

The beauty of things that don't scale

Why tomorrow's
marketing must be
smart – and romantic





By Tim Leberecht

Succeeding the broadcast era, the smart and hyper-connected age bore a smart model of marketing that quickly adapted to ever-changing market circumstances. Everybody strove to be the Google of their category. Think of Zara, the fashion retailer, and how it created entire apparel lines on demand. Or the rapid-response Old Spice video ads that perhaps marked the pinnacle of the “Your brand is a Conversation” paradigm that the Cluetrain Manifesto had so clairvoyantly predicted in 2000.

The marketing mix ideally had to change every day, every hour. From the reassuring consistency of their messages, marketers moved to the vibrancy of conversations, from differentiation to ubiquity, from big moments to an array of small hyper-targeted, results-driven interactions.

Smart marketing crowdsourced and democratized – it was inclusive, open, agile and conversational. It became “newsroom marketing,” with community managers replacing campaign managers, and a growing cadre of journalists joining marketing teams as “content strategists” to drive and join social media-amplified stories.

A new romantic era

Now, a few years into this brave new smart world, we're slowly beginning to realize what we are losing in all that incessant chatter, with corporate conversationalists on either end. When everything that's said is recorded and exploited, when everything's explicit, rehashed and hashtagged, we lose a sense of aura, exclusivity and elation.

When everything is predictable and automated, we abandon the thrill of strangeness outside of our “filter bubbles,” of unfamiliar experiences that have the potential to disrupt our daily lives and grant them an awesome shock of meaning.

This new demand for meaning has dramatic effects on the economy of attention that constitutes the marketing arena. We like convenience and comfort, but we also love brands that offer us unexpected beauty and friction. We look for rebels who punctuate our routines and offer us not just purpose and personalization, but a heavy dose of punch-drunk love.

We want experiences that are unique and precious – experiences that can't be scaled and must not be optimized either. In other words, we want romance, the ultimate insurgent in a regime of maximizers and optimizers.

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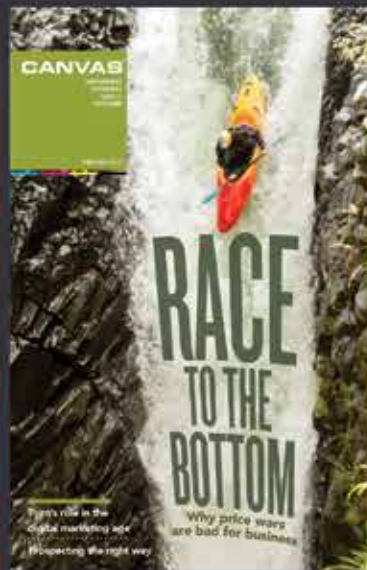
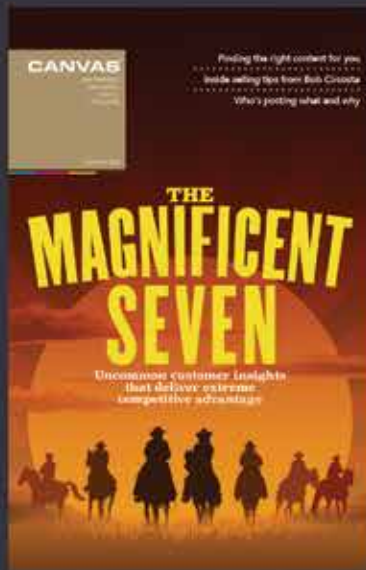
The power of the unknown

Brand consultancy Landor proclaims the new branding paradigm of “TMI” (too-much-information), but I think the opposite is true: We secretly appreciate the allure of not-enough-information. For the very moment we know too much is the end of romance.

New Yorkers recently were all buzz about a secret club dubbed the “Spring Street Social Society.” The club's mission is to bring strangers together in “unexpected spaces” around a cabaret-style artistic program.

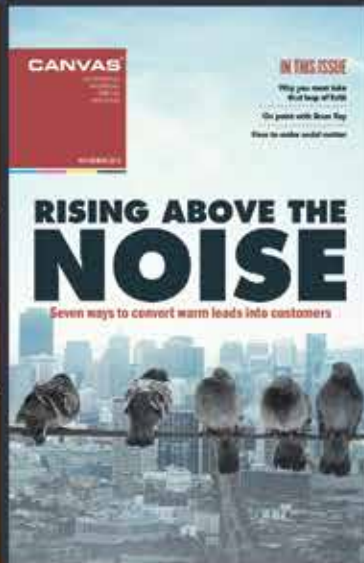
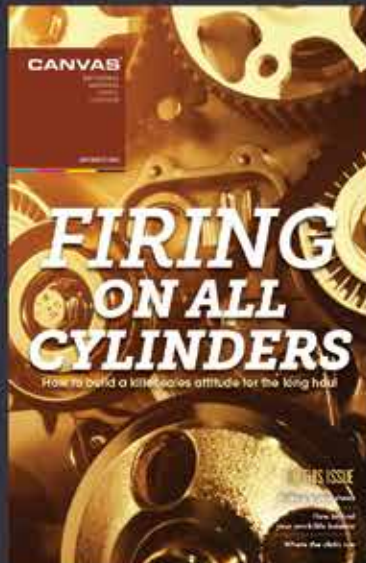
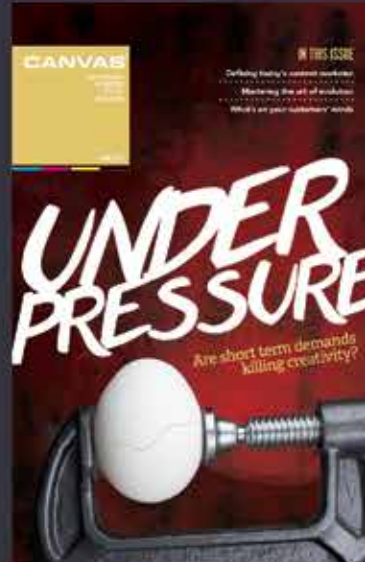
UK-based Secret Cinema operates in similar territory, showing interactive, participatory “mystery screenings” of seminal movies, from “Casablanca” to “Blade Runner” to the “Grand Budapest Hotel.” Movie and locations are disclosed to viewers only on short notice.





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Fabien Riggall, Secret Cinema's founder and CEO, says he wants to bring the romance back to the movie going experience and provoke strong emotional reactions. He is driven by the desire "to create a spectacle, a dream, another world we can play with, how the world might be."

Both companies have taken the practice of "unboxing," known from tech products and fast becoming a critical ingredient for online retailers, and have made it the product (even leading to the trend of un-boxing videos as a new marketing format).

The unwrapping of gifts is more valuable than the gift itself. In a time when transparency is the norm, mystery attracts the utmost attention. Transparency dwindles against the thrill of the curtain-raiser – and the even greater thrill of the curtain staying closed.

In the end, it doesn't really matter which movie Secret Cinema is showing. In the smart age, the algorithm was a secret. In the romantic age, the secret is the value proposition.

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Intimate and beautiful

We are witnessing the return to intimate experiences at human scale, to unique, singular moments that don't (need to) scale. Take, for example, dinner series such as Death over Dinner series (no one dies, but all guests converse about the dignity of a good death), or Kitchensurfing, an online platform that connects chefs and diners for private dinner gatherings.

Or take the recent buzz about Ello, which positions itself as the anti-Facebook, as its pure, more intimate, and denser alternative that goes deep before it goes wide. Ello's manifesto – with its warm, human tone – was a big part of its appeal and initial explosive growth.

And Somewhere, a new professional online network, offers a romantic alternative to LinkedIn. Instead of linear resumes and an accumulation of credentials, it treats our work identities as stories, allowing users to present about their unique talent and personality rather than proving that they fit (in).

Romantic brands serve as idiosyncratic curators of the strange, eccentric and whimsical. Other examples include "concept shops" such as Broken Arm, which are becoming popular in Paris, with cafes, curious items, clothing and a desire to make the shopper think. Or Maria Popova's Brainpickings blog, a "human-driven machine for interestingness," as she calls it, which serves as a tastemaker recommending select books and articles to her loyal readers.

Both services resemble the good old hotel concierge and, are in essence, the anti-algorithm: collected by humans for humans. Accessible, personal and highly subjective.





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Our un-quantified selves

All these brands are wrapped in an air of nostalgia, a strong desire to connect back to a true sentiment, a profound truth that we may have lost in the busy comings and goings of our hyper-connected work lives. They are a yearning for something greater than our quantified selves.

However, romantic marketing doesn't mean a backward model of marketing that is purely based on sentiments and intuition. It's not an "amour fou," as the French call it, the pipe dream of an unreasonable mind, devoid of strategy and calculus. It doesn't want to simply return to archaic pre-data truisms.

Rather, it will remain bipolar, yet more accentuated than before. The challenge and the opportunity ahead will be to create "smart romanticism" – using the data and intelligence at the marketer's disposal to create romantic experiences rich with emotion and meaning that honor our un-quantified selves.

The sweet spot for both consumer and enterprise brands will be to reconcile smart technology with the imagination of a romantic. Why not combine Big Data and big ideas, big science and big dreams? Why not usher in what William Gibson's cyberpunk 1984 novel "Neuromancer" projected as the marriage of cyberspace and romance, as, according to one reviewer, "a fusion of the romantic impulse with science and technology?"

Innovative marketers always have used both science and art, but the smart-romantic ones now do so not to demystify but to mystify, not to make everything explicit, but to create mystery and moments of inexplicable magic. They leave room for serendipity, because they know that if it can be

engineered, it's not a brand. They don't market just to move products; they do it to make meaning; not simply to generate impressions, but to impress themselves on the world.

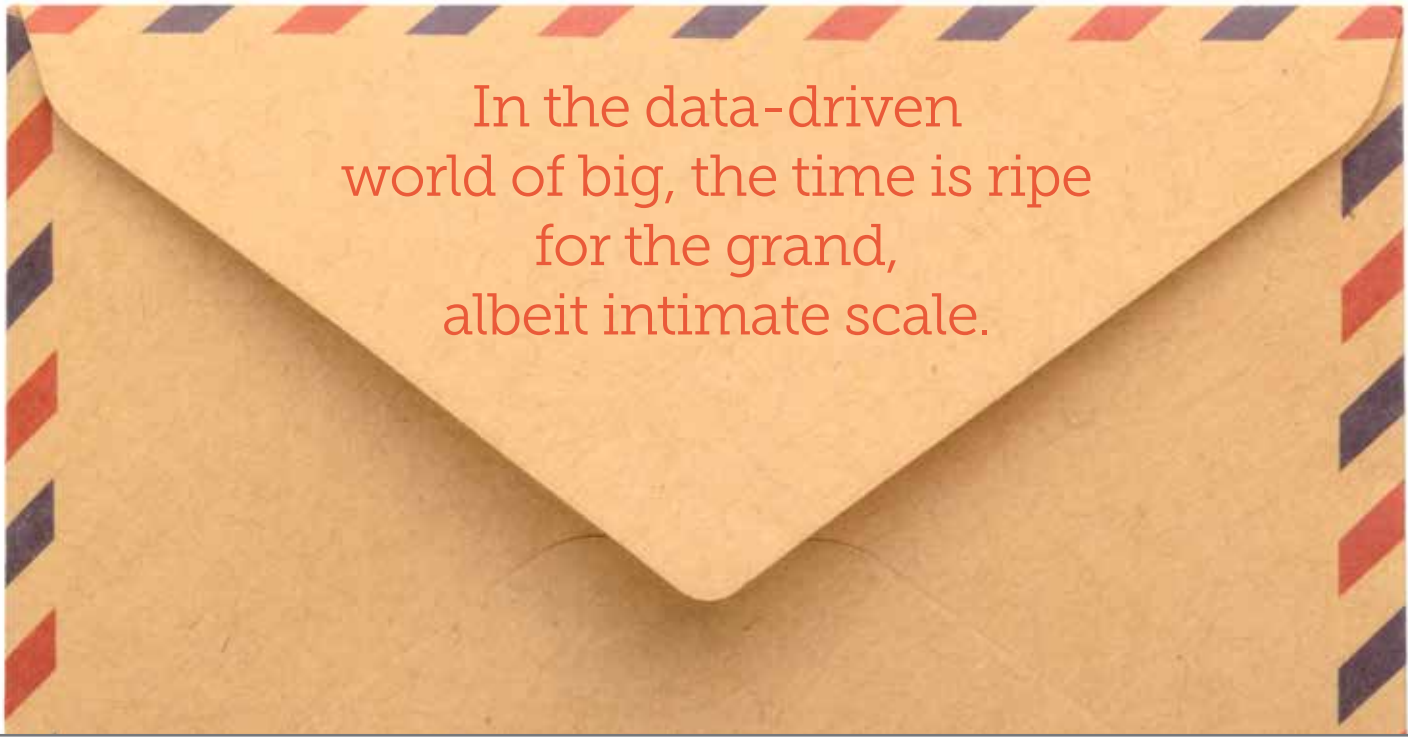
The ultimate hack

We are indeed experiencing another "great disenchantment," a term coined by the economist and sociologist Max Weber in 1919. Datafication seems to be pushing us to another trigger point for a new romantic counter-movement, this time heralded by the new poets, the new meaning-makers, of our time: marketers.

Like no other discipline in business, marketing has the power and responsibility to be the great enchanter, a modern medicine man, a magician rather than a data scientist or spreadsheet bureaucrat. Marketing can again provide us with the hope (or the beautiful illusion) that another life is possible. But this time, the beautiful illusion is even more important, because data and transparency are designed to constantly disillusion us. When maximum clarity and objective truth narrow our options, creating alternate realities is a truly humanizing act.

In the data-driven world of big, the time is ripe for the grand, albeit intimate scale. Heavy sentiments in small moments, niches that offer the great escape. As a powerful escape artist, marketing can lead the way. It can be the haven for misfits, pirates, renegades, rebels, poets or mash-up artists, and cultivate mysterious sub-plots to the streamlined, algorithmic meaning-making machines.

In this new digital-romantic age, it is – to borrow a term from William Gibson – the "ultimate hack." ■



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Tim Leberecht is the author of the book, "The Business Romantic: Give Everything, Quantify Nothing, And Create Something Greater Than Yourself." He also is the founder of The Business Romantic Society, a global consulting network focused on helping leaders create beautiful brands and high-performing cultures. His TED Talk "3 Ways to (Usefully) Lose Control of Your Brand" has been viewed by nearly one million people. He serves on the Values Council of the World Economic Forum. For more information, visit www.timleberecht.com