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Decision-Making Is a Two-Step Process

Consider Hidden Opportunities in Changing Approach

By Mark Dominiak

Special to TelevisionWeek

Story continues below...



Critical decision-making is another in our ongoing discussion of growth that can help us raise the bar this year. In this column we've already discussed resolution-making, time and environmental change.

Here is a brief case study that demonstrates how making correct critical decisions can help raise the bar on media planning efforts. In this situation, marketplace circumstance and available data suggested the need for a new approach, but dynamics within the agency team pressured the media team to take the same old approach.

In preplanning work for a super-premium niche beer brand, the media team became increasingly convinced that the users of the brand had a deep love of music and that radio played a primary role in the target's media consumption behavior. A recommendation was made to the account team to pursue a spot radio campaign in key metropolitan markets with the limited funding afforded by the brand budget.

Reaction from the account director was strong and pointed. We were directed to build a television plan because the creative team's

strength was in crafting outstanding TV spots. The exchange with the account director went back and forth quietly before the media team was ordered to stop pushing and finish a television plan.

The first critical decision is fairly straightforward. Does the media team bow to pressure from the account director or does it take a stand and evolve the plan in a new direction? We believed the data was so compelling we needed to take a stand and strive to evolve the plan direction.

The second decision is the tougher one. Where are the opportunities in the situation? It's easy to see the counterproductive account director problem, but what were we missing? The answer was that we failed to include the rest of the agency team in the discussion. Our opportunity was twofold.

First, our odds of raising the bar would increase if we could engage everyone on the team in the process and share our learning beyond just the media and account teams. Second, there was potential opportunity in challenging the creative team to translate its A game from television to radio.

In response to the final ultimatum from the account director, we issued a teamwide response memo, filled with backup support data that essentially said, "If we cannot do strong radio creative, that is one thing, but if we're just too scared to try, that's entirely different." The account director was furious and the creative team was pumped. In the end, the lead creative on the team wrote spots that won awards (as an aside, the lead creative later became a satellite office's creative director), we ran a plan that covered more markets than we could have with television and the data was correct. Consumers responded extremely well, resulting in significant marketplace impact for the brand.

Decision-Making and Media

How do we apply critical decision-making to media planning? The answer is largely based in knowing when and how to make critical decisions.

If one makes a commitment to change, it shifts the individual's perspective from reactive to proactive. The individual is deciding that no longer will the environment act upon him; the individual is deciding to act on the environment. Energy shifts from defense to offense. When efforts (and media plans) shift from defense to offense odds of success, in life or in the marketplace, increase greatly.

The key to committing to change, which we call critical decision No. 1, is to know when change is needed. Changing the direction of a media plan isn't needed every time the planning process is renewed. But as media planners, we all have a good sense of when we are settling in the creation of a media plan.

It's at those times that a little voice is in the back of your head saying, "But what if?" At those times, there is probably a legitimate need to make critical decision No. 1 and commit to change. The path likely won't be easy, but it will be more fulfilling than settling.

Seeing opportunities, not problems, is critical decision No. 2. Tackling problems suggests the focus of one's energy is on cleaning up current messes. There is a willingness to adapt to be able to deal with circumstances, but the individual is still rooted in the present as the environment evolves around her. What does one do after the mess is cleaned up? Wait for the next environmental change to create a new one?

Seizing opportunity suggests a different, growth-oriented focus. Opportunities are about what is over the next horizon: new territory to be visited. Gaining that new territory is consistent with growth.

Making this critical decision No. 2 is more a matter of how than when. It's not easy to take a step back and identify opportunities in a situation. When the problem dominates your viewpoint, how can you see the opportunities? The answer is actually fairly simple. Take a giant step back and get a new perspective on the situation.

If something is right in front of you it dominates your perception. When you back up, it becomes a smaller portion of what you can see. Not only is it less intimidating, but you can see more.

For example, when considering a budget cut, the thought that dominates a planner's mind is "What do I cut?" The finished plan is what's staring you right in the face. It's natural to choose which components to cut to make up the budget difference. But if you take a step back far enough you can see the whole plan process. The opportunity may be to create an entirely new plan as opposed to dismantling the old one.

Making the correct critical decisions during times of environmental change helps put us on a path leading to growth. But we may need

help along the way. In April we'll talk about the need for others as the next principle of growth.

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