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Break Out of Conventional Approach

'Same Old' Ways of Thinking Can Lead to Uninspired, Repetitive Media Plans

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

Sometimes the greatest enemy a media planner can face in the creation of media plans is conventionality. Dynamics of the account team, brand client or category conspire over time to influence plans into repetitive patterns that become hard to break. Yearly planning exercises deteriorate into a search for optimization or negligible refinements.

The way out of a conventionality rut starts by acknowledging the problem. If a quick review of the last few years' plans demonstrates little evolution, there is significant likelihood that convention is creating constraints and limiting plan potential. In effect, the team may have placed itself in a box that it's become hard to think outside of.

A quick competitive review of category leaders is in order. If a competitive review shows the same standards and patterns of investment, conventionality of approach may be the category rule as well.

Escaping conventionality should be viewed as an opportunity, not a problem. When a brand finds ways to break convention, that evolution provides a competitive edge. If executed appropriately, an evolutionary approach can secure a level of brand exclusivity that may keep competitors off-balance for a while.

How can planners attack conventionality successfully? Starting to treat media planning strategy a bit more like a war game isn't a bad place to start.

"The Art of War" by Sun Tzu, ancient China's famed military theorist, contains many metaphors for conventionality. For example, "Attaining 100 victories in 100 battles is not the pinnacle of excellence. Subjugating the enemy's army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence."

Perhaps a different way to phrase this would be that rewriting the rules of a war game so that a competitor can't compete delivers a more complete victory. Circumvent the current, conventional battlefield. Leave competitors behind to fight those hundred battles among themselves, realizing only later that the real battle they need to fight is the one to catch up with you.

Areas of Media Implication

Conventionality can exist in virtually every strategic foundation area of media plans. As a first step in the planning process, an assessment of conventionality's influence on each foundation area should be done. Planners can determine which areas might yield the greatest competitive benefit should conventionality be broken and attack that area accordingly.

- Target Audience: One of the best examples of breaking target convention comes from the cola category. Back in the 1980s, senior management for Coke became frustrated with the ongoing battle to win one or two share points in a mature category. Then-CEO Roberto Goizueta asked some simple questions of his senior management: "What is the per-capita consumption of fluids by the world's people? What is Coke's share of that total?"

  The answers are 64 and 2 ounces, respectively. In the cola category, Coke owned a 35% share and was trying hard to increase its position. But if the company could increase its share of total fluids from 2% to 3%, it would have a significantly larger impact than it could attain by simply fighting in the cola space.

  Thinking about share growth from a total fluid instead of a cola perspective alters the view of who the important target is. The target is no longer heavy cola drinkers. It now becomes the most opportunistic populations among coffee, water or juice drinkers. A different target potentially means a different message battleground, and one that may not be as cluttered or conventionally constrained as existing category battlegrounds.

- Geography: What are the dynamics of the category? Do competitors support their brand nationally or only in their best markets? Has your brand attended only to its best-developed markets? A new approach may favorably change the conventional dynamic.

  Why consider geography nationally or by what conventionally defines a market? It's entirely possible that a market with a 70 brand development index may have a 140 development in part of the market and a 25 in the rest, yielding what appears to be an overall poor market average.
  Maybe geography should be considered on the basis of Zip codes or regions or suburbs within markets. Retail distribution or target concentrations may highlight productive areas in a marketplace and bring to light those that provide no benefit. Targeting only the opportunistic areas eliminates waste and makes invested dollars more productive.

  Options like cable or satellite zones, regional print inserts or specific outdoor locations are all available to planners. Focus of resources may enable conversion of a seemingly poorly developed brand market into a money-maker for the brand. From a competitive-edge perspective, it would take competitors a while to ascertain from conventional spending reports that your brand was engaging in highly targeted strategies of this sort.

- Seasonality: When planners consider sales seasonality of their brand or of the category, how much is driven not by consumer need, but by category marketing? Occasionally, marketing efforts are the driver. In that situation, what's to stop a crafty brand from breaking conventionality and marketing when the competition is not?

A classic example concerns the marketing of sinus sufferer brands during the heavy cold and flu season. Cold and flu season happens to be the high point of seasonality for sinus brands, because the average person who is not a chronic sinus sufferer purchases a sinus product to address cold or flu symptoms.

If chronic sinus sufferers are really the core target for a sinus brand, off-cold-season timing is a better strategic option. During those times, hundreds of millions of competitive message dollars are not shouting in the marketplace, meaning individual brand messages have a better chance of connecting with prospects. Also, the cold and flu season tends to coincide with the high-priced fourth quarter; avoiding that means ad dollars can go farther.

It all adds up to a better opportunity outside of conventionality. Reaching sinus sufferers more effectively in the off-season can mean conversion of prospects that will constantly need to refill their medicine cabinet with product because of the chronic nature of their ailment. The longer-term, multiple-box consumers are worth far more over time than a few occasional non-chronic purchasers.

Does your brand's category function on seasonality paradigms that might be counterproductive? It may be worth a deeper look to see if opportunity lies just below the surface.

- Budget: Conventionality also can be found in budgetary practices. Many brands consistently treat fourth-quarter funds as a flexible pot that can help achieve bottom-line goals at year's end. Media budgets can be a quick way to show large profitability in year two or three for a new brand.

  Unfortunately, conventionally viewing media funds as a way to easily address balance-sheet problems can actually cause marketplace problems or keep the brand from exploiting opportunities. Not investing adequately in fourth quarter can lead to lengthy hiatus periods, which are harder to recover from months down the line. It may actually take more investment to return to square one than if maintenance funds were retained.

  In the second or third year of a brand intro, cutting funds works to undermine the brand just as it may be cementing momentum, or open the door to competitors who are just entering the market with new products. Take a step back and think about what budget conventionalities may exist on your brand or in the category that can provide significant benefits with some changes.

- Media Selection: Does the category fall into expected patterns of which media or which genre types within a medium are used as platforms for brand messages? Are all of the key category brands in TV, therefore your brand is as well? It's unlikely that conventional properties are the only ones relevant to core target audiences.

  Don't let legacy media selection strategies rule your plan. A useful exercise would be to revisit a comprehensive list of media and properties relevant to your target. Start by considering how relevant each is to which part of the purchase process for the brand. Then look at competitive presence.

  Zero in on media types and properties targeting the most opportunistic part of the process. If there are no competitors there, that's actually a good thing. Your brand may have an opportunity to own the territory. Legacy or reach and frequency shouldn't cloud your judgment. Include properties that will influence consumers in a positive way.

Owning new, relevant territory is a very positive thing. It disencumbers the media plan from pouring energy and resources into areas where there is little to be gained.

New territory allows a brand to escape convention and present a message to a consumer in a fresh, uncluttered way. That breaking of convention may be all that it takes to breathe new life into your brand.

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