



Round Marketing in a Flat World

Neil M. Rosen and Jeannette Cézanne

In the early 1990s, many businesses made substantial investments in technology, but without really knowing what to do with it. For example, people who had once retained and filed paper memos and letters began printing, retaining and filing e-mails instead. Marketers started sending out e-mails instead of paper communications – but didn't include all of the components necessary for either good market penetration or good analytics. Not exactly a great leap forward.

There was a shift in the mid- 90s, however, as perceptions of online possibilities and paperless offices began to work themselves into the collective consciousness of businesses, and partnerships were formed between users and software/web developers to put more and more activities online and give more control over these activities to the business itself. As transactions in all areas of life activities became more user- available (one could suddenly do everything from selecting one's seat on a flight to researching marketing trends), organizations that formerly provided those functions became less and less relevant.

Yet one wonders if emarketing has yet taken full advantage of the technology available to it today.

Thomas Friedman, in *The World is Flat* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005) introduces a concept he calls "triple convergence." Three key factors, he says, help businesses take advantage of the new technologies available: increased connectivity and collaboration, increased capabilities in a single device, and process and workflow changes. Industries do not, he suggests, see progress in their productivity until all three of these factors "converge" – until all are being used seamlessly in the daily work of the business.

For example, a revolution happened when technology became available in the form of desktop computers – but there wasn't any connectivity allowing users to collaborate. When connectivity arrived, businesses still used their old workflow methods – people still moved automatically to the fax machine when they merely wanted to share the information in a document. It wasn't until there was real path innovation, the changing of work processes, that the technology began to live up to its potential.



So the question is: Has e-marketing reached its point of triple convergence? Well, no, not exactly.

The first Friedman factor, increased connectivity and collaboration, holds that in a mature market, connectivity and collaboration enable more people than ever before to work together to successfully develop products and deliver services. In the e- messaging space, technologies have indeed been developed that bring marketers and service providers together: online collaboration is standard practice these days, and collaborators develop products and deliver services daily. Yet there are two major components lacking in the current market situation that are dramatically delaying opportunities for maturation in the area of connectivity and collaboration.

The first problem is around technical standardization. There are plenty of pockets of connectivity and collaboration happening in the market, but they are typically taking place on differing technologies using a variety of platforms and database structures.

The other issue is that while there is often a reasonable level of connectivity and collaboration along market verticals, there is little of it across market verticals. Marketers and ESPs connect, for example, in the production of products and services that enhance campaign performance, while ISPs and telecoms connect and collaborate in the production of bandwidth and deliverability products and services; but there is no maturity in developing connectivity between ESPs and ISPs, marketers and ISPs, or marketers, ESPs and telecoms.

Friedman's second point of convergence involves increased capabilities in a single device. While it's not immediately obvious how this point is connected to e-marketing, an analogy is easy to draw: more and more, it's important to assemble multiple functionality on one e-marketing platform, including search, transition marketing, CRM, and branded desktop applications. Other possible functionalities include RSS feeds, podcasts, webinars, and mobile technologies. Have we reached the point of convergence in this area? Companies like ours are moving in that direction, but the industry as a whole needs to embrace both the technologies and the new workflow associated with them in order to bring this area to the explosive increase in value cited by Friedman.



The third factor in assessing triple convergence, process and workflow changes, grows logically from the second. When new technologies are embraced – rather than simply tolerated – then there is incentive to identify and implement the best possible workflows to take advantage of the technology.

There is of course the issue of probability, which Friedman does not address. It stands to reason that there is a greater likelihood of convergence taking place when there is a real need driving both the development of technology and the assimilation of that technology. If I need a really stunning database application and my need (translated into money) drives someone to write the code for it, then assimilation within the workflow will be as close to automatic as one can hope for.

New technologies will always challenge cultures and norms, and the emarketing space is no exception. The very industry rests on technology that a mere twenty years ago was unimaginable. Even more recently than that, e-mail's appropriateness for business communication was questionable; doing direct mail routinely was unthinkable.

Although it takes time to adjust to new technology, work processes to change to take advantage of it, and as workflow adjusts, both expected and unexpected advantages can appear.

E-marketing's culture as well as its way of doing business will change and grow as new technology spreads and triple convergence approaches. E-marketers need to adapt to changes, continually develop and re-develop their culture and constantly consider performing their business and new ways.

Friedman notes this cycle of dependencies when he quotes a Stanford University economist: "The new way of doing things makes the information technologies more valuable, and then new and better information technologies make the new ways of doing things more possible." (Friedman, *The World is Flat*, p. 178) Clearly triple convergence occurs when all three factors are linked, are interdependent, and when there is incentive to use them.

Has e-marketing reached its point of triple convergence, or are we seeing round marketing in a flat world? It's axiomatic to state that nearly every application, once put in place, is already falling behind: new and better technologies will be pushing it out in less and less time. And people – as well as people-driven businesses – tend to respond slowly: we're still learning one way of working when another is already being introduced.



Yet if any industry could be capable of leveraging the power of technology through connectivity (the cornerstone of the business), assimilating it into single platforms, and adjusting workflow to take full advantage of the technology, it must be e-marketing and e-commerce. Have we reached triple convergence? No. Can we?

It seems clear that we can. And we will, once we become accustomed to changing our thoughts, our preconceptions, and our assumptions as quickly as the world around us is changing.

And then e-marketing, too, might be able to fit into Friedman's concept of a world that is flat.