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Creating Powerful Media Ideas

Using the One-Up Exercise Enables Planners to Tap Creative Sources

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

Story continues below...



One of the most daunting tasks a media person faces in creating a plan is to weave in a big idea that can impact the marketplace.

Clients expect big ideas from communications companies and when they get them, there are rewards. When they don't, however, there are usually uncomfortable repercussions.

No media planner has a big-idea switch to be turned on and off as needed, but there are some things planners can do that can increase the chances of creating a big idea as part of the planning process. To set up one useful best practice, here's a quick story:

A Productive Road Trip

A number of years ago, my team worked for a client who happened to be a four-hour car ride away. On one particular trip to

visit the client, a team member who was crafting a departmental seminar on print planning mentioned to the traveling team she was stumped as to how to organize the seminar.

Little by little, various team members offered up items that should be covered in such a discussion. As the brainstorming session progressed, people enhanced aspects of the agenda with thoughts on the order of, "What if you added this" and so forth. One person suggested having sales reps come in and talk about working with the magazine community rather than just having a senior media person recap items academically on a slide.

Another person suggested that it might be interesting to invite the reps to attend the whole day and have them stay during the lunch break to engage media team members in conversation on the topics discussed. Yet another person suggested the discussion expand into the afternoon when a mini-project could be given to the trainees to finish and present by day's end.

What if, another suggested, the reps were asked to participate on the projects, one on each trainee team, and even pitch in on the presentation of ideas as the culmination of the day? Upper managers could be invited to assess the ideas and help contribute yet more perspective to enhance the training.

By the end of the ride, the media team had designed a lengthy and comprehensive training program for the department's greenest members—a program that included a variety of innovative elements and would have far more impact than a simple classroom discussion. The plan was presented to department leadership, approved and implemented shortly thereafter.

The seminar was completed to rave reviews, including a significant amount of very positive feedback from the reps who participated. They had never heard of or been involved with a program as unique as what had been created. They were not only pleased to have participated, but they appreciated the opportunity to get to know the people of the department better as well as gain a deeper level of understanding in how we did our jobs. In turn, the media participants were happy for the chance to see the world from the reps' perspective.

Creating the Big Idea

The notion here for creating big ideas is straightforward: Start with a simple idea and add to it. Your purpose isn't to make a simple thing complex. Your purpose is to make a simple thing more compelling—and give it quite a bit more gravity than it has in its simplest form.

Simple media ideas identify and secure impressions that deliver the creative message to the marketplace. Big ideas make simple notions compelling; not just delivering the creative message but creating a platform that can elevate the message and allow it to connect with consumers. Asking questions like "what if" can get a planner to a big idea more easily than might be expected.

Call this the "One-Up" exercise: Remember the scene in "A Christmas Story" when Schwartz and Flick disagree about the notion of a tongue sticking to a frozen flagpole? What starts out as a simple disagreement gets triple-dog-dared into a major challenge that grabs the attention of the entire school yard. The same practice works with a simple idea. Keep "one-upping" the original idea. Triple-dog-dare it into becoming something much larger.

There are two situational perspectives from which to consider the One-Up exercise. The first situation is when a media person is working alone.

The second situation is when a media person is working in concert with others.

Working Alone

It's not always easy to play the One-Up game by yourself. It's difficult to ask polarizing "what if" questions or allow your mind to range free when you're bound by the perspective of your own frame of reference. How can a media person working alone overcome this barrier?

The key component to productivity is essentially time.

In her book "The Creative Habit," choreographer Twyla Tharp discusses a notion very similar to the One-Up exercise. Tharp talks about setting up a box at the start of each of her projects. As she considers ideas and takes in background information, items with relevance for future creative activity are put into the box. The things in the box become tangible pieces of ideas that over time contribute individually to a larger creation.

Expounding on the functionality of the box notion, Tharp also mentions a habit of Beethoven's. The master composer routinely kept notes on his ideas in a series of notebooks organized by the level of development of the idea. Some ideas can be tracked at various stages of development, even suspended for periods of time and eventually revisited, modified and ultimately formed into wonderful compositions.

Another relevant example is J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings." Tolkien wrote the trilogy over a span of 12 years, first developing aspects of the mythology of his Middle Earth and the Elvish language before truly concentrating on the well-known narrative that sold millions. What started as stories for his children eventually developed into the big idea that captured the imaginations of multiple generations.

So the One-Up exercise best practice for developing ideas alone is that it is done over time. Media planners can do things such as keeping a log, filling a file with random notes or creating quick Word documents on the computer. Those sources can be revisited and augmented as appropriate with the One-Upped germs of the bigger idea.

Working With Others

The other avenue for One-Up exercises is to draw others into the process. That can be done person-to-person or via brainstorming sessions. Brainstorming sessions are always good for generating a list of ideas, but people seldom take a step back to focus on a few of the better notions. A powerful best practice would be to use the last portion of the brainstorming session to have the team play the One-Up exercise, adding on to golden nuggets and turning them into gold mines.

Planners should also be on the lookout for interactions with others that can provide One-Up opportunities. It may be something like the aforementioned team road trip. Or it could be a lunch with a rep or impromptu cocktail hour with colleagues. Whatever the source, take some notes about the idea and the One-Up notions and keep them handy for future use.

Additional One-Up Benefits

Media teams that employ tactics like the One-Up exercise stand a good chance of being successful in their planning efforts. Media plans that can One-Up themselves are much better at both keeping the brand's message fresh with consumers and keeping competitors off balance. When those situations result, clients are pleased.

A variation of One-Up also works for generating ideas that remove obstacles. How many times have you heard something like, "We can't do that because...." A One-Up type of approach can attack "can't because" in this way: Simply ask "What would we need to do to eliminate the 'because'?" Maybe one thing can't be done. But then you can ask, "What can we do that moves us one step closer?" Then simply keep asking, "What takes us one more step?"

Build a barrier-breaking solution step by step. Any one step may not in itself be a big idea. But eventually, a compelling solution can be built using a step-by-step approach, each step One-Upping the last and eliminating traps of conventionality.

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Rank	Program	Viewers (Millions)	Change	Rank	Program	Viewers (Millions)	Change
1	Monday Night Football	31.2	+	1	Monday Night Football	31.2	+
2	Survivor: All Stars	18.1	+	2	Survivor: All Stars	18.1	+
3	Survivor: The Island	17.8	+	3	Survivor: The Island	17.8	+
4	Survivor: The Game	17.7	+	4	Survivor: The Game	17.7	+
5	Survivor: The Contender	17.6	+	5	Survivor: The Contender	17.6	+
6	Survivor: The Contender	17.5	+	6	Survivor: The Contender	17.5	+
7	Survivor: The Contender	17.4	+	7	Survivor: The Contender	17.4	+
8	Survivor: The Contender	17.3	+	8	Survivor: The Contender	17.3	+
9	Survivor: The Contender	17.2	+	9	Survivor: The Contender	17.2	+
10	Survivor: The Contender	17.1	+	10	Survivor: The Contender	17.1	+

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