

Keynote, Wednesday 21st July 2010 10am Mark Earls

Mark Earls is widely recognised as one of the world's leading planning thinkers about brands, branding and human behaviour. Mark's background is in creative agencies (he was planning director of the revolutionary St Luke's (1998-2001) and Chair of Ogilvy's Global Planning Council until 2006) but he has long argued for a revolution in how the industry goes about its business (which hasn't always made him popular). He is currently working independently out of the UK with a range of clients, trying to put the insights about human behaviour and how to shape it from his book, *HERD*, to work in a new kind of marketing – one based on understanding and harnessing our social or 'HERD' nature. Recent client projects include: Unilever (global), Bacardi-Martini (US, Spain and global), Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (US), The Edrington Group (US and Spain), UK Department of Health and Ministry of Defence (UK), UKTV (UK), Inter-IKEA (Europe), Greenpeace, The School of Life (UK but soon to be in NYC). Mark's written work has won lots of plaudits and awards from marketing, market research and management science. Blog: <http://herd.typepad.com>

The 'social marketing revolution' is happening in a number of different parts of the marketing world. It's a fundamental rethink of how we do what we do, and how what we do has an impact on the audiences that we want to market to, or ideally with.

Social marketing is not marketing for social causes or about the social issues, for example, health issues. There's a school of marketing called social marketing which deals with that. It's not that, nor is it specifically to do with social media, although as we'll see the new technologies that are so ubiquitous in our world are part and parcel of revealing ourselves.

'Social' means that it is about our social nature. Like all good marketing it's based on insights into human beings, into people. It's not technology itself that's shaping this, nor is it some ideology that's shaping it, it's insights into real people.

[Mark begins by showing a clip of a Mexican wave.] Dirk Helbing of Zurich Technical University has a team of anthropological researchers who go around the world to football stadiums filming not what goes on the pitch but what happens in the crowd. The 1986 World Cup was the first time this really came outside Latin America and appeared in the UK, from that World Cup and it's now everywhere.

What happens is that individuals respond to the person next to them and that's how it spreads through a crowd. In the northern hemisphere it tends to go clockwise and in the southern hemisphere it tends to go the other way. Mark was confused in the Sydney cricket ground to see a Mexican wave coming the wrong way.

[Delegates are encouraged to do a Mexican wave]

It's interesting, that before doing something like this people often feel slightly anxious but when it's done they think that was fun. There's evidence that whether it's religious ritual or other ritual practices, when people do something together in sync it actually increases feelings of wellbeing. What's happening is 'co-ordinating' – one of the great signs of how good we are as a social creature. Why is this social stuff with people learning from each other becoming really important?

Technology

The first thing is that technology is revealing us to be a fundamentally social creature. Four hundred years ago, Galileo and a bunch of other amateur astronomers were using really simple technology to observe the sky. The technology wasn't important, but what it showed about human beings was really important and changed our culture forever. It showed that far from being at the centre of the universe, we, in fact, lived in the equivalent of a forgotten lock-up on a rundown industrial estate in a provincial town in a country that land forgot. That's cosmologically speaking how important the human race is.

The technology that is ubiquitous in our world is connected. A decade ago we sent no texts – it's now six billion a month in the UK alone. That degree of connectivity tells you – and there's been very little marketing or advertising to encourage people to do it – tells you how much we like connecting with other people.

Proving impact

The second thing is it's becoming really clear that the old models that underlie traditional marketing approaches and some of the new ones just don't work like they're supposed to. If you visited London in the 70's, 80's and early 90's you might have seen Stanley Green in Oxford Street. Six days a week he marched up and down giving a message to have less promiscuous sex, eat better and take more exercise. He had absolutely no impact on the population. Most marketing struggles to demonstrate any impact. We can say that, because we're all friends here and we abide by Chatham House rules.

Change management changes mostly nothing. I've got a load of T-shirts and photographs from away days and off sites and management planning sessions for the new organisation, and nothing really changed. Occasionally you remembered there's a new budget and a title for a person three changes ago, but you can never quite work out who that person is or what they're supposed to be doing, but three re-organisations ago they were put in that job.

Then there are governments, bless them. Governments struggle to demonstrate any lasting impact of their activities on citizens' behaviour, whether it's crime, whether it's health. It's a really big issue in Whitehall for the last few years, behaviour change; they know that they struggle to make any impact.

Explosion of science

The final thing is the science has just exploded. Who here has read things like the *Tipping Point* or *Blink* or any of those Gladwell books? Anyone read *Nudge*, which is the bible of behavioural economics? So there has been an explosion of lots of these non fiction books about human behaviour.

It seems that virtually every article about human behaviour, in every document about human behaviour, including the ones produced by the Cabinet office, go like this, 'it's now widely agreed that we are a fundamentally social species'. Not a species of individuals like we tell ourselves, who kind of like to hang out with other people like ourselves, the other 499 arts marketing experts that are in the room. It's not just a bit social, we are a fundamentally a social species.

We live in more complex and larger groups than any of our close cousins. We are supremely adapted for a world of other people, which is just as well. Thomas Shelling won the Nobel Prize for economics a few years ago and he said that most human life consists of individuals responding to a context of other individuals' responses to a context for the individuals who were there in the first place. All our life is largely other people. Freud said that you can never escape the other – our lives are largely other people.

So just as well then our mind turns out to be a social mind. A social mind, a mind adapted for a world of other people, not, as we'd imagine for rational independent thought, but for a world of other people. We are supremely adapted. There are things called mirror neurons that help us understand instinctively what other people are up to and feel what other people are feeling and help us learn from other people. Robin Dunbar who teaches at Oxford now has demonstrated there's a direct correlation between the sizes of primate brains, the neo cortex in particular relative to your body size, size of your brain and the size and complexity of groups in which you live. In other words, our minds, that we think are about rational calculation and creativity are in fact evolved and adapted supremely, primarily for living with other people.

It also turns out that this embedded social creature is rarely independent. Another Nobel Prize winner, Daniel Carnerman says human beings and independent decision making are like cats and swimming, they can do it if they really have to. Much of the stuff we imagine we think actually is shifted in time by our mind to make it seem as if it's causal. Jeff Goldblum said in that great 80's reunion movie, *The Big Chill*, 'don't knock post rationalisation, don't knock it, post rationalisation is more important than sex'. When did you last go for a whole week without a really juicy post-rationalisation of your own behaviour? We do it all the time, we do it to ourselves, we do it to our partners, we do it to our colleagues, we do it to our therapists, we do it to our parents and we do it to market researchers. When asked what we do we make sense of it after the fact, mostly we just do stuff and then do it and most of it's not independent.

Because here's the big deal, the really big insight about human nature which changes how marketing has got to be: Not only are we embedded in social situations all of our lives, but much of what we learn we learn from other people, the big stuff and the small stuff. It's seen to be so important by social scientists now that some have suggested that we change the name of our species to *Homo Mimmicus*.

In a scene from a 21-year old movie showing Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal in a deli in New York, Meg Ryan's making all these strange noises and at the end, where Meg Ryan's head finally hits the table and she stops whimpering, a woman at the next table leans over to the waiter having observed this experience and says:

'I'll have what she's having'.

Louder.

'I'll have what she's having'.

'I'll have what she's having'. All our lives are about 'I'll have what she's having'. That creates a pull through populations, it's how things spread. It's not only how each of us do what most of the time, because it's cheap and it's easy, it allows us to focus on other people and it gives us other social benefits in evolutionary terms. But it also allows things to spread through populations, which is what we want to do, we want people to do stuff. We want the thing to spread through populations and the social learning thing is the key mechanic behind it all and that's why we need to get to grips with it.

Unfortunately, our ways of thinking in marketing and management and policy are already unhelpful. On a Microsoft whiteboard in Richmond in the US there was this view of how marketing really works: in the top left corner is a circle representing the all-powerful company; in the bottom right corner is a stick man representing the helpless and grateful consumer. An arrow flows from the company to the consumer and written on that arrow is 'data streaming' – i e: 'streaming data at people'.

It showed how most marketing assumes that there's lots of individuals out there, acting independently from each other, thinking about stuff, thinking about whether or not to go to our show or another show, to engage with this or the other and then we do stuff to them, as if they were independent of each other, as if they were dis-embedded somehow from the social world, as if there was no social learning going on.

But even the more enlightened of us have identified influential individuals in social networks, but we just use them as like mini broadcasters for our traditional marketing stuff, so these are influential people who other people listen to. So that doesn't really help either.

This is something that got sent around last year from a dance music festival in Calgary:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GA8z7f7a2Pk>

Colin is trying to get everyone to dance and he tried several times interestingly. Now if you go to this kind of music event you'll know that there's always a weirdo guy with his shirt off. Sometimes he has a friend and sometimes you'll see he has a fat friend. Like I say most of the time people sent this to me and said, look, you've got to watch this, it's the crazy original guy'. Here comes the fat friend. Okay, something will happen in a moment which changes the view that people had of this and what they described. You'll see three or four people arrive at once and that's where the thing really takes off, that's where the crowd really kicks off. Remember it's not Colin, he's not unusual and it is not the dance that Colin's doing that's unusual, nor is it the music, because these things are all constants and he tried it again and again and again and only on this one occasion did it actually work. And the one occasion it actually works is when it went from three guys, weirdoes, freaks, suddenly to eight, and you suddenly get what the American political commentators call momentum, suddenly everyone is going that way. That's people responding to stuff, not him.

This goes back to a school of psychological research called *conformity research* and one of the fathers of it from the middle of the last century is a guy called Solomon Asch. He did an experiment where you take an individual like you, into a room of other people and you say 'look, it's a simple question, see the line on the left, which of the three lines, A, B or C, is closest in length to the line on the left, A, B or C?'. We all know what the answer should be. However if everyone else in the group says 'B', by the time it gets to you a significant number of people, whichever way you conduct the experiment, will go 'B'. Now there are lots of reasons for that, one is it's embarrassing to disagree with all these other people, they must have spotted something, I don't know, did I understand the question, they'll all think me stupid. But there's also a genuine, 'I don't know, B? They all seem to think it is B'. We use other people's minds like that.

Now, conformity research has always been about how people can persuade other people to do stuff. If you've got kids or if you have any people reporting to you in your team you'll know how difficult it is to get people to do the thing that you want them to do through persuasion. What it's really about is the propensity of the guy on the left or you, madam, to accept what other people are doing and copy it. That's the mechanism and that pulls stuff through the population. Excellent. So that's the pull and not the push and that's at the heart of what, I think, this conference needs to be thinking about, that mechanism. Social learning pulls things; our approach in marketing is pushing. Let's learn to work with the pull that exists everywhere, all the time in peoples lives and see how our marketing tools can be made to rework that way.

Now, we hate the idea of people copying each other, we love the idea of originality, the creative individual and we hate the idea that we ourselves are just copying other people. *HERD* was so named to be provocative and Mark has had a lot of abuse about it, not least from his publisher saying, 'but people don't want to think of themselves as a herd', but that's the point.

'Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.

Oscar Wilde

This is Oscar being suitably and appropriately disdainful of people copying other people. Most lines are quotations from the lives of others and it's true, we find it really embarrassing when copying actually comes out. Last year there was a thing on the Internet (<http://bit.ly/autEn8>) that shows how James Cameron (*Avatar*) and his team, accidentally found themselves remaking *Pocahontas* – accidentally – because they didn't mean to.

Alex is a collaborator, an academic who specialises in how names spread through populations. His son Archie was born last year and the name Archie was up to some debate. All the way through the pregnancy he and Emma, his wife, were arguing about an original name, 'let's be original about it, I can't possibly find myself copying, it must be original, because I've written about how everyone copies each other, so it must be original'. And it was all going fine, eight months in they decided if it's a boy it's going to be called Archie, if it's a girl it's going to be called Lily. So the first mother and baby group that Emma went to after the birth of Archie had three Lilys and three Archies.

How did that happen? It's because it's in the air, we know other people, it's in the air and we're copying, even without realising. We don't know we're doing it.

Some of the social science behind that is this: Andy Meltzoff did some classic research in development psychology at Princeton – 'baby gurning research'. He takes a baby or infant and holds it in his arms and then makes a face at it and sees – there's someone over his shoulder photographing – how accurate the gurn is reflected back and how often. What he discovered was that human beings copy better, they copy earlier. He got a human child to respond at 42 minutes and that's much, much younger, several days younger than with other apes.

One of the things that has been learnt in a recent cross-cultural study in Africa and Australasia, is that humans carry on copying even when there's no real benefit, there's no food or reward or anything, we just carry on copying, we're like over-copying machines. All kinds of things are shaped by copying; we've managed to demonstrate this in a huge number of different kinds of markets and aspects of human behaviour. The names we give our children is an obvious one, we mentioned that; the clothes we wear; things like tattoos, (Mark did some work a few years ago and sat in the Miami Ink Studio down in Miami South Beach and watched people come in. They were all imagining they're individuals, that's what they told the researcher outside, but the ink artists could tell exactly what these people wanted and where); the friends we have; music – it is likely that a lot of arts actually work this way.

There's a famous study by Duncan Watts, who is a senior research scientist at Yahoo, who's a fantastic sociologist and he did this download experiment. He took kids who like unsigned guitar bands and split them into three groups. Sample A, they get to listen to let's say ten, twenty songs by unsigned bands they've never heard before and they get to download a certain number of them. Sample B is the same, except they get to see what other people have downloaded, what the popularity ranking is. Sample C is the same, except that the researchers sneakily inverted what the popularity ranking is.

- Sample A gives you a really weird plot, which you never see in the real world of popularity, however many times you repeat the experiment with sample A.
- Sample B, you get the long-tailed distribution, that Chris Anderson has written about and we see it on Amazon and we see it everywhere in music.
- Sample C also get the same shape, but weirdly the things that were seen to be most popular from the lying, cheating researchers have now become the most

popular.

It shows you that the music itself is something that we choose and buy because of what other people seem to be choosing.

Ari Versluis is a Dutch photographer at www.exactitudes.com/ and he goes all round the world and finds people dressed in a certain way, takes a shot of them in a particular stance and then combines them with eleven shots that he's taken of similar style in the same pose from different cities. So – all these people are completely unique and individual with their Mohicans and everything.

The point of brands is not for you to make a rational individual choice, the point of brands is to make it really easy for you not to think very hard and the prime power of brands is they help us see what other people buy. Popularity is a key strand of what makes a brand successful. Where we live is based on where other people live, people like us. A great book if you want to understand American politics called the *Big Sort* by Bill Bishop, published a couple of years ago, which shows how this has led to the extreme polarisation of American society.

Things spread through entire populations. Some great work done by Nick Christakis and James Fowler, two American health researchers in a book published last year called *Connected*, which shows how obesity is socially influenced by the people you hang out with, what their social norms are and how they behave.

In Framingham Massachusetts over 32 years individual patient records of health indicators and their social connections were studied. Watch what happened in the study here: <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMsa066082>. The yellow dots are obese people. You can see they become more and they become bigger and they become more important and more clustered around the centre of the network. It becomes obvious that if you want to stay thin, avoid stout people as friends. You're 57% more likely to become obese if a friend of yours becomes obese.

We've known for a long time that things like suicide spread through population in the same way. Emile Durkheim, the father of modern social science wrote a book in the first part of the 20th century called *On Suicide* and he demonstrated very clearly, very simply – no computers available to him – that suicide spreads through population by people copying each other. When we think of the recent outbreak in Bridgend in south Wales we blame unemployment, we blame drugs, we blame the internet, we blame the Labour government and the Iraq war. But frankly we've known for a long time that the spread of this through a population is largely a social thing.

Virtually every kind of technology spreads through the world through social means, tractors spread across the US by people seeing other people using them. When Barnham the great circus man wanted to get people excited about this circus, he did events in towns, sent the elephants ahead, got people to see other people being excited and that led to the circus parade.

There's a great story about the village, the town of Samsø on a tiny island outside of Copenhagen, which recently became energy independent and while there were a couple of people who started encouraging others to think about this, it became part of the social fabric and a kind of informal competition to become more and more visibly energy independent grew up.

Outside Ohio, Monroe on Highway 75, there's a church that had a hundred foot high statue of Jesus rising from the dead. In June it got struck by lightning (read the story <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/9786>). Now the terrible, godless folk on Twitter got

very excited about this, there was a big spike, so everyone heard it and it came on the one feed that everyone got which was all very exciting. That essentially everyone had got it from same external source, but it spread through populations by people copying each other. Mark knew this is the case as he's done statistical analysis that shows that that is social learning. Marketers should worry less about the initial impact and more about how we get people to tell the story to each other, how do we get them to shape each other's expectations, how do we get them to see what other people are excited about, that's what marketing needs to be about in the future.

There followed an exercise involving delegates choosing a partner and seeing who could get their partner off the ground the most times.

- Learning point 1: The most successful couples worked together. Stop thinking about marketing as doing something to people and do it with people instead.
- Learning point 2: Note how quickly everyone started copying the most successful execution of the exercise when others started to solve the problem. If each couple was persuaded to do it separately, think how long it would take. Harness the herd mentality.

Katie Kovec from New York built robots with no navigation. How do you get them across the Central Park area? Create a space for humans to do stuff with them. They have a little flag which says 'I would like to go to ...' and a smiley face on them. Katie has created an amazing opportunity for humans to come in and do the navigation, you don't need to build the navigation in, you just create it in such a way that people want to spread it further. There's video footage on her blog about how people engaged with it.

The point is we need to find ways to get people to do the spreading for us, and build the space in to allow them to do that. If we imagine the audiences for our products as being fantastic, social creatures who are really into other people how can we get between them and those other people? That's the space, the new social marketing needs to work in, between people. Not between us and them, between people.

How can we help people spread stuff? Amazon does it already, so you know some of these tricks, sixteen features on every Amazon product page which show you what other people think, do and what alternatives they've done. If hotels want to increase the proportion of guests who comply with their request to be kind to the planet by re-using towels by between 25 and 50%, they just have to say that most people who stayed in the room chose to recycle. It's easy then, they don't have to think about it – oh ok, that's what we do around here.

Another example of stuff in the space between people is iPod. Apple are genius, there's a wonderful white logo that's back lit that I never get to see when I'm using my laptop – it's for you, not for me. Similarly the white ear pieces, they're not for the users, they have no technical function whatsoever beyond what they obviously offer, they're no better than anything else. Normally the iPod itself is not on show, it's normally hidden, but these were very different at the time, and that's why they spent most of their marketing budget drawing attention to how cool these things were, so every time you see someone on the train, the bus or the plane with them, that's that.

There's a third idea, which is again between people, it's called social object theory and there's lots of this on my blog about it. You make a thing, an experience with your marketing which people can interact with each other around. It's not that the thing itself does something to people, it's an excuse for people to interact together. Tate commissioned a wonderful game called *Tate Trumps* from Hide and Seek, which turns the experience of gallery visiting at the Tate for teenagers into a game. It radically transforms their experience of it, in the same way that IBMs iPhone app this year changed the

experience for Wimbledon-goers of what they could see and how they saw it, interacting with other people.

Marketing has become not just marketing, not just a stunt, but it becomes a service, it becomes actually useful to people. Indeed, it gets to the point where it actually changes the product that we're selling to people and changes the experience fundamentally. This, in the arts world, creates all kinds of issues about who's the creative owner and what the intent of the creative folk in the part of it are, but I think we need to get over ourselves and explore this stuff more.

The Daily Telegraph bought the story of MP's expenses in the traditional way that newspapers buy the story and they dripped out the story of who's been doing what for about three months, until it one day all of the data was going to be revealed. The *Guardian* have been forced to follow this for a while and decided to create an app for their readers. They basically crowd sourced the analysis, stage one and then did it again subsequently to get more detail out of it. Twenty five thousand people took part in this rapid thing, they created a new content for the paper and a conversation and a sense of community around that. It was an interesting experience trying to get journalists to work with this, telling the story over time rather than having 'here's the front page splash', but rather working with the reader over time to develop the story. That's a skill we need to develop in our arts marketing with our audiences on the outside as well as with the creative people inside.

A final note, particularly in this time of financial restrictions: 'why did Susan Boyle get to be so successful? She's not got the best voice in the world, nor is it an unusual combination of good voice and a rather unattractive physique, nor is it that she's had a particularly tragic life story. So why her and why not anyone else? Why did she become one of the US's top-selling recorded artists last year, why? Chance. You couldn't have known ahead of time, so you have to place lots of bets. We have to learn as marketers, about using this between space, we have to try stuff, try lots of different things and see what happens. It's hard to tell to people who own the money that we're doing that, but it's the only way really to make sense. In fact it's riskier to just have one big bet.