



[Contact Us](#)[Register](#)[Letters to the Editor](#)[Subscriber Services](#)[Media Kit](#)[Privacy Policy](#)[Archives](#)

Search: [Advanced Search](#)



Media Business
October 30, 2006

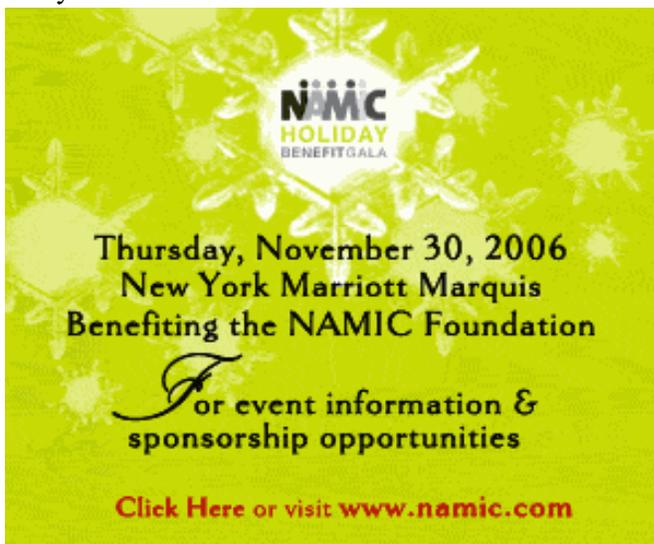
Mixed Messages Hurt Your Brand

When Customers Must Make Compromises, They Question Their Relationship With You

By Mark Dominiak

Special to TelevisionWeek

Story continues below...



Last week I went through a customer service experience that was so bad I decided I needed an outlet to positively channel my frustration. It occurred to me a good avenue might be to take a deep look at the overall situation and draw parallels to the media planning process.

A number of months ago I received a direct-mail offer from United Airlines suggesting participation in its Mags for Miles program offering me magazine subscriptions in exchange for airline miles in my account that were soon to expire. Not realizing my miles actually had a finite shelf life, I elected to dive into the online portion of the program.

It was worthwhile. The number of miles wasn't good enough to use for travel, but would net more than 15 subscriptions. I

sprinkled in a good number of magazines serviceable to me as a media person. I was looking forward to Variety, Entertainment Weekly, TV Guide, Newsweek, The Wall Street Journal and a number of others. The program seemed to be a blessing in disguise.

After completing the online ordering process, I received confirmation June 20 that the order had been placed and that the magazines would begin arriving in six to eight weeks.

Fast-forward to October: No subscriptions have begun. I contacted the Mags for Miles fulfillment center in short order, only to discover that it had no record of the transaction and that the airline needed to be contacted to have the miles confirmed in the system so the transaction could be completed.

The big problems were on United's end. Its mileage arm informed me it had no record of the magazine transaction and since my mileage expiration date had passed, my miles had been wiped out of the system. After much conversation, it didn't matter: The irritated mileage program rep informed me it was tough luck for me. The miles were gone, they could not be reinstated and there was nothing I could do to replace the miles. At least I concluded the call by procuring the number to the tech-support unit.

Interaction there was completely the opposite from that at the mileage unit. While the polite young man there couldn't help directly, he quickly determined with his managers that my best shot for getting the problem corrected was with United Customer Relations. He even forwarded me to that number directly with wishes for a good weekend.

Of course, at customer relations the situation turned back in the opposite direction. The gentleman there was polite, but hard to understand. After a back-and-forth, he regretfully informed me that he was restricted by the company to a smallish number of replacement miles he could provide. Of course, he was sorry for my disappointment. And, by the way, while he immediately addressed the replacement in the system, I was informed I would not be able to access miles in my account for three to four weeks.

Lessons for Planners

In the end, experiences like this invariably damage the brand. The sum of prior messages doesn't hold water in view of the recent experience. Consumers no longer view the brand in the same light, and it boils down to the brand failing to holistically address its consumer relationships beyond the transaction of products or services. Here are some aspects of the failure and how they translate to media planning.

No consistency in communication. In the Mags for Miles situation, every point along the communication experience had a different brand voice. The initial communication tone was inflexible and irritated. The second was polite and helpful. The third was barely understandable and, while helpful, ultimately restrained.

For any brand, those situations are unfortunate because over time, users of the brand will experience products or services and repeatedly hear communication messages that help develop expectations about how that brand will fill their needs. When a circumstance like the example occurs, for the consumer it's like having an old friend do something completely out of character. It makes the consumer question the relationship. No brand wants to see situations in which loyal users decide to cast their lot with a competitive brand.

If advertising messages are "gifts" for consumers, message context is the wrapping paper. If the message is presented in an inappropriate context, or in contexts that differ greatly across amassed exposures, the brand can deliver inconsistent communications.

Media planners should strive to engineer consistency into plans. If a brand and its message are serious, the plan shouldn't include comedies. If the brand thrives on a tongue-in-cheek personality, the plan shouldn't rely on news or newsmagazine programming. Sometimes it's difficult for a planner to build in premiums that may be needed to ensure consistency in context when things like rotators bring attractive efficiency, but the effect on consumers is probably worth the investment.

Forcing compromises on consumers instead of benefits. Brands sell themselves to consumers based on the benefits they claim to provide. Consumers expect that a product or service will solve a problem or fill a need that they have. The product or service opens up possibilities for consumers in their lives and they want to take advantage of the opportunity.

Often with the purchase of brands as a condition of the category consumers are forced into compromises over things like prices, blackout dates, limited availability, hours of operation, size, quantity, color palettes and other attributes. Settling for a color not to one's taste or waiting to make the purchase or having to deal with some unappealing feature may be worth the inconvenience if the product or category is the only option to filling the need.

However, when compromises a consumer did not expect become part of the bargain, the brand begins to look less attractive. In the Mags for Miles example, there were a number of compromises injected into the situation. Miles needed to be used by a particular date or they would be terminated, even though they had been legitimately earned. Various departments could not solve the problem because that wasn't their job. Only a reduced number of miles could be replaced because that's what the brand restricted the representative to do. The consumer must wait three to four weeks to take advantage of what recompense was offered.

Those aren't the types of compromises consumers find acceptable. They're the ones that make them feel their only value to the brand was in the transaction for the core product. More weight ends up on the liability side than on the benefit side of the equation, potentially removing the brand from future consideration.

In the television space, there are a number of areas in which consumers have been forced to make compromises over the years. Programs appear on certain nights. Ads must be endured before the show begins again. The next show doesn't air until next week. You can't watch if you're at work. Of course DVRs and TiVo have given consumers the power to eliminate those compromises, and the networks are breaking ground with their digital offerings.

My own TiVo-less quest to catch "Jericho" on a night inconvenient for me has been wonderfully solved by online episodes graciously funded by Target, AT&T and Cingular. Content availabilities like this have become a wonderful tool in the media planner's box to help consumers break the shackles of compromise. Associating a brand with a consumer's feeling of compromise escape can foster benefit-enhancing communication context.

Lack of empathy. Consumers have relationships with brands, just as they have with other people. When consumers have selected the brand, they expect interactions will be mutual, just as with friends or family members. One key aspect of interactions is empathy; if a friend or relative doesn't demonstrate empathy with an individual at a rough time, it's unlikely the individual will maintain a relationship's status.

In media planning, it might not seem there's much that can be done. But consider the power of really diving in with the creative team and understanding the mood and tone of communication pieces designed for each media type. They will each attack the mood of consumers during a particular need state.

For the planner, it again boils down to context. Consumers can be experiencing a range of emotions during the day and at times various media are consumed. How well do you know your target consumers? What are they feeling when a particular message may be delivered?

If the planner has a good grasp of what the creative message has in store, he will make very sure that it is delivered in a media type and at a time emotionally relevant to the consumer. In doing so, execution of the media plan will demonstrate brand empathy and increase the brand's chances of succeeding in the marketplace.

Mark Dominiak is principal strategist of marketing, communication and context for Insight Garden.

[E-mail to a Friend](#)[Format for Printing](#)

WEB EXCLUSIVE



[Bob Wright: NBC Universal's Chief Executive Talks All Things Media](#)



[Mark Cuban: In-depth Q&A with media tech titan covers everything from A to Z](#)

[Expanded interview with NBC Universal Television Group President Jeff Zucker](#)

BLOGS



[Daisy Whitney](#)

[Tom Shales](#)

[Marianne Paskowski](#)

[Steven Lipscomb](#)

VIRAL VIDEOS



[Daily Viral Videos](#)

[TVWeek's Featured Viral Video](#)

SPECIAL REPORT



[Verbatim: Television's biggest executives predict the industry's digital future.](#)

DIGITAL DEALMAKERS

[Sangita Verma: CEO and founder of Mountain View](#)

AUDIO DOWNLOADS



[Interviews with Doug Ellin of 'Entourage'](#)

[Interview with Nigel Lythgoe of 'So You Think You Can Dance'](#)

AWARDS CENTRAL



[58th Annual Primetime Emmy Winners](#)

BONUS CONTENT

[HD Newsletter](#)

[Media Planner Newsletter](#)

[Datebook](#)

[Roving Eye](#)

[Newsmakers](#)

[TV Links](#)

[Weekly Ratings Chart](#)

SPEAKOUT

[Should there be more sci-fi programming in prime time?](#)

FREE E-Newsletters

[Sign up for E-Daily](#)

[Sign up for Daily Viral Video](#)

[Sign up for HD Newsletter](#)

[Sign up for Media Planner](#)

[Sign up for E-Editions](#)

SUBSCRIBE



CLASSIFIEDS

[Classifieds](#)

ADVERTISING

[Media Kit](#)

[Contact Us](#)|[Register](#)|[Letters to the Editor](#)|[Subscriber Services](#)|[Media Kit](#)|[Privacy Policy](#)

Copyright 2006 [Crain Communications Inc.](#)

Site Design, Programming and Administration by [Chaffee :: Interactive](#)