

From herds to swarms

We live in a world of power shifts. With the advent of the Internet, many powerful institutions have fallen off their pedestals. Consumers don't believe just anything anymore. This also means that powerful institutions – such as the church, banks, newspapers, politics and brands – are in trouble. People no longer let others define for them what is true; instead, they make their own truths. More and more, they are relying on their immediate social environment to do this. An environment that, through the Internet, is becoming ever larger.

This is a major change. Wherever we see increasing numbers of people relying on themselves and on their social environment, we also see the emergence of a new kind of group behaviour. From herds to swarms. Herds are led by an opinion leader, they share a single view, and choose a joint direction, as a single body. Swarms, instead, go in a multitude of directions, made up of the members' individual opinions. It is like a swarm of starlings that maintains continuous communication, taking on different shapes and flying in different directions.

Nowadays, people are also in continuous communication: they share their views through the blogosphere, send films by email, respond to other people's opinions. A brand that is on top of the world today can, through a single user's opinion or experience, be wiped out in no time. For example, in a single week, 135,000 people voiced their criticism on the fact that HEMA's famous sausage is not made by HEMA itself, but by Unox. And on YouTube, we could see mice running through an Albert Heijn supermarket. In a word: swarm behaviour.

Ego collective

In nature, a swarm (such as a swarm of birds) works as follows. Each bird keeps a close eye on the birds in its immediate environment, which creates a spontaneous order that, as a whole, is stronger and more intelligent than the individual birds in the swarm. Together, they are stronger than they would be on their own.

Swarms of people work in a similar way. The swarm makes its individual members stronger. With the protection of the larger group, which helps us to take up arms against the institutes of power that we no longer trust. It is a form of self-organization. An ego collective.

This is evidenced, for example, by the emergence of purchasing collectives that let each of the members negotiate a lower price. And by websites such as kieskeurig.nl, which enable us to know what we're talking about when we walk into an electronics store. And by initiatives such as the clean-up of the air in Amsterdam by joining forces to buy our own little piece of air, and

assuming responsibility for it. And by boosting our professionalism by feeding our LinkedIn network. We also see the rise of initiatives that circumnavigate all intrusion by the powers that be – such as Boober, where private people (on the principle of *no banks, better deals*) can borrow money without having to deal with a bank. In a nutshell: the swarm strengthens the individual.

Character

But the opposite is also true: a powerful individual strengthens the swarm. It has been shown that a swarm of independent opinions increases the group's intelligence. Research has revealed that as the group grows bigger, its members grow more intelligent – as long as the group is made up of independent-minded individuals who have their own views. In his book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki uses different scientific experiments to show how a large group of independent-minded people can make probability predictions that are more accurate than those of the experts. In these times, then, of vocal individual opinions – to each his own dignity and character – the swarm is also becoming more and more intelligent. We can see this in the high reliability of Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia made by “laymen”. And as we share our experiences online, we often know more than our own family doctor or physical therapist.

Reciprocity principle

You'd say that this kind of behaviour is troublesome for brands. After all, how can a brand communicate with a swarm that communicates internally first, and that becomes ever stronger and more intelligent? And that is constantly changing its course?

The answer is: by becoming part of the swarm, rather than talking to it from the outside. And you can only join the swarm if you understand what the swarm offers the individual, and what the individual can offer the swarm. This is because the swarm works according to the reciprocity principle: I'll make you stronger, you'll make me stronger. This means that brands, too, have to make people stronger. A good example is Google. Google's mission is essentially to make people stronger, to offer them navigation in the Internet world. More than anyone else, Google is part of the swarm.

Also, a swarm can only be strong if it is made up of powerful independent-minded individuals who have their own views. This means that, as a brand, you must also have an outspoken opinion, and must act accordingly, in an impactful way. So that people know what you stand for, and can make the choice to become stronger through you. The bottom line: be strong and empower people.

This article was based on the findings of DDB SignBank. DDB Sign Bank is a sociological compass that, in a unique way, identifies changes in human

behaviour (so-called "signs"). It offers insight into today's consumers, the direction in which they are headed, and how brands can capitalize on this. DDB SignBank is active in the Netherlands and in 60 DDB offices worldwide. For more information: jacqueline.wolfs@nl.ddb.com.

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