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Marketing Along the Razor's Edge

Simple Solutions Make Better Use of Resources, Resonate with Consumers

By Mark Dominiak

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Marketing professionals, including media practitioners, tend to fall into traps of conventionality. One of these traps is to use the television medium the same way consistently.

Over time, the communication creation process has evolved to focus on the depth of information marketers believe is necessary to communicate to consumers about the brand. When creating messages, marketers try to include as much relevant information as they can.

Marketers have research that confirms all of the information is important. They also have determined which contact points best intersect target consumers. The conclusion, therefore, is to deliver as much information as possible at any given contact point.

They follow this paradigm every time a messaging effort is needed.

This process has become a trap in which marketers have forgotten the most important task is to influence the consumer in the most advantageous way provided by the contact point.

Sticking With Convention

I had the opportunity to work on a brand for which a solution to this situation was desperately needed. When I arrived on the scene, the first meeting I attended was a briefing to kick off a new effort for the brand.

The account team informed us that, as in past years, the brand was instituting sweeping upgrades to its offering for the upcoming seasonal drive period. Messages would be targeted at a busy, niche audience most likely to influence the majority of new business for the brand. The client's expectation was a new agency campaign featuring television creative to communicate the complexity of new offerings.

Creative team members in the meeting were visibly disheartened. There was an awful lot of information to be crammed into the message and slim resources for production and media, with legal copy requirements besides. The team became resigned to similar campaign work as in years past: namely, two or three copy-filled spots at best with maybe enough funding left to provide a few weeks of media presence. The expectations of generating business for the client were low.

My lack of history on the account was a benefit to the team. When asked what I thought about the potential course of action, my question was simple: "Why do we have to do 30-second spots that cram all the new information into them?" The basic answer from the team was a conventional one: That's how we've always done it.

I offered a different solution. What if other contact points were chosen that would allow for the use of media options friendly to the conveyance of the brand's entire new offering—media options that could better reach a niche target and allow for brand news to be consumed by the target at leisure?

I suggested the creation of an interactive compact disc (content that doubled as an Internet microsite) that would be made available to the target in specific locations on specific days. In that way, I suggested, television could still be used, but as a tool to simply direct the target to the detailed information.

An added benefit of the approach would be that 30-seconds and heavy production were no longer needed. Television messaging only needed to direct target consumers to a place to look for specific information, and that didn't require anything more than 15 seconds and a voiceover. Voila: Lower production costs and dramatically increased media continuity for the overall effort.

The creative team's demeanor changed by 180 degrees. They very quickly saw a wealth of creative possibilities open up with the different approach and the team quickly mobilized behind the idea.

Occam's Razor

The team's realization can be described by the Occam's Razor principle: Its 14th century scientific jargon is colloquially translated as "All things being equal, the simplest solution tends to be the best one." Thomas Aquinas made a very relevant observation in considering the Razor centuries ago: "If a thing can be done adequately by means of one, it is superfluous to do it by means of several. ... Nature does not employ two devices where one suffices."

In this case, the brand's conventional television approach didn't feel as though it was doing a complete job delivering the entire message the brand needed to communicate, because it was trying to do way too much. In reality, television would be most effective at driving general consumer awareness of one aspect of the brand, but not effective at communicating the entirety of a detailed brand message in a short 30 seconds.

Therefore, why think that television had to be used to deliver the entire complexity of the message? To honor the Razor, make television presence more powerful by using it more simply.

When marketers try to make any type of media that advances consumers from point A to point Z all at once, they run the risk of over-complicating the message and falling into the conventionality trap. Step-by-step is the simple approach.

As media planners, we need to always be mindful of what roles different media types play in the lives of target consumers and communicate to our teams and to clients the strengths each medium has to move the consumer one step further down the purchase process. And we need to advocate to our team members that media be used simply to create the best impact possible.

In the above example, television brought the niche target one step closer to the brand. When the target explored the compact disc or Web site, they were yet another step closer. When they clicked on a link or dialed a phone number in the detailed pieces, they advanced yet again.

Examples of Simplicity

Another television area that can become a conventionality trap is billboard ads. Marketers tend to follow the conventional approach of creating a cute way to deliver many brand attributes in a five-second board. Happily, the recent Super Bowl demonstrated that marketers are starting to understand the value of simplicity. BudTV.com, beatyourrisk.com, cokerewards.com, honda.com and godaddy.com all made good use of their Super Bowl billboard placements to advance consumers a step closer to their brands.

Newspapers are another area where marketers are slaves to conventionality. Do we really believe all readers read the entire paper? Do they really see every ad printed in the paper? Sometimes we just need to acknowledge the paper does a great job at getting into the hands of a lot of consumers and use it as a delivery mechanism instead of a communicator.

So go for an insert that will likely be seen by many more readers than a typical ad. The financials might even be more advantageous. Higher CPMs for normal display ads may be avoided. Try conducting an analysis of insertion CPMs plus the cost of printing. It may turn out more advantageous than the regular ad CPM.

With such low click-through rates, do we really believe Internet ads must always be a vehicle to prompt interactivity? If we take a step back and remember the first likely strength of Internet ads is that they can be seen, we need to remember consumers are browsing for entertainment or information. So first, maybe Internet placements should simply provide quick entertainment or information.

If visible Internet messages can first engage consumers, the simple approach will have advanced them one step in the purchase process. From that point, consumers are smart enough to realize pretty much every Web ad will have interactivity attached to it. In short, why try to entice interactivity from the get-go? Be simple; satisfy the information or entertainment need first, focus on interactivity second.

Don't you hate it when too much information is crammed onto an outdoor board? Let's take a step back and remember that people travel by outdoor boards multiple times during the month. Why not feature only the core portion of the message on the board? And if a deeper story needs to be told, purchase sequential boards to advance the consumer yet one more step. Make a commute more like a story. Over multiple days, complexity can be achieved by units of simplicity. By making the messages simpler, they become more engaging and more effective.

Effectiveness in the earlier example was outstanding. Not only did the brand entertain thousands of consumer leads, but the marketing team was invited to multiple meetings to present to the board. Internal energy created by the effort was contagious within the client's organization.

So as a media planner, when you're faced with the trap of conventionality, one great solution has been around for literally ages. Honoring Occam's Razor, don't try to do too much in any given media type. Simplicity in how each medium is used may be the

secret to advancing target consumers more effectively down the purchase path and creating impact for your brand in the market.

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