

ISSUE 81 WINTER 2015

BEST BUSINESS BOOKS 2015: MARKETING

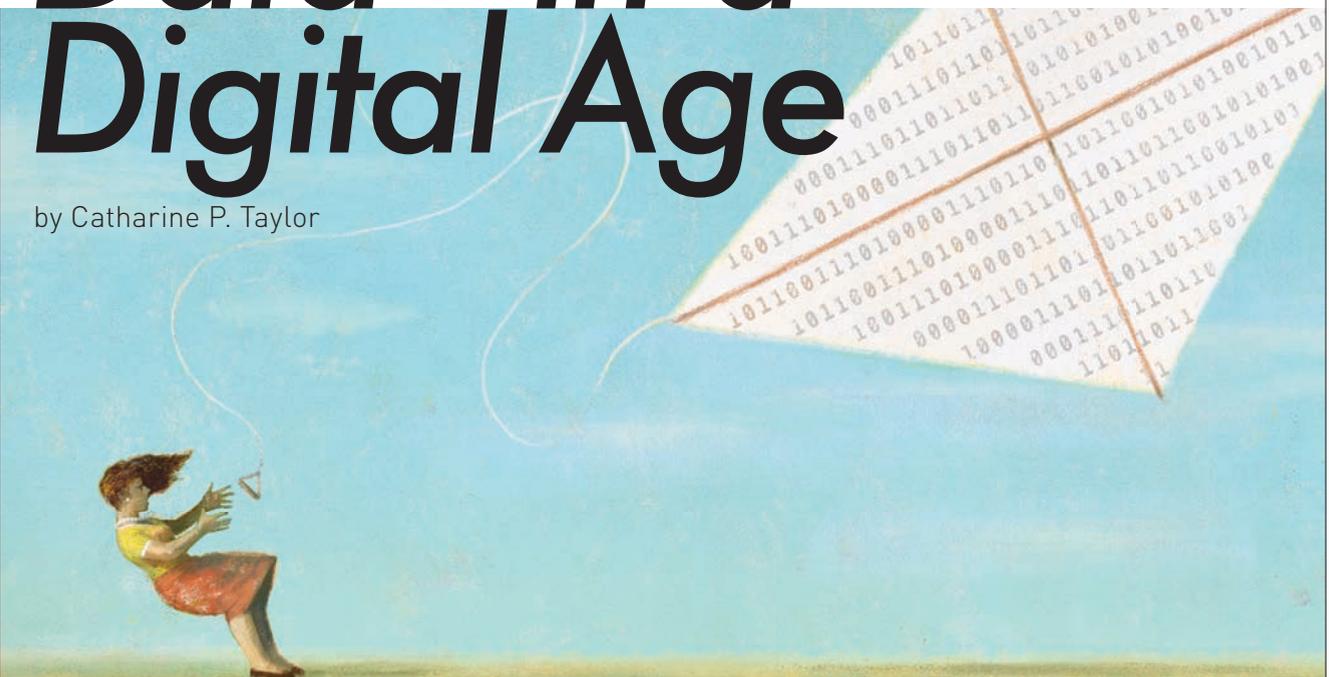
# Capturing Attention — and Data — in a Digital Age

BY CATHARINE P. TAYLOR

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best books 2015 | marketing



Ben Parr, **Captivology: The Science of Capturing People's Attention** (HarperOne, 2015)

Shane Atchison and Jason Burby, **Does It Work? 10 Principles for Delivering True Business Value in Digital Marketing** (McGraw-Hill, 2015)

Anna Bernasek and D.T. Mongan, **All You Can Pay: How Companies Use Our Data to Empty Our Wallets** (Nation Books, 2015)

**I**T OFTEN SEEMS as though book authors, who work on that most analog of platforms, have been obsessed in recent years with the technology that may make their traditional product obsolete. This preoccupation with the digital future is particularly noticeable when it comes to books about marketing. Virtually all the good ones published over the past decade have focused sharply on the digital revolution. There's simply been so much to learn about best practices, tools,

and new ways of reaching customers. At times, it seems as if little else matters; certainly little else gets much attention.

Which is as it should be. A medium such as the Internet, which has been transformative for the consumer experience, was bound to be just as transformative for advertisers. More than 20 years after the advent of the World Wide Web, it's hard to remember a time when marketers didn't have digital strategies, or when most

consumers used dial-up modems. It's time to wrestle with the ramifications of a digital age that, if not fully mature, has certainly progressed through adolescence. In one form or another, all of this year's best business books on marketing grapple with what has turned out to be not just a change in media consumption, but an overwhelming cultural shift. They go well beyond the basics of Internet marketing to help us reach a more sophisticated understanding of the opportunities — and perils — of deploying immensely powerful digital platforms to reach customers.

### Grabbing Mindshare

*Captivology: The Science of Capturing People's Attention*, by Ben Parr, isn't positioned as a marketing book. But it does deal with the most fundamental struggle in marketing: how to get noticed. Thus, it's an indispensable read and the most compelling of this year's bunch. For all of today's immense targeting capabilities, every marketer still lies awake at night wondering if anyone out there is paying attention to his or her company's products and services. There is no such thing as a captive audience. *Captivology* is a well-timed antidote to this particular reason for insomnia.

*Captivology* is the best marketing book of the year not only because it contains deep insights, but also because it is immensely enjoyable. I got the feeling that Parr wrote it mostly out of his fascination with the topic, and his enthusiasm shows. It also helps that he is an experienced journalist. Parr worked at Mashable in various capacities from 2008 until 2011 — including serving as its coeditor — and also did an 18-month stint at CNET as a columnist and commentator.

Parr first became interested in the capturing of attention through his work as a managing partner at DominateFund, a Silicon Valley venture capital firm, a position he's held since 2013. Early on, he realized that “what [startups] really wanted was our expertise in dealing with the press, developing marketing campaigns, building viral products, optimizing customer acquisition, and connecting with Hollywood,” he writes. “In other words, they were coming to us for help getting attention.”

The book inspired by this insight is a well-structured and exhaustively researched look at the hooks that grab us. Parr helpfully classifies them into seven triggers: Automaticity, Framing, Disruption, Reward, Reputation, Mystery, and Acknowledgment. I won't detail how each works here, but after marinating your mind in

Parr's research, you will find yourself looking differently at your own behavior. Next time you find your attention swiveling toward an ambulance rushing down the street, you'll think, “Ah, it's the Automaticity Trigger!”

Parr's book is so, well, captivating because it's relatable. Despite being a member of the Silicon Valley intelligentsia — he gives a special shoutout to Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg in his acknowledgments — Parr doesn't write as though the whole world revolves around Palo Alto. Rather, he delves into studies from a range of disciplines over the last century that reveal the mysteries of human nature, using real-world examples. Steve Jobs garners praise for championing simplicity (the Disruption Trigger). But Parr also ropes in less obvious cultural signposts such as actress Vivien Leigh, cookbook author Betty Crocker, and even Anthony Weiner, the ex-congressman whose career was ended by some ill-advised tweets, to illustrate his points. In the chapter on the Reputation Trigger, Parr contends that Weiner ruined his reputation to the point of no return not simply by tweeting photos of his genitalia, but by initially claiming it was the work of hackers. According to *Captivology*, why people do things is as important as what they actually do — and that's a timeless insight.

Case in point: a fascinating study detailed in the chapter on the Reward Trigger. Male Harvard student participants were broken into two groups — unbeknownst to them, called Meaningful and Sisyphus. Each team was asked to build Lego Bionicles, and they received a small sum for each model they completed. In the Meaningful group, each completed Bionicle was placed in front of them, and the models piled up satisfyingly as they continued to build. But the moment the Sisyphus group completed a Bionicle, it was disassembled. The Meaningful group built far more Bionicles before quitting — and that gets to the heart of how and why rewards grab our attention. It was the combination of extrinsic rewards (the money) and intrinsic rewards (the feeling of accomplishment) that served as a powerful incentive. At root, *Captivology* works because it brings the technology-addled marketing mind back to the basics: figuring out what makes people tick.

### Miles Away from Mad Men

*Does It Work? 10 Principles for Delivering True Business Value in Digital Marketing* follows a much more traditional news-you-can-use formula. But it is remarkably effective. The authors, Shane Atchison and Jason

Burby, are global CEO and president of the Americas, respectively, of Possible Worldwide, a WPP-owned digital agency.

Because Possible, a rollup of several fledgling digital agencies, is only about four years old, keep in mind that *Does It Work?* is marketing too. The agency's positioning dovetails with the book's ethos: Great marketing is great only if it meets business objectives. "Possible is a creative agency that cares about results," intones the first line of the company's description on its website.

Fortunately, the book delivers. From the start, the authors write directly about digital marketing's failures. The authors chastise advertising culture for doling out awards for highly creative, but ineffective, work. Atchison and Burby open with a data-driven takedown of "Dumb Ways to Die," the 2012 Australian public service video that, as of this writing, had 107 million YouTube views, not including the countless spoofs, spinoffs, and sequels that made it a meme. It also, according to the book, won more awards at the industry's most self-congratulatory annual event — the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity — than any other campaign in the event's history.

The campaign's goal was to make sure people didn't do potentially lethal things in and around trains on Melbourne's Metro system. But it didn't work! The authors' thorough look at the statistics showed there was virtually no change in dangerous incidents between 2012 and 2013.

That example — bolstered by a deep analysis in the book's appendix — exemplifies the rigor with which Atchison and Burby suggest advertisers and agencies analyze their efforts. Throughout their discussion of the 10 principles in the title, which range from setting business goals to ensuring that your organization continually optimizes campaigns, the authors pound home the message that data-grounded focus is the key to making things work.

*Does It Work?* is at its best when discussing the (too-often forced) marriage between data and creativity. Professionals in the two disciplines have long eyed one another suspiciously, with the creatives prone to feeling

that data geeks' sole purpose is to hamper their creativity. Atchison and Burby argue that data should do the opposite. "We believe that data can deliver powerful moments of truth that can inspire creativity, encourage bold ideas, and allow you to hang on to your vision in the face of subjective opposition," they write. A client who realizes that an edgy idea is rooted in data may be more willing to give it the green light.

One of the book's stronger case studies shows how Netflix's bold decision to develop the expensive (and, as it turns out, popular and critically acclaimed) series *House of Cards* was the product of just such a strong marriage. Before ponying up US\$100 million for the

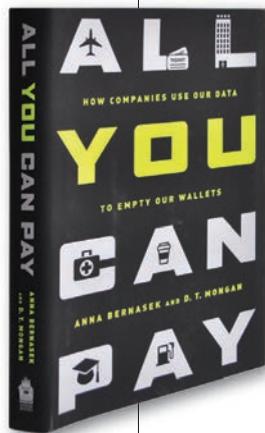
first two seasons, the streaming service looked at user streaming data to uncover the popularity of its proposed director (David Fincher) and lead actor (Kevin Spacey), and the original, British version of *House of Cards*. Not only were all three popular, it appeared, but there was also a notable correlation among users who liked all three. Now that a successful fourth season has aired, there's no doubt that Netflix made the right decision in picking up the series.

At times, *Does It Work?* tries to do too much. It's difficult to discuss every aspect of measurement while also sandwiching in a principle or two about creating a good work environment and hiring great digital talent. At the end of each chapter, the book usefully includes a list of questions under the heading "Does It Work for You?" that help bring that chapter into focus. When readers feel they're swimming in too much information, those questions should anchor them.

### The Limits of Data Mining

Netflix's successful mining of user data to construct the *House of Cards* phenomenon is the kind of effort that would send Anna Bernasek and D.T. Mongan, the authors of *All You Can Pay: How Companies Use Our Data to Empty Our Wallets*, scurrying into their doomsday bunker. So why does a book that rages against data mining — a standard marketing practice — make the best business books list?

It's because, while the marketing industry holds up data as the holy grail of the discipline, consumers —



# At least in e-commerce, customized pricing is possible. But that doesn't mean it will happen en masse.

thanks to repeated data breaches and Edward Snowden — are becoming ever more data-aware. *All You Can Pay* powerfully illustrates why so many consumers are waking up. Of the three books reviewed here, it's certainly the most provocative, even if it's not always right.

Bernasek, a veteran financial journalist, and Mongan, a lawyer, hold that the escalating amount of data that companies have about individual consumers is being used not just for increased customization of products, but also for increased customization of pricing. The mass market is over.

Healthy markets — such as what used to be the mass market — are relatively transparent; both sides have a good idea of what a fair price is. But the authors say the trend toward mass customization has been accompanied by an increasing asymmetry of information. Because of the data consumers incessantly (and often unwittingly) spew about their preferences and private lives on Facebook, Google, Amazon, and elsewhere, companies now know much more about consumers than consumers know about the companies. Ultimately, that means that companies know how much individual consumers can pay, and they charge accordingly.

“If you think companies won't use the growing knowledge they have about you to extract higher prices, think again,” the authors write. “In many small and big ways, companies already take advantage of your trust. With more sophisticated data extraction and analysis, exploitation will only get easier, cheaper, and more pervasive.”

So-called dynamic pricing, the mechanism that makes umbrellas more expensive during a rainstorm and flights more expensive during the holidays, has been with us for decades. But the picture painted in *All You Can Pay* is far more insidious. Theoretically, if Amazon knew you were better off financially than your next-door neighbor, it could charge you more for a pair of Nikes. One of the book's best passages is its analysis of college financial aid. In theory, tuition is transparent: It's posted on every university website. But prices paid by students vary widely. The family of every student coughs up boatloads of financial information, and the college ultimately decides — in a process that is far from transparent — how much each student can pay.

While reading this book, it's impossible not to wonder whether such price disparities will really trickle down to the aforementioned pair of Nikes or a bar of soap. At least in e-commerce, one-to-one customized pricing is technologically possible. But that doesn't mean it will happen en masse. Some bad actors are willing to misuse data, but not everyone does so. *All You Can Pay* paints a compelling and obviously Orwellian picture of data overlords manipulating every transaction. But it goes too far in painting consumers as powerless and companies as defaulting to being evil, when given the choice.

In fact, until the very end, the book ignores the fact that consumers have more of a voice than they've ever had. Who hasn't gone on a local Facebook group and asked what an appropriate price is for having a plumber unclog a drain?

Still, *All You Can Pay* is a must-read for marketers. Consumers are increasingly skittish about the use of their data. We all know there's a quid pro quo about the Internet; we trade information about ourselves for access, content, and discounts on goods and services. A book such as *All You Can Pay* — which aspires to be a consumer rallying cry — should serve as a reminder to marketers to continually ask themselves whether they are being responsible in how they use their customers' data, and what the blowback will be if they're not.

These three books illustrate the diversity of issues marketers have to contend with, now that digital technology is fully embedded in their consumers' lives. They also show that even in an age of limitless distraction, short attention spans, and content that is designed to disappear (hello, Snapchat!), writers can craft lengthy fact-laden arguments that can capture our focus. +

Reprint No. 00377

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