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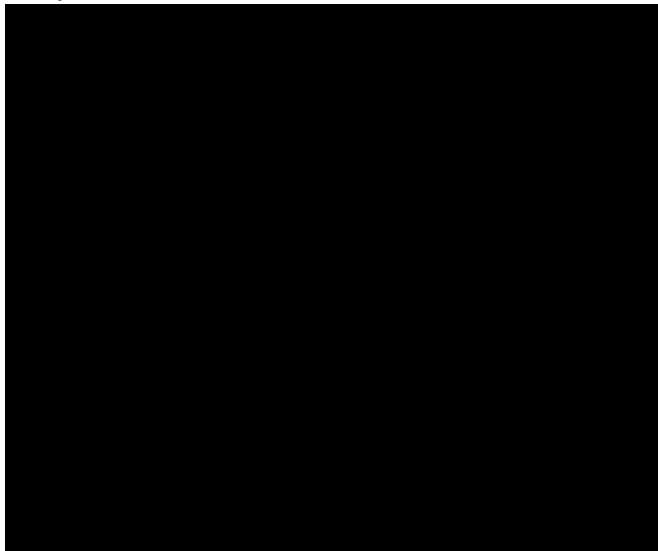
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When Good Plans Go Wrong

Addressing the Problems Head-On Can Minimize Damage for Clients

By Mark Dominiak, Special to *TelevisionWeek*

Story continues below...



I recently made my annual pilgrimage to Ball State University to share real-world case studies, talk about media planning and conduct a dialogue with students in a number of journalism classes. Beyond the altruistic value of giving something back to my alma mater, the experience always provides me with unexpected benefits.

There's a lot to be learned from the questions students ask. Some of them are to be expected: "Should you interview at an agency if they have recently lost business?" "How can you tell if an agency is on an upswing or downswing?" "How did you get into the business?"

Other questions went beyond the norm and showed that some of the students are starting to get into the real nuts and bolts of media planning. "How do you attack multiple target segments for a product that has broad reach?" "How does the media strategy in this case tie in with the creative strategy?"

But the most intriguing question came from a young woman who was still an underclassman: "Do you ever fail?"

In addition to being a great question, it also provided one of those unexpected benefits of a college visit. Not only did I enjoy the opportunity to provide a thoughtful answer on the spot, but the question suggested to me a discussion of failure would have value as a topic for media planning.

In marketing and in media planning, we tend to invest more time celebrating victories than contemplating failure. Whether it's something as big as a wholesale failure, a smallish mistake or an unanticipated problem, we have a tendency to run from failures and never dwell on them again. That is exactly the wrong attitude to have when things go bad.

The world of communications and media has always been complicated and is now, more so than ever. There are far too many variables present in the communications environment that can be missed or can unexpectedly change and negatively affect the best-laid media plans.

Ignoring the contingency of failure could leave the team unprepared to face it, which can compound negative impact to the brand. Anticipating the possibility of failure prompts the team to shore up holes in the media plan and keeps the team vigilant, minimizing negative impact should failure occur.

When plans fail, there are basically two areas a planning team needs to address. The first deals with the immediate concerns of the situation, the second with future implications.

Bring Failures Into the Open

Like most things in life, the manifestation of failure strikes an emotional chord. People are responsible for the creation of media plans. When individuals make a small mistake in the details of the plan or encounter a problem that results from an unanticipated event, they tend to take those failures personally.

How many times have you experienced or heard of a planning situation going bad and the team trying to figure out how to correct it or bury it on the fly before the situation becomes public knowledge to managers or clients? It makes people uncomfortable to have failures, accidental or otherwise, become a focus of attention.

It's important to keep in mind that a planner's first responsibility is to the brand. Especially at a time when there has been some type of failure, it isn't practical to dwell on emotions. Planners should not try to forge ahead and attempt to solve problems quietly on their own. In the end, fear of repercussions or embarrassment is not as important as addressing whatever might have prompted failure in a plan.

Senior leaders on the planning team should be equipped to provide the help a planner may need. Planners have to realize that not only do their managers have more experience, it is highly likely that they have had to deal with similar situations over the course of their careers. As such, there is almost no conceivable instance in which a planner should try to keep managers out of the information loop.

Planning leaders need to remember that younger team members may be fearful of repercussions in the event of failure. Managers need to make sure they are approachable and do their best to remove emotions from the equation when it comes time to deal with failures. Job No. 1 is to get the brand and its media plan on track as soon as possible.

Have a Solution

The first action to undertake, then, when some type of failure occurs in your media plan is to meet the situation head-on. Bring leaders into the loop. Be proactive. Take the offensive in addressing problems.

When a planner reaches out to managers, there is an inclination to make excuses or point fingers. Planners need to remember the

brand's clock is ticking. Their primary job is to minimize any impact the circumstance might create.

When it becomes necessary to bring failures into the open, get that information to managers quickly. Provide as comprehensive a briefing as possible in the discussion. Don't leave out any details. Even small things can be important. Bring a solution or two to the table with you as well. Demonstrate a bias for action. Show managers that the focus is where it should be, which is solving the problem, not dwelling on it.

Solutions and a bias for action are important because they go a long way in converting the negative energy of a failure situation into the positive energy of moving forward. Positive energy provides a better karma for finding solutions and dealing with the time pressures that are likely involved in failure.

Make sure clients are included in the loop as early as the situation dictates. The longer the team waits to bring them into the loop, the more opportunity clients have to hear about the problem elsewhere. Clients need to hear about bad things from the team first.

Bringing solutions to that conversation is extremely important. If something has gone wrong, the client will be questioning the team's ability. They will be inclined to question more than just ability if the team shows they are hesitant as to how to proceed. While it's not the type of opportunity any media team wants, a failure situation is a time when the team can demonstrate how good they are at dealing with pressure.

Learn From the Situation

After the storm has passed, invest some time in reflecting on what happened. As George Santayana once said, "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." One way to decrease the chances of snags in the future is to understand failure situations and their contributing factors inside and out so that future plans can address those possibilities and avoid them.

Don't just quietly reflect on them. Try to bring the team together and conduct a review of the situation. There might be some value in laying out a chronology of the situation in as much detail as possible. Also try to do some brainstorming around the key factors that may have led to the situation. Pull out some easels and marshal the team in creating a number of ideas that could eliminate or address those factors in the future.

After solutions have been implemented, managers should also take some extra effort to regroup with planners. Given that failure can be viewed in very personal terms, it's important to make sure no one has fallen into the trap of dwelling on the past. Managers must assess how things stand, administering encouragement or a metaphorical kick in the pants as the situation dictates. And in every situation, managers must remember to ask "What did you learn from this situation?"

Take some time after the dust has settled to turn the situation into a broader learning experience. Develop a best-practice white paper that can be forwarded to the organization-at-large or to the client. Consider developing a case study presentation to be used for training sessions or seminars.

With all of the variables and complexity in today's communications environment, the possibility of failure can haunt any media plan. When failures occur, planners should fight the initial urge to hide things or to solve the problem by themselves.

The most productive action for a planner is to quickly bring in the larger team and have possible solutions in hand. That course of action will change the situation's energy from negative to positive, better serve the brand and provide a valuable learning experience for the planning team.

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