And so we are observing a tectonic shift in marketing, as forward-thinking brands are opting to engage with consumers in new and unexpected ways. Instead of relying on traditional methods to tell people about themselves, these brands are finding ways to insert themselves directly into people's daily lives. They are offering solutions to problems, even problems that are beyond the purview of their product categories. By doing this—by participating in people's lives without attempting to sell them products—brands can sidestep that naturally skeptical response: "So really—what's so special about your brand?" Instead, they gain an opportunity to connect with consumers whose defenses have been lowered by the brands' friendly and helpful overtures.

CITI RIDES TO THE RESCUE

In New York City, known for its crowded subways, surly cab drivers, and pushy pedestrians, getting around town is a problem, and Citibank has championed a new solution. The multibillion-dollar financial giant (known derisively by some New Yorkers as "Sh*tty Bank") has shelled out $41 million to sponsor the Citi Bike program. The new bike-sharing system, launched in May 2013, has revolutionized transportation for millions of New York City commuters.

While not the first program of its kind, Citi Bike is currently the largest bike-sharing program in the United States. For a low daily rate or an annual $95 membership fee, users can unlock a bike, ride to their destination, and return the bike to any docking station.

In creating this service, Citi has demonstrated that their concern for their customers goes beyond meeting their banking needs. They are effectively telling people, "We understand that getting around the city can be tough. Efficiency, convenience and environmental friendliness are all important to us too, and we are doing something about it."

We are observing a tectonic shift in marketing, as forward-thinking brands are finding ways to insert themselves directly into people’s daily lives.
Since its May launch, New Yorkers have traveled more than 5.5 million miles on Citi-branded bikes, and in an informal *New York Magazine* poll, 40 percent of Citi Bike users rated the program a 5, meaning “the world will never be the same.”

Already, consumers’ feelings toward Citi have begun to shift. In our research, one Citi Bike user who has ridden more than 100 times told us, “I have never paid much attention to Citi’s advertising, and a commercial certainly would not make me change my bank. But now I would definitely look at them as a possibility in order to support them back for what they have done to change my life.”

**OTHER BRANDS ARE JUMPING ON BOARD**

Citi isn’t the only brand finding innovative ways to help. Samsung is also leading the charge—literally—by alleviating another consumer pain point: the flashing one-bar battery signal that indicates there are only a few minutes left on a phone, tablet, or laptop. To help people facing this anxiety-inducing moment, Samsung has outfitted 13 major airports, several college campuses, the Mall of America, and the Las Vegas Convention Center with more than 500 free Samsung-branded universal charging stations. Technology blogging communities—the same forums that offer purchase advice—have applauded Samsung for this action. *Engadget* praised Samsung for “giving a nod to the little guy,” a sentiment likely shared by many consumers.

Samsung’s initiative is rooted in a deep understanding of the needs and values of their customers. “Travelers rely on their phones every day to stay connected to work and their family or friends,” said Dale Sohn, president of Samsung Mobile. “The redesigned mobile phone charging stations ensure they stay connected on the road.”

Samsung’s sensitivity to people’s needs is likely to engender a warm regard for the brand that will catalyze future consideration.

Even marketers in categories as basic as toilet paper are finding ways to participate in people’s lives. In 2009, the Procter & Gamble brand Charmin launched the Sit or Squat smartphone application to help people find the nearest clean public restrooms, mapping them out and displaying user-generated reviews. Unsanitary bathrooms are designated as “squats,” while more acceptable ones are designated as “sits.”

Since the launch of Sit or Squat, Charmin has been flushed with positive buzz. People who ignore ads featuring fluffy dancing bears seem to notice Charmin’s innovative effort; it has been mentioned on thousands of blogs and has garnered over 200 million total media impressions. One grateful individual told us: “Sit or Squat is one of my favorite go-to apps. Clean bathroom options can be scarce, and I love that Charmin has really acted on its mission rather than just telling people how it can improve their lives.”

**DOVE’S BEAUTIFUL IMPACT**

Citi, Samsung, and Charmin have all provided people with concrete solutions to logistical problems, but brands can also participate in people’s lives by offering less tangible forms of support. They can build and strengthen consumer relationships by demonstrating that they understand people’s internal conflicts and tensions. For example, for almost a decade now, Dove’s *Campaign for Real Beauty* has been addressing the lack of confidence felt by most women in relation to their own attractiveness.

The “*Real Beauty Sketches*” video, released this April as part of the campaign, exposes the harsh and unforgiving judgments women make about their own looks. The film records a forensic sketch artist drawing two portraits of the same woman—
Brands can also strengthen consumer relationships by addressing people’s internal conflicts and tensions.

one based on a description from the subject herself, the other from a person who met the woman earlier that morning. Invariably, the portrait produced from the latter description is much more flattering.

The video resonated deeply with consumers; according to Dove, it became the most watched video ad of all time just one month after its release. This video, along with other elements of the Campaign for Real Beauty, is not only impacting women and girls around the world, but may also be inspiring other companies and brands to follow Dove’s lead. For example, the diet company Jenny Craig recently made a widely publicized decision to drop celebrity spokespeople in their marketing. Whether you are creating a tangible service such as a bike-sharing system or helping people feel a little better about themselves, the principle is still the same. Brands need to step up and make a true positive impact on consumers’ lives.

LEARN TO ACT

Marketers should not be dissuaded by thinking that all the winning ideas are taken. There is an ocean of unmet needs out there. Brands can provide creative solutions to these problems by transforming their marketing efforts from talking to doing.

If you’re considering such a transformation for your brand, think of three things, captured in the acronym ACT: Assess people’s needs, Craft an innovative solution, and Test for credibility.

Brands can provide creative solutions to consumers’ unmet needs by transforming their marketing efforts from talking to doing.

ASSESS PEOPLE’S NEEDS

First, assess people’s needs and desires. Think not only about your product or category, but also about people’s lives in general. Research what they care about and find solutions to problems that are not being addressed. Citi understood consumers’ needs for convenience and efficiency; Samsung understood that consumers feel empowered when they can stay connected. These brands recognize that any successful marketing initiative must be built on a foundation of deep consumer understanding.

CRAFT AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION

The next step is to craft solutions that address the needs you identified. Brainstorm how you can best serve consumers and improve their lives, even in ways outside of your traditional realm. Citi aptly identified sponsoring a bike share as a way to give consumers the ease and efficiency they wanted.

These initiatives can and should transcend your product category. Charmin expanded the notion of its business from being a provider of toilet paper
to being a provider of comfort and security, which both their product and the Sit or Squat app exist to provide.

TEST FOR CREDIBILITY
An initiative that lies outside of a brand’s product category still needs to bolster and support the attributes the brand wants to convey within its category context. Therefore, you must give your solution a credibility test. Ask yourself: Are we a reliable source to deliver this solution to consumers? Are we fit to provide this offering, or does it contradict with other aspects of our positioning? Will people be able to make a mental connection between this initiative and our brand?

DON’T JUST TALK—DO SOMETHING
We all know the old cliché “Actions speak louder than words.” While traditionally applied to people, this saying is increasingly being taken to heart by brands. Conventional communications may help improve brand awareness and drive certain associations, but when people are making purchase decisions, a brand that is part of their lives is more likely to get into their consideration sets. By thinking more broadly—beyond their products and associated benefits—brands can take on more active and appreciated roles in the lives of consumers, thereby positioning themselves favorably when purchase decisions are being made.

The challenge going forward, of course, is measuring and valuing these initiatives. Citi Bike was only launched last May, so Citi acknowledges that the exact ROI of the program has yet to be understood in terms of deposits, account openings, or credit card spend. However, if consumer buzz and sentiment are any indication, positive results are sure to follow.

By thinking more broadly, brands can take on more active and appreciated roles in the lives of consumers.

For Citi, though, the bicycles are more than just a new marketing initiative. They have set the company apart as an innovative, forward-thinking marketer that understands and participates in the lives of its consumers. Brand builders, let this be your call to action. How will you start moving from communicating to demonstrating and participating?

To read more about innovations in branding, please visit www.mb-blog.com.

If you enjoyed “Innovations in Branding: Pedaling from Talking to Doing,” you might also be interested in:

“Creative Storytelling: For Sponsors, an Olympic Sport”

“Big Ideas: Research Can Make a Big Difference”

“Ideals: The New Engine of Business Growth”

“Why Brand Building is Like Dancing”