Christopher Locke established himself as one of the foremost chroniclers of the information age with his contribution to the popular 2000 book, The Cluetrain Manifesto, in which he spelled out how traditional hierarchical models of marketing and corporate communication were being disrupted by that most disruptive technology of all, the Internet.

Now in Gonzo Marketing, he sketches how models of marketing should look if businesses wish to thrive in an age where Locke sees the Internet as the ultimate revolt of the masses.

The book’s title is inspired by Hunter S. Thompson, self-styled creator of so-called gonzo journalism, who rejected that sacred cow of journalism, objective detachment. In his view, “The writer must be a participant in the scene while he is writing it.” So Gonzo Marketing is peppered with lively anecdotes and stories, beginning with how Locke was introduced to the power of small-scale, or micro, marketing by a busker in London who after receiving an extravagant £10...
The book’s thesis is that the Internet is not a mass medium, but rather a vast assemblage of micromarkets and communities—a thousand knitting enthusiasts here, a hundred topologists there, and so on. That being so, businesses should no longer see themselves as somehow separate from markets, relying on largely one-way communication with consumers through the controlled window of mass media advertising. To succeed in a world of micromarkets, Locke contends, a company’s marketing needs to embrace today’s welter of on-line forums, in such a way that participants in those forums are willing to describe and endorse a company’s products without appearing to be empty shills.

Because the author is proposing a new and as yet nonexistent world order for marketing, his best example for how this might work in practice is hypothetical. Imagine, he asks, a Web site called Organic Gardening World, sponsored by the Ford Motor Co. Ford is a good choice for such a forward-looking hypothetical: a few years ago, it distributed free computers and Internet accounts to 350,000 assembly-line employees, without any restrictions on use.

Organic Gardening World would be run by the handful of real organic gardeners who happen to work for Ford. Ford would support them by providing the hardware and software to run the site and allowing them to spend some time there during work hours, but otherwise would pretty much leave them alone. Locke envisions that these employees then become guerrilla marketers, talking to other organic gardeners mostly about soil and fertilizer and seeds and such, but, inevitably, about which Ford cars get the best mileage and which trucks are best for carting trees around in.

It seems improbable, Locke admits, that in an era when 140 million people tune in to watch the annual Superbowl advertising circus, marketing can or should be done in such an indirect, one-on-one, fashion. He reminds us, though, of how the railroad barons of an earlier century must have been skeptical that their majestic locomotives could be replaced by 100 million individually driven, personally financed, horseless carriages.

As Locke’s arguments are rarely spelled out as explicit formulas, they are difficult to pin down, but he does address a number of important objections. For example, he heaps contempt on similar-sounding, but quite different (and perhaps more palatable to a corporate audience) visions of Internet marketing such as mass customization—which are rooted in the idea that people can be marketed to one-on-one, but impersonally and automatically, via databases of demographics and market segmentations feeding into, inevitably, antiseptic Web sites and unwelcome direct e-mail campaigns.

Indeed, it is difficult to summarize the arguments of this book, in part because there are fewer arguments than stories. Fortunately, the stories are many and varied, making it an entertaining, as well as persuasive, quick read.