

Working title:

**LISTENING BRANDS: How the New World of Data Is Replacing Traditional Branding
or**

LISTENING BRANDS: How Data is Rewriting the Rules of Branding

By J.R. Little

The Promise / Value Proposition:

A revolution is occurring in the world of marketing. In the past, companies needed to invest in big brand ideas to project themselves to the world. But now, this broad, one-way messaging has become much less important, and the new name of the game is data. The most successful organizations today are using remarkably detailed info gleaned from digital and social media to *listen* to their customer in radically new ways. Top media professional J.R. Little spent years learning and preaching the gospel of branding, but has changed his tune. In his publishing debut, he shows you how to transform your business, no matter the size, by adopting a data-centric (rather than brand-centric) approach and by listening to consumers – to intimately understand and consistently meet their needs and desires.

Author/Book Goal(s):

1. To establish and articulate his own unique and innovative vision or point of view, the common thread to everything he does in his career
2. To solidify his brand, which will hopefully lead to speaking gigs and media bookings (from magazines to Bloomberg News)

Anticipated Audience(s):

1. Companies/clients, big and small, particularly the marketing and sales departments but also the leaders of those businesses, the chief officers, C-Suite
2. Tangentially, other industry folks, who work at media and branding agencies.

Table of Contents

Introduction: *The Value of Listening*

Part One

Identifying the Problem: Why You Think You're Listening But You're Really Not

Chapter One: *What Are You Investing In?*

Chapter Two: *What Are the Questions You're Asking?*

Chapter Three: *What Kind of Listening Are You Doing?*

Part Two

Gathering Data: What Does It Really Mean to Listen

Chapter Four: *What Does It Mean to Become a Listening-Centric Company?*

Chapter Five: *What Does It Mean to Have a Listening Infrastructure?*

Chapter Six: *What Does It Mean to Listen to Lifestyle Data?*

Chapter Seven: *What Does It Mean to Listen to Patterns of Data?*

Chapter Eight: *What Does It Mean to Listen to Sentiment Data?*

Part Three

Acting on the Data: Why Listening Is Important But Implementation Is More So

Chapter Nine: *How Can Data Be Used to Build Micro Teams?*

Chapter Ten: *How Can Data Be Used to Constantly Refine Message, Product, and Context?*

Chapter Eleven: *How Can You Use Data To Make Your Product or Service Something Your Customer Simply Cannot Live Without?*

Conclusion: *The Future*

OUTLINE

Introduction: *The Value of Listening*

You were raised on a farm in North Carolina, which you credit as an unlikely influence on your current business philosophy of listening... how is that?

- Description of author's very rural childhood and how he learned principles of supply and demand, learned to be adaptable to market changes

What about on a personal level, in terms of your family dynamic on the farm?

- How his quiet/introverted personality contrasted with his big, loud family, and how it taught him to listen and observe, and devise clever ways to make sure his voice was heard

What did your pre-media career teach you about listening?

- Early professional experience in non-profits, as a lesson in humanity and compassion, and how to truly listen

Ironic then that the impressive resume you built over many years in the world of branding was not as important, and even counter-productive in some ways?

- Years of working with some of the biggest and best agencies around the world taught him all the *wrong* lessons, at least for today's landscape, taught him to grow customers by essentially screaming into a megaphone, the opposite of listening

Tell us about how you ultimately changed your way of thinking?

- Account of personal revelation, breakthrough in understanding that it is all about customers' digital behavior not about a company's brand, and that author's unique strengths in space of human development were more important than his CV in advertising

How did this change in your thinking align with the times in which it occurred?

- Period of historic transition, where branding hasn't gone away entirely but has a very different role to play than it has for the last century – where the goal was positioning messages in TV, print, billboards, stores, etc.

What do you see emerging in place of traditional branding?

- Something different and exciting in the air, where businesses [*specific examples*] are succeeding, against many people's expectations, not because of the strength of their overarching brand but because of their intelligent use of digital & social data, which they receive from consumers in real time

So how would you define "listening" in this context of marketing/business and the intelligent use of data?

- Relatable analogy/story of going to a conference and listening rather than trying so hard to sell yourself

Why is this kind of listening so much more important than it used to be?

- Context of growing customer skepticism toward big brands and advertising (average consumers becoming much more sophisticated; digital and social environments as hyper-transparent)

When and how did this new framework emerge?

- In the West, 2008 was the peak of branding, before the recession created skepticism not just with banks but all corporations/institutions, coinciding with an explosion in social platforms (we're already decades in to the digital revolution, but what we're now seeing is social revolutionizing digital)

What would you say to the reader or company/client who may still feel hesitant or defensive of the old ways?

- Direct appeal to set aside the old ways and be open to these changes, even if they may feel overwhelming and uncomfortable at first

Part One

Identifying the Problem: Why You Think You're Listening But You're Really Not

This section of the book is about taking stock of where you are and why you need to adapt

Chapter One: What Are You Investing In?

Would you say that companies are wasting money on the wrong things?

- Companies likely wasting enormous resources, in terms of their time and budget, on traditional brand-oriented marketing, and seeing diminishing returns

What are some stories or examples of misplaced investment in branding?

- Example of the failures and wastages of one major global beverage company in contrast to its famous competitor, how one made itself hyper-relevant and the other persists in its outdated top-down approach
 - Leveraging user-generated Content vs Brand-created Content

What about investing in advertising?

- Probably a waste of money. Today, most people spend many hours on their phone, within apps, and those spaces have very few advertising options. Simply put, there just aren't many effective advertising formats left to communicate in the one-way overtly-branded style of the past.
- What they do have is places to consume content - pictures, videos, and articles
- When a brand listens to their consumers in these spaces - through data - they better understand what their consumers like, and then can build relationships with, or provide content around, the topics their consumers love.
- Overall, it's not that ads won't exist anymore but that there's a shift from ads being around the periphery of the content to ads being the content themselves

What would you say to readers/companies who are resistant to change course?

- Why it's never too late, and in fact the new paradigm makes it hypothetically possible to have zero wastage, which would balance out the earlier losses

Chapter Two: *What Are the Questions You're Asking*

You maintain that companies may be asking themselves questions but just not the right ones, is that correct?

- Asking questions but not really challenging themselves to change their businesses in kind or in degree with the massive shifts in marketing/communication

What are the specific distinctions, as you see it?

- They are asking questions around what they should be saying to their customers, about imagery and messaging they believe will appeal, but *not* asking the more important question of whether their customers want to hear anything at all
- They are asking questions about how they're different than their competitors (which is totally irrelevant to customers), not about category context, how they fit in vis-à-vis other habits and hobbies and interests of the customer
- They are asking questions so they can respond quickly not so they can deeply listen

What is an example of a company asking the wrong kinds of questions?

- Story of Oppo, car company trying to sell cars to young millennial hipsters, but failing because they were asking themselves questions relating to their competitors not asking themselves how they can be more relevant to their customers

Chapter Three: *What Kind of Listening Are You Doing?*

Companies have always listened in a sense, no? They've always done research to analyze the market and their customer base?

- Distinction between traditional market research and the much more nuanced and sophisticated version of listening advocated by author

Why is even a very sophisticated expression of this research approach still misguided?

- Companies may think they are listening by spotting trends, testing ideas, and seeking feedback, but they're still performing these tasks in support of the expression of a Big Idea
- Old idea of research, which was to research so that you're better prepared to bombard the consumer, or even just to subtly nudge, is being replaced – the point now is that you don't even need to persuade at all anymore

How can a company not be concerned about persuading people to buy their product? Isn't that the whole point?

- Distinction between persuading and just listening to individual needs and desires and meeting them
- History of branded messages, how people have always listened more to their peers in their (pre-digital) social network than to companies, people have always mistrusted branded messages to some extent
- What's different now is that social networks have scaled in size, with the average FB user having 250 friends, and these friends constitute the culture people listen to when deciding what car to buy, etc.

Is there an example of a company being failed by traditional market research?

- Candy & Gum brand trying to figure out the right storyboard and messaging for a TV spot when their consumers are not even watching TV
- FMCG company in Russia where consumers lied in Focus groups to impress the people in the room.

Part Two

Gathering Data: What Does It Really Mean to Listen

This section of the book is all about putting the systems and structures in place for intelligent data collection and analysis. It's about the different kinds of listening and what this listening actually looks like in practice.

Chapter Four: *What Does It Mean to Become a Listening-Centric Company?*

Can you give us a real-life example of what the kind of listening you're talking about actually looks like in practice?

- Instructive anecdote about telecommunications company, as way of showing that what customers care about is that the company is listening to their needs

How do you apply that same listening model to customer behavior online?

- Algorithms gather data from private messages and comments, e.g., they look at the people that follow you on Twitter, and find out all about those people

What about privacy concerns?

- Discussion of regulation, and the necessity of it, as well as the specific bodies that deal with these issues (e.g., IAA)
- Existing protections like the ability to disable cookies, how FB just uses #s not names
- Why regulation ultimately is good for the companies as well

What are all the different forms of data we need to listen to?

- Everything from economic data, to business results, to digital clicks, to searches, to social chatter, to what's trending, to geolocations
- Above all, not just the consumer's data but their partners' data and the connections between customers, which leads to a more holistic understanding

What about new types of data that are just now being discovered?

- Absolutely. For example, sentiment and commentary analysis, which we'll talk about in Ch. 8, are fairly new. This is a type of data that can tell what things people talk about most and how they feel about those things.

What is the distinction between listening on a macro and micro level?

- Macro listening involves data scientists looking for prophecy in the minutia, involves long-term planning and an entire new kind of skillset: listening to anticipate future needs, in a planned way over time, setting up projects to look at data
 - Potentially smaller signs, yet bigger business impact
- Micro involves thousands of people listening on daily basis, to things that pop up in social spaces, and cultural opportunities that arise
 - Big signs, but little business impact

Chapter Five: *What Does It Mean to Have a Listening Infrastructure?*

What comes after listening?

- Obvious but important point that being able to listen to big data and social buzz has no meaning if you don't have an infrastructure in place that will allow you ultimately to act on it

Before we get into talking about a listening infrastructure, can you walk us through the OLD way to build a brand, the process and people involved?

When you talk about a listening infrastructure, what exactly are you referring to?

- Three categories: physicality/geography, talent/people, and technology, including concrete examples
- How this kind of tri-part infrastructure allows companies to respond quickly, using micro-listening, to memes and other ripples in media, example of Ice Bucket Challenge, how this can be especially effective when the meme is directly related to your brand

Can companies build such an infrastructure on their own?

- Probably not. Data listening is complex and without the exception of a Facebook, Google or Twitter, it can't be done well by one party, nor can the big tech players do it alone today.
- An effective listening infrastructure requires requires:
 1. Sources of data – the place where bits of information are being collected against a unique ID – this ID is a marker of a person. For example, Facebook has an ID for their entire ecosystem
 2. Managers/holders of data – as someone must make sense of the gibberish. These data management companies are the ones that can take the hard data – in a format that looks like random numbers and letters – and make sense of it. They can also merge and find overlaps between differing sets of data.
 3. Data Visualization – these companies are experts in building dashboards and interfaces where a human can look at a screen and make quick sense of the data. This is where charts, graphs, word clouds come into play. These players help humans make sense of the vast information so they can act on it.
 4. Agencies and/or clients. These are the ones needed to execute change because of what the data says.

How do people/talent factor into this model?

- Difference between old assembly-line type approach, where ideas had to be approved via hard copy or at least email, and now where physical proximity (or at least video proximity) and hyper-collaboration are essential in order to respond nimbly, in real time

What is an example of this kind of sophisticated infrastructure in practice?

- Super Bowl story of Oreo responding quickly to lights-out meme and connecting with it, but how it requires talented people to be empowered with the responsibility to act decisively when opportunities arise

So that's a great example of how micro listening to social buzz can yield successful results, but if everyone does that, won't it lead to overload?

- Yes, the overload thing is real, and jumping on the meme bandwagon is not enough, which leads us to the importance of macro listening, which we'll look at in the following three chapters
- If it weren't for macro listening, Oreo could have potentially messed up with their experiment because they neglected to look at long-term patterns between their brand and other cultures (i.e., football fans)

Chapter Six: *What Does It Mean to Listen to Lifestyle Data?*

Can you define what you mean by lifestyle data?

- Essentially synonymous with traditional consumer research, that companies have always done, using a statistically significant sample size to uncover trends both qualitative (anecdotes) and quantitative (binary data)

What is an example of listening to lifestyle data?

- Story of company who did this successfully, but just on a very basic level, which is where most people stop
- Why listening to lifestyle data is just the first step, and the categories discussed in the following chapters are the true frontier

Chapter Seven: *What Does It Mean to Listen to Patterns of Data?*

Can you define what you mean by data patterns?

- Specific categories of search, performance, and cookie-enabled data
- Distinction between data patterns as measured by customers' desktops (through cookies) and by their phones (through IDs)

What does this look like in practice?

- Tracking people's places of interest, and those or people who matched their personal online, to paint a more accurate vision of what they're doing daily

What is an example of listening to patterns of data?

- *Need story here*

Chapter Eight: *What Does It Mean to Listen to Social Data?*

Can you define what you mean by listening to Social data?

- Three types:

- Social that the company is overtly referenced in, using hashtags, handles, posts on brand wall. We should consider these like direct messaging to a company or brand today. Its like the new Email.
- Sentiment – this is when a judgment is made about the types of Social that exists, like is it positive or negative?
- Commentary analysis – this is new. This is where the words and emoticons people use in posts or messages can be treated like data. People’s identities are not used, but their Unique IDs are used.

What does this look like in practice?

- Listening to customer commentary and buzz, how people use hashtags, handles, Tweets, etc.
- Being able to understand how keywords relate to one another in online conversation and comments, analyzing the proximity between different words and search terms

How much are companies already doing this?

- This is the area where industry is most nascent, but also where we’re heading

What is an example of how all these types of data - lifestyle, pattern, and social - can come together?

- Story of dog biscuit brand, that learned it would benefit them to get involved with hiking and family activities, learned by listening to what matters, what the consumer likes – and specifically, how closely they use these terms in combination (dogs, hikes, family)
- Overall lesson: When a company can see what matters to their customers, and is talked about in the vicinity of their product, they can then build programs to become more relevant to that/those consumers.

Part Three

Acting on the Data: Why Listening Is Important But Implementing Is More So

This section is all about taking the insight absorbed from the listening and the data and using it to target the most receptive customers and to build a closer relationship than you ever imagined possible, by responding effectively to what they’re telling you, and giving them what they want on a consistent basis – which will have the added effect of reduced wastage of resources

Chapter Nine: *How Can Data Be Used to Build Micro Teams?*

What is the relationship between an effective listening-and-response infrastructure and a seamless implementation?

- Listening is only beneficial if a company acts differently as a result of understanding the consumer better, and has the tools to execute those actions

How does the implementation work in terms of a company’s organization?

- Listening and data-gathering serves to classify customer base into remarkably precise clusters or mini-cultures, and how a company can create teams that cater to each tribe – of course with attention paid to how these tribes correlate or overlap, Venn diagram style

What is an example of a company effectively mobilizing such clusters/cultures?

- Story of Red Bull, how they know their customers and their tribes intimately, which allows them to extend their brand to unlikely offshoots, like studios, events, DJ academies

Chapter Ten: How Can Data Be Used to Constantly Refine Message, Product, and Context?

How exactly do companies act on the data they listen to?

- Listening allows companies, big and small, to infinitely personalize their responses and relationships to customers, by meeting them where they are and by anticipating their needs

How do these hyper-targeted, individualized experiences create value?

- They surprise and delight customers, and create value through extraordinary company-to-consumer *experiences* not through branding

What is an example of a company successfully tweaking their message, product, and context based on the data they pick up?

- Story of the UK feminine-hygiene company Bodyform, which created a company-to-customer experience that was so remarkable it went viral

Not every experience is going to have ramifications like that though, right?

- No, but with social media, a company never knows when they're talking to the minority of users who have extremely big social networks and are highly influential, never know when the individual experience can become scalable, could happen anytime

Chapter Eleven: How Can You Use Data To Make Your Product or Service Something Your Customer Simply Cannot Live Without?

In this last chapter, try to bring it all together for us, what is the final message you want readers to leave with here?

- Listening to your customer in this way allows you to do and make things they *really* want and love, thereby making your company incredibly relevant to their lives

What are some companies that are doing this?

- Examples of businesses making their customers very happy and improving their lives, by truly listening to them, companies such as AirBnB, Uber, NetFlix, and more

- Also counterexamples of the companies they're making irrelevant, the dinosaurs who the unicorns are replacing (video stores, car industry for young people, expensive/shitty hotels, etc.)

It almost sounds as if there is magic to be found in data, is that how you see it?

- No, it is still very rough, and it's still early days, no one has mastered it yet, which is good news for you – there is time to catch up

Conclusion: *The Future*

In that case, what does the future of data look like?

- Future where not only is branding and advertising obsolete (and companies are receivers of signals rather than emitters), but also where the industry is such that humans are only there for the creative thinking part, the creative use of data, the “art”; and everything else is automated by computers/algorithms, moving toward AI
- So in the same way that branding is being swept aside by the data revolution, AI will eventually do the same to data

Any last thoughts for reader?

- Go out there and have the courage to move forward, to take what they've learned in this book to conquer this exciting new world