

Foreword

It is 27 September 2009, at roughly half-past five in the afternoon. Cadel Evans, a man 'born to lose', has just won the World Cycling Championship in Mendrisio. This comes as a surprise to both outsiders and insiders, as the comments of the Belgian television commentary team make clear. In passing, they also inform me that this is the first ever Australian world title on the road. At around six-fifteen I check *Wikipedia* to see how other countries score in this respect. Belgium still heads the list with 25 victories, followed by Italy with 19. Holland (our traditional cycling rival) has just 7! But my biggest 'aha'-moment is when I see that *Wikipedia* has already been updated. Cadel Evans is already listed as the winner for 2009 and Australia already stands proudly in the list of championship winning countries. Who are these internauts who live in the *intense lane* of the information highway and who are offering the world a new élan? This is a battle that *Encyclopedia Britannica* can never win.

'Always in motion is the future', declares Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back*. This declaration (albeit somewhat ungrammatically) puts its finger on the problem facing today's modern managers, consultants and academics in the internet era. The future is unfolding faster than the past can be evaluated and appreciated. My favourite shopping site, *Amazon.com*, is packed with books which can never live up to people's level of expectation. How far and for how long can we carry on limping behind the past? Where is the paradigm shift that will allow us to give meaning to this past and still extract maximum benefit from the future?

The Conversation Manager provides this breakthrough. The author, Steven Van Belleghem, has written a brilliant analysis of how the internet will alter *your* commercial strategy. He does this with great style and bravura, which gave me the comfortable feeling that I was the pupil in the presence of a great master! His activities at InSites Consulting – a successful internet start-up which expertly combines science and market research – have given him the opportunity to examine at close quarters the work of the *digizens* who cruise along

the information highway. *The Conversation Manager* is a remarkable piece of work – and one that you will enjoy reading. I hope you won't mind if I give you a brief summary of the book's structure, using three legendary *YouTube film* clips as my guide.

PART 1 reminded me of the *Did you know?* clip, in which you can learn (amongst other things) that in just one (!) week the *New York Times* offers you more information than someone in the 18th century was able to process and absorb in their entire lifetime. The general tone of *Did you know?* is ominous and the Fat Boy Slim rap '*Right here, right now*' is prominent in the mix. Steven Van Belleghem goes for a different approach. His 'did-you-knows' are never threatening. He explains tectonic shifts in the internet landscape, yet manages to convey them to his readers with humour and style. Simple words and easily recognisable examples illustrate and soften the impact of these seismic changes at the deeply human and emotional level of 'you' and 'I'.

Whether he is talking about Oprah Winfrey, Domino's pizza or F.C. Bruges (his favourite football team), one conclusion remains inescapably in the foreground: authenticity is the trump card in the global brand village of the modern marketeer. The virtual world is not developing alongside everyday reality, but right at its very heart.

It is not possible to bypass – let alone win – the modern commercial chess game with the logic of the past. Forget 'either...or'. Think 'and'... 'and'. The modern marketeer needs to sense emotionality and control rationality; value the individual and steer society in the direction he wants. In **PART 2** Steven Van Belleghem openly approaches the question of what we must do to achieve brand identification in the 21st century. He never lapses into cheap and easy theorising, but is practical and concrete at all times. This part reminds me of the powerful *Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch. What would you do if you knew that this was your very last chance to act? Doing nothing is not an option. Laziness could be lethal! The solution is as simple as it is challenging, as obvious as it is powerful: marketeers must become Conversation Managers. The use of capital letters is not just a nice stylistic touch: it serves to underline the importance of these new players in your new commercial organisation. The Conversation Manager is a strong personality who listens to and talks to consumers.

And then it is time to start your own personal journey. Or to put it another way: after you have read Part 1 and Part 2, you will be positively

burning to start your journey. This book gives me the same feeling as when I first saw the clip *Where the hell is Matt?* on YouTube in 2008. Matt danced to a catchy tune and the evocative poetry of Rabindranath Tagore at places in the world where I also wanted to be. In a similar way, Steven writes about things that I want to do. In fact, I am desperate to try them all out! **PART 3** is a real *tour de force*: he tells us how we can all become Conversation Managers (you will note that I have deliberately adopted his capital letters trick). Simple propositions, simply put, but beautifully illustrated with clear and telling examples (like me, you will certainly remember the idea of the McDonald's discount voucher in Burger King!).

Good books fill up the gaps in our knowledge. Very good books change our way of thinking. Exceptional books change our way of life. This is an exceptional book. It is destined – and rightly – to join the list of bestsellers by such international stars as Seth Godin, Jack Trout or Malcolm Gladwell. In our modern world, innovations are global and ideas are democratic, in the broadest sense of the word. *The Conversation Manager* offers us all crystal-clear insights and usable advice. The familiarity of many of the Dutch and Flemish examples makes the book highly assessable for readers in the Benelux: hopefully our foreign readers will find them interesting as well. Be that as it may, Van Belleghem's arguments are skilfully put, scientifically based and backed up by razor-sharp synthesis at the end of each chapter. This book is the marketing equivalent of *Back from the future!* Like a latter-day Michael J. Fox, Steven Van Belleghem shows us the way to our future. In short, this book gave me – to use one of Steven's own quotes – “answers to the questions I never even knew I had.”

The Conversation Manager is the story of a voyage of discovery, told in a fascinating manner by a guide who has already reconnoitred the pathways to the future which he now advises us to follow. My final conclusion is simple: *The Conversation Manager* is written by a true *Conversation Champion*. I wish this book the success that it so richly deserves.

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