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The Meaning of Mobile

By Jesse Haines and Abigail Posner

The mobile phone might be the world's most ubiquitous device, and yet the marketing community is just beginning to understand how mobile can and should factor into their overall strategies. Nine out of ten people on the planet own one¹ — a higher percentage than cars, radios, or television sets — and nearly 500 million smartphones shipped last year alone.² We know what percentage of Brazilian twentysomethings use their smart phones in restaurants (71%) and how many Saudi women have ever used theirs to shop online (19%)³. We can't live without apps, maps, and email on the go, but what we don't know is why.

Why does the ringing of mobile phones trigger the same brain waves as love, for example? And why do we feel them vibrating even when they're missing? What do these devices mean to us that they make us lovesick? Remarkably, no one had thought to ask about how and why mobility is enabling us to create meaning in our lives. It turns out neuroscience can explain both our Pavlovian devotion and phantom

buzzing, but as marketers seek to connect with their increasingly mobile customers, it's hard to tell emotionally resonant stories about brands in the mobile space unless we understand the resonance of the mobile space itself.

As we discussed the mobile space with countless creative directors and strategic planners, we found the prevailing attitude to be that the mobile screen is too small for creating immersive brand experiences. We had a hunch that there was a lot more to this story, so we decided to explore the deeper meaning of mobile in the same way that a strategic planner would approach the task of unlocking the meaning of the Cheeto — we hired an anthropologist to interview dozens of ordinary mobile device owners and observe them as they interacted with their smartphones. The first thing we found is that the phone's pocket size is anything but a flaw — in fact, it's the key to understanding what it really means.

1 International Telecommunication Union, 2011
2 International Data Corporation, February 2012
3 Our Mobile Planet, thinkwithgoogle.com/mobileplanet



Small...or gigantic?

Anthropology teaches us that in every culture, miniatures possess the power to unlock imaginations. Whether it's a dollhouse, toy truck, or some other tiny talisman, miniatures look and feel real, but their size gives us the permission to suspend disbelief, daydream, and play. Remember *The Nutcracker*? In between pirouettes, a toy nutcracker comes to life, defeats an evil mouse, and whisks the heroine away to a magical kingdom. That, in a nutshell, is the story we implicitly tell ourselves about our miniature computers — one of youth, freedom, and possessing the key to a much larger world.

“Because it’s in my pocket I somehow squeeze this time in for various things — and only because I think it just sits in my pocket,”

one of our subjects told us. The screens may be small, but they serve as gateways to the *gigantic*.

We see this power manifest in insights gleaned from the anthropologist's observations. Our mobile devices help us fully actualize our best self, or what we call the *Quicksilver Self*; they engage us to create a shared culture, the *New Tribalism*; and they help us to make sense of the physical world around us, an act we describe as *Placemaking*. Understanding the deeper levels at which individuals, customers, are finding meaning in mobile will enable marketers to put this powerful medium to its best use.



Small...or Gigantic? Applied: Heineken Star Player

Heineken®

Through the rabbit hole of “the small screen,” Heineken brought rabid soccer fans from their couches onto the field. Their Star Player app allowed fans to interact in real time with the nail-biting action of the UEFA Champion’s League. Fans were given eight attempts to accurately predict whether either team would score in the next thirty seconds, making them feel like they were controlling the flow of the game, with all the disappointment and triumph that implies. Through the small, they became part of something gigantic.



The Quicksilver Self

It's 7 AM, the phone alarm's ringing, and for many of us, our first groggy impulse isn't to press Snooze, but to reach over to see what the night has brought in terms of Facebook updates, Google Alerts, *Breaking Bad* recaps, Groupon deals, and eBay auctions — the overnight syncing of our digital selves. Later that day, a friend texts to offer tickets to that night's Yankees game ("something twenty minutes before I had no idea was going to happen," said one of our subjects). That's followed by a ping from OKCupid with a potential match, and on and on it goes, a constant stream of news, offers, and choices. The mobile life is a real-time Choose Your Own Adventure in which we are constantly writing and rewriting the stories we tell about ourselves.

For Americans, this might sound familiar. "[The American Dream](#)" is premised on personal transformation and reinvention — the promise of

becoming our best possible selves. This is what historian James Truslow Adams had in mind when he popularized the phrase in 1931:

["a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are."](#)

This dream runs like an underground river through American culture, whether it's *The Great Gatsby*, Jack Kerouac, or Kim Kardashian (a lucrative act of self invention if there ever was one). It's also morphed over the past few decades to the point where agility, fluidity, and serendipity have become the ideals of the Quicksilver Self. It's the freedom to be open to discovery and to make and remake ourselves, experimenting with different personas and experiences to see which fits us best.

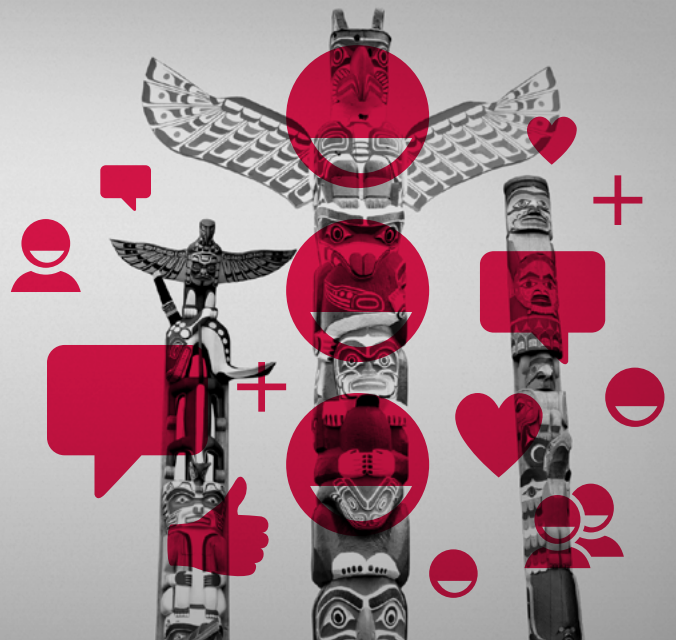
We've always looked to technology for help with this. For most of the 20th Century, the ultimate mobile device was the car, not only because it could ferry us from point A to B, but also because of the tantalizing prospect of discovering someone, something, anything new. (Cue Springsteen: "Well, the night's busting open, these two lanes will take us anywhere.") But that's ending. Less than half of potential teenage drivers have a license, down from two-thirds a decade ago. And twentysomething Millennials — the largest generation in U.S. history — purchase barely a quarter of all cars.

"We have to face the growing reality that today young people don't seem to be as interested in cars as previous generations," the president of Toyota USA said last year. "Many young people care more about buying the latest smartphone or gaming console than getting their driver's license."

Indeed. Today, it's smartphones and their constant streams of information that streamline, automate, and refresh our Quicksilver Selves — which is why we can't get enough of them. "You feel settled, you know?" said one of our subjects. "Everything is here, so you have that energy." They ground us in the here and now by reassuring us that nothing will slip past us, allowing us to take advantage of whatever comes our way.

This is the explicit promise of a new generation of "social discovery" apps such as Highlight and Sonar, which marry your phone's GPS with your social networks to notify you of friends — and friends of friends — nearby. Suddenly, our phones can lead us with pinpoint accuracy to the potential mate of our dreams or future business partner. We've replaced the open road with the digital superhighway.

The New Tribalism



In historically tribal societies, individuality takes a backseat to kinship: who you are matters less than who you know (and whether you're a blood relation). The New Tribalism, by contrast, is the product of our new connections: who you are is the sum of who you know. A network without links isn't a network at all; we are increasingly made of what connects us.

Obviously, mobile devices are accelerating this. The smartphone is fundamentally a communication tool — we can speak, text, chat, tweet, email and video conference at a moment's notice. Facebook may have started its life on the desktop, but the phone has become the real-time nexus of social networking, whether it's Google+, Instagram, or next-generation apps like Mobli, which literally allows us to see the world through others' eyes (or at least camera phones).

The result is that our personal stories have begun to entwine. We're all sharing pieces of the larger story unfolding invisibly all around us, a story whose edges are defined by our networks and accessed through our phones.

The technologist Adam Greenfield calls this the “Big Now” — the deepened sense of time passing by seeing it (metaphorically) through so many others' eyes.

“A ten-minute interval may see reports of friends experiencing rush-hour frustrations in the Bay Area, dining out in New York, and late night dancing in London,” he writes. “For me, at least, it's been difficult to see my New York through quite the same eyes, when every time I get my phone out I feel the entire planet's deeper rhythms working themselves out.”

Which isn't to say we're passive observers of life's rich pageant. The New Tribalism is defined by sharing and co-creating culture, whether it's tweeting your favorite restaurant in Manhattan, texting the password to the hottest club in London... or sending a Coke to a stranger (see Project Re:Brief example). We are essentially creating or reaffirming a community of shared interests. A text or a tweet isn't just a message; it's a gift of knowledge, ideas, and opinions.



The New Tribalism Applied: Project Re:Brief and Coca-Cola

Coca-Cola MR

Perhaps the most iconic Coca-Cola ad ever is “Hilltop.” You know the one — I’d like to teach the world to sing, in perfect har-mo-nee... Less famous is the singer’s second wish: to buy the world a Coke. Last March, Google partnered with Coca-Cola to belatedly grant this wish as part of Project Re:Brief, which re-imagined classic campaigns for the digital era. The re-imagined mobile ad enables users to select a location, attach a personal message, and then watch as the Coke is delivered to a specially-designed vending machine on the other side of the world. In an instant, a mobile phone user in New York City and an unsuspecting stranger in Capetown are part of a new tribe.



The New Tribalism Applied: Google+: John Butterill's Virtual Photo Walks



Photographer John Butterill uses Google+ Hangouts to share his photo walks with the world. By attaching a phone to his camera, he makes it possible for others to see exactly what he sees through his viewfinder: the rippling waters beneath his canoe, the beautiful bark of an old tree, the perfectly lit sky. Almost immediately after he posted the video from his first photo walk, photographers around the world began volunteering to share their views of the world with people whose mobility was limited. John, and the many photographers he has inspired, share the freedom they feel from going on a photo walk - whether it be in the woods by their homes or deep in the African plains - with members of the tribe who aren't able to do so themselves.



Placemaking

Humans have an innate desire to make sense of their physical surroundings by assigning meaning to them. This is what anthropologists call “placemaking”. The places that surround us create, store, and bring back powerful memories. A favorite restaurant, for example, might be the scene of past first dates, break-ups, celebrations, last-night meals, and conspiratorial drinks at the bar. In our mind’s eye, all of these memories exist simultaneously, with each occasion mapped to a different table and booth. It’s the reason we decorate our homes and why young lovers carve their initials into park benches. The latest iteration of Instagram — the mobile photo-sharing app with 80 million users — has the same idea. Unveiled in August, Instagram’s new Photo Map feature sorts geo-tagged photos onto maps, stacking them according to the places where they were taken.

The new Instagram is a perfect example of Placemaking, which describes using our mobile devices to tell stories about and make meaning of our physical world — our homes, streets, favorite

haunts. Another is Foursquare, which rewards users for “checking in” to locations with badges and the title of “mayor.” Both apps remind us that every place has someone’s memories attached. Those memories in turn remind us of who we are (and who we were) and orient us emotionally. We “read” and “write” meanings onto places the same way we tell stories about ourselves — only now we do this using our phones.

Real-time mapping and GPS are the foundations of Placemaking but they barely scratch the surface when it comes to meaning. The flipside of the “Big Now,” Greenfield suggests, is the “Long Here” — the ability to accrete and share thoughts and memories of a place over time. Whether we leave notes or check in, we are doing just that.

The science fiction author William Gibson recently admitted he was wrong about the Internet. We won’t abandon the real world for “cyberspace” (or Second Life), but will map cyberspace onto the world. And we’ll navigate them both with our phones.



Placemaking Applied: Red Bull Street Art View



Red Bull recognized their customers affinity for street art and utilized Google's Street View technology to create a mapped collection of street art from all over the world. People were able to contribute to the map by adding markers tagging their favorite local artworks, helping to build a global, curated experience. They were also able to sift through the thousands of submissions to view works from unknowns to famous street artists like Banksy and Keith Haring. Red Bull Street Art View linked physical spaces and pieces of street art together, lending new meanings to places around the globe. This was a desktop initiative, but imagine how powerful it could be on a mobile device — where we are able to connect instantaneously and in new ways with our physical surroundings.



Conclusion

As marketers, the notion that mobile phones are merely tools — a screwdriver or socket wrench with a data plan — is a strange one. After all, branding is about making sense of our lives; brands wouldn't exist if we didn't attach meaning to our surroundings. It turns out, of course, that our phones are no different. Instead of lacking all meaning, we use them to create new ones for ourselves, our friends, and the places we live in and love. Their screens may be small, but the worlds they open onto are gigantic.

How To Be Meaningfully Mobile



1. Start from the person up, rather than the brand down.

One reason mobile storytelling hasn't reached its potential is because the content is frequently repurposed from other media, which have their own meanings. A television spot on a smartphone's screen won't resonate the same way — and not only because of its size. People are creating their own stories around themselves, their friends, and their world — so link your brand's story to their stories.



2. Be as quicksilver as they are.

We've become serendipity addicts, accustomed to a never ending flow of offers, discounts, events, and invitations, each making us more excited for the next. The key for marketers is to join the flow in a manner that's both unobtrusive (by offering something of value) and also on brand.



3. Help people tell stories to their tribes.

Remember, they contain multitudes. Telling someone a story is one thing; the key to making it go viral is to give them a story they can share as their own with their tribe.



4. Exploit the Long Here and the Big Now.

Chance can be cultivated; opportunity can be orchestrated; serendipity can be engineered. Anchor your brand's story in a particular moment in place and time and let them discover it — in effect becoming part of their stories as well.



5. The future is local.

On the one hand, this is obvious. But think beyond geo-targeting. Connect brands to local places, events, and landmarks, and offer to enliven and enrich them.