

❖ **Li, Charlene & Bernoff, Josh - *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, 2011, (pp. 352) ISBN 978 1 4221 2500 7**

Reviewed by Reisa Levine

Dedicated to Gary Macintyre Boyd (1934 – 2011) Professor Cybernetics scholar and a great mentor to many.

Seems like everybody's talking about the *Groundswell*. Not just the book but the social phenomenon, the quickly growing "trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other, rather than from traditional institutions like corporations"(9). Considering this clever appropriation of the term 'groundswell' by marketing research giant Forrester Inc, it's perhaps somewhat ironic that the book is aimed at teaching other traditional corporations how to jump into the groundswell and profit from it.

For the people who have actually created the groundswell, the millions of internet users who regularly share their opinions, ideas, videos and friendships online, the groundswell phenomenon may have a somewhat different significance, and as such they may not gain much from this book. Some may even find the book problematic for its heavy corporate and profit-driven focus as opposed to a more collectivist approach. But *Groundswell* is clearly aimed at the corporate world, which, generally speaking, has been behind in using social media and the Web.

The authors, Forrester Research analysts Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff clearly do 'get' the groundswell, and this book details an excellent framework with solid advice on how to develop new marketing paradigms within a connected world. Anyone looking for a "how to" manual will not be disappointed: *Groundswell* offers in-depth background, plenty of pertinent examples and several concrete case studies, as one would expect from a reputable company like Forrester. So from a purely business perspective, this book is a well-written and valuable guide. However from the critical perspective of someone who has witnessed and participated in the emergence of the groundswell online, there is nothing new here, and unfortunately there is no deeper analysis of the social context from which the groundswell emerged.

There is no doubt that the groundswell phenomenon "has created a permanent shift in the way the world works" (x), and that companies do have to reposition their messaging in order to move forward in this new era. So yes, if you're a company strategist, it's true that you had better be aware of this shift, and *Groundswell* can help. As Li and Bernoff point out, companies have been struggling with the fact that customers are no longer simply silent consumers.

The Web has given people another way to talk to one another, to criticise, denounce, and reinvent brands in their own fashion. And people, millions of them, are weighing in, on blogs, in YouTube videos, through user reviews and in every imaginable corner of the internet. This has terrified the corporate world, which has typically seen it as a dangerous loss of control. *Groundswell* clearly lays out how big business (and most of the case studies they mention are large companies) can stop being threatened by this culture of sharing and start using it to their advantage. *Groundswell* certainly isn't the first book to talk about the "social computing" (9) phenomenon and its effect on markets, but what makes this book relevant to marketers and business executives is that it focuses on creating relationships with customers first and foremost, and then matching the appropriate technology to your goals.

The authors offer some well conceived tools to work with, such as the "Social Technographics Ladder" (43), which is a useful (if somewhat prescriptive) way to categorise end-users into one of six categories: Creators, Critics, Collectors, Joiners, Spectators and Inactives. They also clearly spell out various ways to engage with the groundswell, such as listening, talking, energising, supporting, and embracing, with each one described at length with pertinent examples. This is all helpful information for big and small businesses alike.

However chapter two, "Jujitsu and the Technologies of the Groundswell" begins to reveal what I find problematic with this book. The opening paragraphs of the chapter describe the groundswell as a potential problem for companies, unless they learn how to conquer it. They compare this to the Japanese martial art of Jujitsu that "enables you to harness the power of your opponent for your own advantage" (17). Li and Bernoff then brashly propose to "teach you about the forces at work in the new

online world, then give you the tools to engage with these forces, and finally to arm you with the techniques you can use to turn those forces to your advantage.”

My problem with this approach is that the groundswell has actually been building within online culture for well over a decade now, thanks to the growth of internet technologies that have helped facilitate mass participation. Those of us who have participated in public conversations like to believe that this phenomenon bubbled up from the basic human desire to share information and to help one another, which Li and Bernoff actually do recognise when they talk about the reasons behind the groundswell. The Jujitsu master is an unfortunate metaphor, a typically corporate way of approaching the consumer/brand relationship: that is, the free-ranging opinion of your customers is something that needs to be suppressed and controlled.

In spite of this, I do commend Li and Bernoff for saying some things that the corporate world really does need to hear. It's bold and refreshing to see a marketing research company like Forrester step outside the box to offer sobering notions such as Brazilian brand theorist Ricardo Guimarães' position that "your brand is whatever people say it is" regardless of what your company thinks it is.

Most of us, as consumers, can't help but get a bit of satisfaction from the rebalancing of power brought on by the groundswell. After all, what do companies expect after pushing their brands and logos on us for decades? Are they really surprised that people, once given a public voice online, would pass up on the opportunity to express their opinions? Technology has finally given people a venue to participate and react to corporate marketers. However, marketers are a clever creed and as we see from the case studies outlined in this book, they are working hard to gain the upper hand once again and harness the groundswell for their own purposes.

To be fair, the authors also devote a fair bit of space to telling us stories about some of the more passionate individuals participating in the groundswell. These personal stories, many of them about how low-level employees win management over with a successful groundswell campaign, define the force of this phenomenon; the human relationships that are struck up and developed around very specific things. The testimonies have an impact, and in addition to describing the essence of the groundswell, they also help keep the book lively and engaging.

Nonetheless, the underlying motivations behind corporate participation in the groundswell are laid bare through many of the case studies offered. In one such example Li and Bernoff describe Proctor & Gamble's beinggirl.com, a site aimed at young girls coming of age and invented to conceal the difficult task of marketing feminine hygiene products. The site is positioned as "a big dollop of sensitivity with a small dollop of information and a tiny brand message", and was a hugely successful international endeavour for P&G, the company that invented the daytime dramatic serial, better known as the soap opera. It's not the astronomical numbers on the ROI (Return on Investment) that I find disturbing here, rather the attitude of P&G's marketers who boast that: "We own this sort of growing-up part that people are too scared to touch". As if P&G have some sort of ownership on puberty. Sure, the site is ingenious, with the clever and misleading tag line; "for girls, by girls", but I think we need to question the motives behind the 'goodwill' and recognize the insidious side to this. Proctor & Gamble's main goal here is to sell tampons, and they have invested exorbitant amounts of money in order to influence girls into becoming loyal 'customers'. The advice and sensitivity is nothing more than a means to sales.

The counter argument to my concerns, and clearly Forrester's stance, is that companies interacting with the groundswell have better relationships with their customers and therefore can create better products and services, and we all benefit from that. Although this may be true to some extent, we don't all profit financially from it, and that's a significant difference. However this position appears to be increasingly popular and almost all of the other reviews I've read of this book are glowingly positive. Although I did come across a couple of critical reviews by more sober marketing professionals who caution that the social-media marketing gurus are dismissing well-established theory and practice. But why is it that there is so little public criticism nowadays of just how deeply we are allowing marketing into the minutiae of our lives? This new wave of marketers has 'rebranded' the very notion of marketing to a new generation of consumers. Marketing has gained an almost romanticised legitimisation and the complete integration into all aspects of our modern lives. It seems as if there is an important shift happening in the balance of power between consumers and corporations. Whereas the organic groundswell may have initially given more power back to consumers, the recent groundswell-marketing onslaught is clearly trying to change that.

My problem is not with the notion of marketing per se, as there are ways to tell people about things, to share, to influence and to really help one another without necessarily selling something. The tradition of "social marketing" is a long respected discipline that uses standard marketing tools to achieve non-commercial goals. It has traditionally been used by non-governmental organisations, school boards and not-for-profit groups to announce events, launch public service campaigns and influence ideas. There's plenty of social marketing going on in the groundswell, and it's a much better fit. But what the authors are proposing here is an outright appropriation of the groundswell for the purposes of corporate interests and profits, the very antithesis of groundswell behaviour.

Perhaps we early online "critics, creators and joiners" have been naïve in thinking that there was a bit of what *Wired* magazine defined as the 'new socialism' in social media. But the game is rapidly changing now that corporate entities have realised that they can use this phenomenon for financial profit, and even *Wired* now speaks of the death of the "collectivist utopianism of the Web."

Traditional marketers and brands have now completely infiltrated the social media landscape and will probably, sooner rather than later, dominate the online world as they do all of our media and public spaces. But I have confidence that the groundswell will continue to be an elusive thing for corporations to pin down. Sure, there will be many successful displays of branding brilliance, but the groundswell is particularly good at sniffing out phonies, corporate spin, and overtly excessive greed. Not to mention the groundswell's ongoing response to companies who make products that are bad for the environment or that are

produced with unjust labour practices. Because ultimately, the groundswell is constantly realigning the balance of power between companies and people and is only just beginning to demonstrate the unbridled influence of people connected.

**About the Reviewer**

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