you can.

In his seminal book about consumer behavior, *How Customers Think*, Gerald Zaltman explains a few of the most important myths about consumer research that need to be avoided when conducting engagement research to explore a person’s attitudes, including: “consumers think in words”, “consumers think in a well reasoned or rational, linear way”, “consumers can readily explain their thinking and behavior” and “consumers’ memories accurately represent their experiences”.

For these reasons, it’s important to understand that the attitudes which constitute the engagement an audience holds with a brand is largely subconscious. These

attitudes need to be revealed, not stated, in connection with a conversation about the relationship a person has with a brand. Sometimes this exercise needs to enable people to use imagery, or metaphors, to describe their feelings and beliefs.

AES helps brands measure the effects of emotional attitudes on a person’s relationship with a brand, uncovering key drivers of advocacy, in a way that is clear and actionable.

WHY DOES ENGAGEMENT MATTER?

Many companies and organizations only measure their success through easily obtainable and tangible metrics like sales, business leads, “likes,” shares, donations, foot traffic, etc. Some of these, notably sales and leads, are sensible metrics to pay attention to, because they typically reflect the profitability and health of the business at the time. But they don’t always tell the whole story. In fact, Cult believes these “hard metrics” can be, not so much measures of success, as they are symptoms of a much more important metric: Engagement. Hard metrics such as profitability and sales are lagging indicators of business health, whereas engagement is a leading indicator of future business health. If you strengthen audience engagement, you strengthen your ability to affect and deliver future business success metrics.

It’s more typical of category-leading brands to place importance in audience-centric metrics and leading indicators, although not nearly as broadly and across all key dimensions as Cult believes they should. Apple is the obvious example to reference, and they’ve employed a key metric—starting as long as two decades ago, for measuring and understanding how engaged their customers are. It was “How much more will an Apple loyalist pay for an Apple, than a Dell loyalist for a Dell, IBM loyalist for IBM, etc.,” a wonderful example of quantifying an emo-

tive preference where it means the most, in connection with a transaction.

Another example is Avis who, not long ago, fell in brand loyalty rankings and experienced declining customer satisfaction scores. To their credit, it prompted them to examine all aspects of a customer’s rental experience, but using non traditional techniques like passive video capture, with a research team comprising a futurist, psychologist and cultural anthropologist. The team interpreted body language, voice inflection, and verbiage used in key emotional moments, as well as conducting in-depth interviews not only with customers but staff too, to understand what improved engagement should look like.

It helped them understand that, well beyond speed of service, cleanliness of the vehicles or convenience factors that Avis has previously focused on, they needed to address the customer’s emotional need to reduce the stress and anxiety associated with travel to improve engagement. This single finding drove multiple operational improvements, like adding video monitors with flight departure times and gates at vehicle drop off points, installing larger doors to accommodate oversized luggage, and training security guards (renamed “customer courtesy representatives”) to emphasize driving directions over checking drivers licenses.

Cult has established with AES its own protocol for identifying what engagement looks like between a customer and a brand, how a brand can benchmark and measure the

By strengthening audience engagement, organizations can strengthen their ability to affect and deliver business success metrics.



Amazon’s focus on long term measures of customer advocacy and engagement instead of traditional short term measures have contributed to the brand’s explosive growth.

By connecting engagement to someone's predisposition to behave in an intended way towards a brand enables marketers to understand the future business impact if they can improve the factors that define that engagement.

effects of various activities on specific dimensions of engagement, and how these metrics can become a predictor of future success. The key to this is an ability to make the connection between a person's engagement with a brand, and their predisposition to behave in a specific and intended way towards that brand. This enables marketers who study and measure engagement to begin to understand the impact not only of engagement on their business today, but also the future impact if they can improve the factors that define that same positive engagement.

HOW IS ENGAGEMENT MEASURED?

Engagement, at its core, is about the ability to affect a person's choice. Matthew Willcox eloquently argues in his book *The Business of Choice*, that before a consumer becomes a customer, they are a chooser. A marketer's job is to help influence their choice. So what is it that defines a person's subconscious attitudes about a brand, that then influences their conscious choice, and ultimately affects their behavior?

Many experts, like Jerome Kagan in his book *Surprise, Uncertainty and Mental Structures*, contend that as much as 95% of purchase decisions are made subconsciously, and rationalized after the fact. Cult believes there are a short list of core subconscious emotional attitudes of "feelings" that define the relationships people have with brands. These attitudes are at the heart of our AES metrics.

The process of uncovering engagement should be intentionally simple, and not taxing for the study participants. In some instances, we can conduct a two to three minute survey of no more than ten questions to uncover how people feel, what they believe, and how strongly these feelings and beliefs drive their relationship with the brand in question. Our approach enables people to reveal, rather than state, their perceptions, and can be used with any audience, internal or external.

A typical question in our engagement survey is:

ON A SCALE OF 1 (NEVER) TO 10 (ALL THE TIME), HOW DOES (BRAND NAME) MAKE YOU FEEL?

- **I can count on it.**
- **I like how it treats people.**
- **It delivers what it promises.**
- **I believe it will make up for a mistake.**
- **It's earned my trust.**

With a question like this, we are much more interested in the derived meaning of their responses than the stated answers. What do their responses reveal about how they feel, and what they believe? For example, people who rate "I like how it treats people" are more likely to represent a community who place the feeling of "respect" high on their list of brand expectations.

The process of analysis, through several filters including community clustering (to identify predominant and opportunity audiences), and audience journey mapping (to indicate both rational and emotional expectations at each touchpoint of the journey) allows us to benchmark engagement, and identify the key drivers that have contributed to a brand's success to date, or should become the focus for future success.

All these processes allow the assessment of not only who the ideal audience is and how they feel or want to feel, but also to understand the underlying expectations and motivations that support their intentions with brands, and to monitor how well the brand is doing at affecting positive engagement over time. For this reason, we encourage ongoing tracking of AES to understand how specific dimensions of engagement are positively affected, as a result of whatever audience relationship improvements the company or organization introduces to the marketplace.



SCHERERVILLE, INDIANA - SEPTEMBER 23, 2015: People eagerly await the opening of a new 40,000 square foot Whole Foods Market.

Ongoing AES tracking reveals how specific dimensions of engagement are positively affected by new improvements a brand makes to the audience relationship.

CONCLUSION

Cult believes that studying, measuring and affecting audience engagement can be the most important decision your company or organization makes for the long term. The most meaningful behaviors of every audience member your enterprise depends on for success, internal or external, are driven by the degree to which they are engaged with you. The sooner you get a handle on audience engagement, the more solidly you build the footings for success with every other measure you hold important.

Once you fully commit to pursuing these metrics, understand that engagement is a composite of emotional feelings and beliefs that your audience holds, and that they are almost always arrived at subconsciously, so you need to embrace a research methodology that allows

them to be revealed, not stated. As importantly, pursue an understanding of the ingredients that drive each dimension of engagement. Otherwise, the study of audience engagement is a hollow exercise that may result in a composite measure of your audience's engagement at a moment in time that is nothing more than a vanity metric.

Finally, measuring engagement should be an ongoing process, so you can understand how your decisions and activities are affecting it, ideally in real time. Find an approach that helps you make important connections between engagement intelligence, and operational excellence. If you follow this path, the pursuit of audience engagement knowledge could become the inflection point of your brand, and your career. ■

1. *The Evolution Of The Customer Engagement Agency*, Forrester Research, February 2012.
2. *Brand Attachment: Constructs, Consequences, and Causes*, © 2008 C. W. Park, D. J. MacInnis and J. Priester.
3. *Likeonomics: The Unexpected Truth Behind Earning Trust, Influencing Behavior, and Inspiring Action* © Rohit Bhargava.
4. www.netpromotersystem.com © Fred Reicheld and Bain & Company.

THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENED MARKETING STARTS HERE.

Cult Collective helps brands win a sustainable competitive advantage by focusing on proven platforms that drive customer and employee engagement, and forge fanatical loyalty.

Learn how we keep brands relevant and remarkable by visiting us at cultideas.com or email us at enlightenme@cultideas.com



Marc Whitehead

Marc Whitehead is a chief engagement officer at Cult Collective. His view of the world has been informed from an eclectic mix of work environments; multinational ad agencies like BBDO, small independent communication agencies he started himself like The Hotbed, and specialty branded content creators like Fresh Baked Entertainment. He's collaborated on communication efforts of all scales and types, from global product launches for brands like Apple and Miele, to national advertising campaigns for Fairmont Hotels and Celestial Seasonings teas, to branded web series for J&J and McDonalds, all with equal aplomb.

His experience is firmly rooted in the disciplines of strategy and planning, which has served as the catalyst for finding new, more effective, and truly authentic ways for people to bond with their favourite brands. For example, he introduced groundbreaking research techniques for several Wrigley product innovation projects (Brand Keys loyalty study, Synectics deprecation study).

His penchant for early adoption fueled his embrace of digital technology, dating back to when the Internet was in its infancy. In 1990 he became the first employee at McKim Advertising to test the idea of using a laptop personal computer in a day-to-day work setting, and in 2007 he drove to Buffalo to acquire an iPhone months before they came to Canada, in honour of the work he did as part of the global team developing its predecessor with Apple—the Newton.

Marc is a regular panelist on Bob Knorpp's acclaimed weekly BeanCast marketing podcast, and speaks on a variety of research, strategy and audience engagement topics around the world.

e: marc@cultideas.com **t:** [@CultIdeas](https://twitter.com/CultIdeas)