Business is in flux. We suffer from disorientation wrought by technological change. Convention has been upended, and the digital world—a universe of bits and bytes, atomistic fragmentation that mocks tradition—is all variables, no constants. The rise of search engines and e-commerce has changed the balance of power between marketers and consumers. In May 2013 the *Financial Times* warned, “Algorithms threaten to end ‘Mad Men’ era of TV ads.” Marketers, traditionally expert in product development and brand messaging, are now expected to decipher the meaning of statistics flowing from “machine-to-machine connectivity.” And, given the dizzying pace of innovation occurring in cyberspace, reasonable people can ask: Across unsettled high-tech terrain, is the term *digital expert* an oxymoron?

CEOs look to the beast itself for salvation, intoxicated by the promise of new ways to maximize return on investment. A typical *Business Insider* headline: “Big Data Can Help Marketers Unlock up to $200 Billion.” Buzzwords abound: *CRM, cookies, digital ecosystems, experience optimization, platformization, algorithmic customization*. The advertising world is experiencing unprecedented
tumult. In the midst of a digital big bang, the advertising giant TBWA advocates disruption to its clients—that is, the unsettling of category convention to achieve competitive differentiation—whereas Publicis Worldwide wants brands to “lead the change.” But what change and how?

DIGITAL SALVATION?

Digital technology offers an infinite—and intimidating—range of ways for brands to engage with consumers. Connections can happen in real time. Brand communications can be transformed into brand journalism, with social network feeds providing consumers with relevant news as they go through their day. Branded apps—from Trailhead, The North Face’s hiking path locator, to Allergycast, Johnson & Johnson’s pollen index counter—transform passively received propositions into actual services. Brand promises flower into three-dimensional experiences.

The gamut of possibilities on this new commercial landscape is almost infinite, too broad for simplistic solutions. More important, the range of strategic imperatives confronted by various product categories is vast, and their needs are incompatible with a paint-by-numbers manual. One thing, however, is certain. Regardless of whether it is cola or computers being sold, the exploding array of digital channels presents increased opportunities to connect and confuse. Unless marketers master the timeless rules of brand building, they will get nowhere. In a hydra-headed digital world, the ultimate commandment of marketing still holds: Consistency is golden. Without long-term ideas behind it, the latest data-mining technique, augmented reality app, or search algorithm will be lost in the background buzz. Technological adventurism will never replace solid, coherent conceptual craftsmanship.

Ideas that stand the test of time are not quaint. Yes, the digital realm presents exciting challenges. But in that excitement it’s
too easy to forget about the consumers themselves—the desires that drive them and the role brands play in their lives. Remember, consumers too are often baffled by technological change. They are also drawn to brands with clear relevant propositions. Back in 1917 J. Walter Thompson, founder of the eponymous advertising agency, a company that celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2014, uttered these enduring words: “Somewhere in your product, or in your business, there is a ‘difference,’ an idea that can be developed into a story so big, so vital, and so compelling to your public as to isolate your product from its competitors, and make your public think of it as a distinctly different kind of product.”

The dazzling new kaleidoscope of choice and the pressures of a hyperconnected, “always on” digital lifestyle has left more than a few people unsettled. This includes many marketers charged with leading some of world’s greatest brands. In an effort to avoid being branded traditional or obsolete, advertising and marketing professionals fall prey to technological temptation. We furtively deploy the latest or hottest digital innovation without fully considering the basics of brand strategy or message consistency. Consumers end up more confused and less loyal.

In the midst of this disorientation, order can be especially reassuring. The practice of marketing may be evolving, but the fundamentals of brand building are the same today as they were fifty years ago—the so-called golden age of advertising. Now more than ever, strong brands command price premiums. Now more than ever, strong brand ideas produce profit.

Only the brand idea—the long-term relationship between consumer and brand that remains steady yet evolves over time—can resolve the tension between traditional brand-building imperatives and the opportunities unleashed by technology and widespread consumer empowerment. Clearly defined yet dynamically interactive, it remains the sine qua non for both consistent messaging and engagement between consumers and brand. Traditional brand building is
top-down, articulated by the manufacturer and fueled by message clarity and deep understanding of consumers’ motivations. The new opportunities offered by technology are bottom-up, unpredictable, on the street—of, by, and for the people. Brand building has existed since the dawn of the industrial revolution; the new opportunities are entirely twenty-first century. Yet they need to coexist within the same discipline.

Plenty of qualified authorities are available to guide readers through the challenges of modern marketing. I am neither a so-called digital expert nor a creative guru. But, as CEO of JWT Asia Pacific, I have had the good fortune of partnering with dozens of clients, both multinational and local, many of whom have succeeded in establishing strong brands in the world’s most dynamic commercial environments—and some who have not. If I have learned one valuable lesson, it is this: Anxiety is not productive. Brands can “lead the change” only when their marketing executives have the confidence to go back to the future and rededicate themselves to timeless marketing principles.

**THIS BOOK’S CONTENT:**
**FREEDOM WITHIN A FRAMEWORK**

It’s time to take a deep breath. With the brand idea as its epicenter, *Twitter Is Not a Strategy* is designed to forge order from chaos for both marketers and consumers. I offer a four-part framework that unifies conceptual and executional essentials, demonstrating that the brands that address these issues most effectively will always reign supreme, boasting the highest margins and the most loyal consumers.

In the first two chapters I discuss the rise of brands and how digital technology impacts lives and consumer marketing. From video games to social networks that provide new platforms for self-expression to the Uber app that connects passengers with drivers for
hire at the tap of a button, the digital world has yielded an explosion of lifestyle opportunities and consumer empowerment. Few people sit passively in front of the television waiting for commercials to interrupt them with information. New technology is two-way, and it enables ongoing dialog between brands and consumers who now demand a voice. They expect to be heard and join in on the fun—with brands whose advertising is as involving as any of their other entertainment options. And consumers want to be rewarded for loyalty. They don’t want to be talked down to.

This is the essence of the new engagement—consumers want more than a messy short-term affair. Engagement is now more like marriage: long term (that is, consistent in message), enriched by dialog between consumers and manufacturers, and providing concrete benefits for both parties.

Engagement needs to be both authentic and constructed. Marketers must forge a paradigm that allows freedom within a framework, pulling off the trick of simultaneously permitting consumers to participate with brands while empowering marketers to manage the message and dialog. In *Twitter Is Not a Strategy* I outline a simple-yet-nuanced process to grab the holy grail of marketing: harmony between the clarity of top-down positioning and the dynamism of bottom-up consumer engagement; between long-term brand equity and short-term tactical messaging; and between emotional relevance and results elicited by data-driven technology. I address this in four interconnected modules, two conceptual and two executive, which build upon one another: consumer insight, the brand idea, engagement ideas, and the engagement plan.

**Consumer Insights:**
**The Human Heart and Profit Margins**

Technology is not changing humanity; rather, it’s empowering people to satisfy their timeless urges in new ways. For this reason insight
Twitter is not a strategy

into consumer behavior—the secret sauce of power brands—has never been more important. Insights are more than observations; they explain the fundamental motivations behind behavior and preference. They answer the question “Why?”

The best insights spring from conflicts, or tensions, of the heart. Teenagers want to avoid alienation but also assert their individuality; adults want to maintain autonomy but avoid isolation. Tension can arise between competing human truths—aspirations that unify all of us. Or they can be between competing cultural truths, yearnings that differentiate clusters of people. (The desire for engagement with society is different in, say, Confucian China or Buddhist Thailand than in individualistic America.) Or the tension can be between competing human and cultural truths.

Consumers spend more time with brands that help resolve their conflicting desires. The role of such brands in their lives will be greater, and pricing can be adjusted accordingly. Insight into consumer motivations—for example, understanding why penny-pinched but status-conscious middle-class Chinese will pay a premium for goods used in public but not at home—is the font of robust profit margins. This truth is increasingly ignored as we dream of salvation through the latest app or data-mining technique.

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