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Media Business
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Sharpen Your Saw and Stay Fresh

Find Ways to Broaden Perspectives and Become a Better Planner in the Process

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

Story continues below...

Driving around the Chicago metro area, I often liven up the ride by popping in the audio version of Stephen Covey's book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." The latter part of that tape is the inspiration for this column.

In discussing the seventh habit, Mr. Covey relates the story of a man coming across another man in the forest who is vigorously sawing at a tree. The first man asks the other why he doesn't take a break to sharpen the saw. The second man replies he's much too busy sawing to take time to sharpen the saw.

Mr. Covey's point is right on. Why is it that we all get so tied up in our pursuits that we can't see the power in taking a step back

and making ourselves better capable of attacking those pursuits we obviously find important? As he interjects, we're never so busy driving that we fail to take time to get gas.

He goes on to describe four areas important for people to "sharpen" regularly. "Physical" and "spiritual" areas aren't as applicable to media planners as are the "relationship" and "mind" areas. Whether planners work harder at sharpening themselves through deepened relationships or stronger minds, sharpening prompts broader perspective.

Relationships

Investing time with the immediate circle of your team has value. While you might not think there is much new perspective to be gained from those with whom you work side by side, guess again. Don't fall into the trap of thinking the only things you can learn from those around you are things relating to your avocation.

Colleagues are also individuals. There's quite a bit to learn about them. In many respects, being a student of the individual has as much value as work-based knowledge. When times are tough, understanding more deeply the people you work with can provide a tremendous source of motivational energy or help navigate turbulent waters.

Time invested with extended team members also can yield dividends. Sure, you should take the opportunity to understand occasional workmates better as individuals, but their place outside your immediate circle means you can also learn things from them because of their different perspective. This also holds true for other members of the communications team or folks from other disciplines, or even clients. Valuable perspective can be gleaned by learning what it is they do daily, how and why those tasks are performed and even how they feel about those tasks.

Interaction with folks outside of conventional circles can also provide valuable sharpening assistance. As part of a magazine training day, we once invited in reps to make presentations on various subjects to junior people in the session. We invited those reps to stay for the entire day, interact with trainees and participate in a problem-solving exercise and presentation. All involved were thrilled with the depth of perspective gained from one another during the session.

The same notion applies to other folks far beyond the circle, such as academics, writers or leaders from other fields. No one says it takes a large, formal setting to facilitate interaction. Many interesting people can be reached via chat room or e-mail, or, if you're really lucky, maybe you can set up a lunch or university visit. You may be surprised at how amenable others are to striking up a conversation with you.

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but in pursuit of worthwhile information or skills, it won't kill you. In fact, the more you exercise your curiosity, the better you'll get at finding valuable pearls of wisdom to help sharpen the saw. Activities like watching television shows, diving into research, reading or even solving puzzles can help make you more productive.

Watch

Media people probably don't invest as much time as we should viewing the programming we recommend. It's an understandable hurdle. Everyone's time is at a premium in today's world, but in a television environment as dynamic as today's, it's potentially hazardous to be out of step with changes that manifest daily. That being the case, media planners should take time every week to consume programming-and not just shows that interest them.

One starting suggestion would be to follow entire nights of programming on various networks. Start with nights and networks you never watch. What's the viewer experience like? Is there an ebb and flow to the night? What are the attractive elements of programs?

Dive into the wealth of new content options out there, especially with the new season not too far around the corner. Think about how different the viewing experience will be on MyNetworkTV this year compared with what we're accustomed to seeing nightly on the tube. The telenovela genre may be strong internationally, but it's not one many media planners have experienced

directly.

What about sampling podcasts, or viewing shows online? My daughter and I recently invested time watching episodes of "Lost" and, for fun (mostly hers), some shows on the Disney Channel's Web site. The viewing experience is decidedly different online than it is from the sofa, and online viewing made my perspective better for having engaged in it.

Search

It's no secret that the Internet is a remarkable wellspring of information with fantastic search capabilities. But how often do we use it? Media planners have a great understanding of the research tools commonly available to them at the agency. We know how to pick over MRI. We understand quite well what we can get from it and what interesting bits of info may be found if you just dig a little.

You can do the same thing with Web-based resources, and there are more of them out there than you may realize. Nielsen data is available to most planning departments, but many of us are used to digging through filing cabinets to procure paper reports.

Have you ever invested time with government resources? The American Time Use Survey, United States Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics are great sources to mine. Business sources are also outstanding. The Journal of Marketing Research has a great archive spanning a huge list of topics that not only could save you time but provide food for thought. The Harvard Business Review is also a tremendous resource. It has a deep archive and access to a number of quality articles. The drawback is that you'll likely have to pony up some cash to get them, but they don't ask for an arm and a leg.

Here's a twist for you. Have you ever used Amazon.com as a research tool? Think about it. For most of the selections that are available, you can easily find a synopsis of the book's subject matter and likely also multiple perspectives from readers. By picking through a number of reviews or synopses of various topics, you can start to get a good feel for the subject without ordering or reading a dozen books.

Read

Of course, you can also order some of those Amazon titles to read in their totality. There's nothing like a good book to get you thinking about something in a different way.

One strong suggestion would be to search out texts not directly related to your specific career area. Don't think it's valuable to read only texts on advertising or media. Think about delving into subject areas such as sociology, psychology, science, history or even biographies. You'll be surprised at how much information you'll find in other fields that can be applied to media planning.

If books seem onerous to you, take a stab at reading the trade journals pertinent to the brands on which you work. You can get a better perspective on how your clients think and see the world.

Puzzling

You can take a brisk walk or a jog, or even go to the club and hit the StairMaster to get in some worthwhile cardiovascular exercise for your body. But how do you exercise your mind? It may sound silly, but taking a brief respite to attack a crossword puzzle or a Sudoku can also help you sharpen the saw. Why? Puzzles are great ways to engage your brain in problem-solving activity. Just like your body, the more you exercise your mind, the more fit it becomes.

Mr. Covey is right. We would never be so distracted that we failed to do a no-brainer task like pausing in our driving to fill up the gas tank. Let's not get so caught up in day-to-day media drudgery that we fail to take the opportunity to engage in some simple activities that can make us better planners. Given today's pump prices, many of those activities are probably cheaper than a tank of gas.

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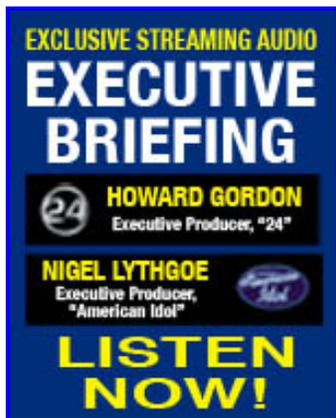
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