

**By BRR Business Strategist Julian Smith – 20 April 2010**

# Inviting the Customer In

**BRIAN R RICHARDS LTD** LEVEL 2, 6 LEEK STREET  
NEWMARKET, AUCKLAND 1023, NEW ZEALAND

**PHN** +64 9 520 0014 **EML** brand@brrltd.com

**FAX** +64 9 522 2709 **WEB** www.brrltd.com

# Inviting the Customer In:

## MEETING THE INTERACTIVE CHALLENGE

**The world no longer cares if you're merely different. They want to know exactly who you are, what you do, and why. In his 1970 book *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler envisioned a wave of 'prosumers' – consumers who are involved in the design process and are intimately connected to the development of products. The accuracy of his notion today may have surprised even him.**

As ahead of his time as the trends he was describing, Toffler foresaw the power of the collective individual. He could see the personalisation of products and the new balance of power shifting to millions of 'me's'.

Early adopters Nike created NikeiD, giving the power to their fans to create customised sneakers with their name or slogan, colour-way and design. Set up in 1999, NikeiD still runs today as a successful way to let their audience engage with their brand in a way that suits them.

Certainly the business landscape is changing at a pace that has dislocated many individuals, companies and nations. Communications and technology convergence is irrevocably changing the way customers desire to interact with brands, purchase and consume media. Barely half a lifetime ago, 6 o'clock closing meant the world shut up shop. Today, the power of the Internet and globalisation has removed the word 'closed' from the consumer lexicon.

**It's no longer enough to pursue a differentiation strategy in isolation. Static statements of what companies' services and products stand for simply bore the increasingly informed and curious consumer. Customers need to be engaged and invited to partake in the evolution of their product.**

We can accept that the marketers' dollar may have shrunk to 85 cents over the last 24 months, but that 85 cents is all too often being spent too sporadically across different areas. There is no question that developing the right marketing recipe requires more strategic alchemy than ever before.

It seems all too prevalent for brands to create a Facebook page or to start Tweeting without any real strategy or plan as to why. The strategic engagement of communities requires linking together new product development processes with supply chains and brand communications, consistently, and over time.

On October 23 2001, Apple changed the music industry forever by introducing the first iPod. This was the first step in a plan to redefine the industry. Personalised music was the key platform to develop iTunes and is now at the heart of a suite of complementary products and compelling brand communications.

While many record labels sought to differentiate their artist list and marketing, Apple focussed on the user experience and engaged and nurtured a community who wanted to be more involved. As of September last year, Apple has sold over 8.5 billion songs through its iTunes store.

Artists themselves have followed an even more direct pathway. Radiohead released *In Rainbows* on the 10th of October 2007 as a digital download with the customer able to determine their own purchase price. As an engagement strategy for an audience wracked with issues of copyright, piracy and downloading, it was a stroke of genius.