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Changes to Plan Can Prove Costly

Returning to Work Already Done Saps Media Team's Forward-Looking Energy

By Mark Dominiak, Special to *TelevisionWeek*

One of the most irksome situations a media planner can face is the unhappy occasion of a plan revision.

In today's world of evolving and ever more complex media choices, the incursion of revisions into the media-planning process is as inevitable as weeds in a well-groomed lawn. Clients tend to view plan revisions as an entitlement; communications companies for years have viewed plan revisions as a necessity of service.

But revisions create a variety of predictable and counterproductive side effects that take their toll on the planning team, including stress; change of perspective; lost profitability; burnout; and vendor implications.

Understanding the side effects of revisions should give planning teams a solid rationale for developing best practices that can proactively attack plan revision circumstances, keep teams fresh and deliver end results that create positive marketplace impact for clients.

Stress

For starters, plan revisions are consistently unexpected and usually must be completed on a tight time frame. There is a significant amount of scrambling required by the team to address the situation. High levels of energy are expended in the relatively short time allotted to complete a revision, creating stress on the entire team.

Added to the stress of the team scrambling to implement a revision is the stress that bleeds through from the client or other communications team members, who themselves are under the gun. Managing stress for two is more difficult than managing for one. Stress takes a toll on everyone and should be minimized or eliminated if possible.

Change of Perspective

Most planning teams don't have the luxury of expansive staffs devoted to each brand. So when plan revisions occur, work in progress on the brand must be put on hold until the revision is completed. It's not good to stop positive momentum, as significant energy may be required to re-establish it.

Moreover, the team's perspective changes with revisions. Focus shifts away from forward-looking activity to work that has been completed already, from long-term growth to mundane execution and process. There's something about forward-looking efforts that puts a bit more zip in everyone's demeanor. Teams feed off of that energy and prosper. Revisions bring that energy to a halt in order to address the clean-up in aisle three.

Lost Profitability

Communications teams, whether agencies or media shops, lose profitability when plan revisions are required. Resources required for one or two revisions might be built into the scope of work created at the beginning of an engagement, but additional revisions of varying magnitudes inevitably occur. More often than not, the estimate of expected plan revisions included in the initial scope of work falls short of the reality when activity is reconciled at year's end.

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I have seen smallish brands call for as many as 15 plan revisions over the course of a fiscal year. Dynamic brands or clients might see even more. Man-hours are required to complete revision work; unless there is an arrangement that compensates by the hour (highly unlikely), clients will receive more hours of labor than dictated by scope. Other deliverables still will be expected, so team hours go up and revenue per hour drops. More problematic, employee work-weeks go from 40 hours to painfully more.

Opportunity cost is buried in that equation. Planning teams working to revise once-complete work divert man-hours away from projects that might increase the organization's profit. What if revision time were invested against research or speculative projects that could increase the brand's profitability? Shops stand to be rewarded for that kind of work. What if revision time were invested against creating new intellectual capital or winning new business? It is harder to find time for those types of activities in planning groups constantly required to make revisions.

Burnout

There is also a human toll that results from the grind of going back and doing things over. People get tired of doing the same task repeatedly. They can become discouraged and productivity can drop. Lost productivity affects profitability in ways harder to measure.

Pursuit of greener pastures could be an ultimate result. When people spend too much time re-covering old ground, they don't grow in their skills. It won't take long for savvy employees to sense the trajectory of that type of career path. When people decide to avoid that trap, their departure creates yet another profit loss for the organization.

Filling vacancies eats up organizational resources. Time is invested by multiple team members interviewing prospects, many hours are needed to bring new people up to speed on brands and within the organization, not to mention the cumulative investment that walks out the door when a longtime employee leaves. All of those hours instead could have been invested in proactive, business-generating activities.

Vendor Implications

Repeated revisions have an effect beyond the core communication team as well. There are matters of practical impact that occur in the marketplace. Plan revisions may require movement of impressions from one week into another where no inventory was previously purchased. That could result in paying higher rates due to the supply and demand of last-minute circumstances.

There is also a significant loss in control. When the marketplace is moving, brands are more likely to become the tail rather than the dog. Desired inventory may not be accessible. Choices may be limited to the best of what's left instead of what's best for the brand.

Planners also lose the best advocacy ability of advertising sellers to marshal resources on behalf of their brand. Short time frames can cut off reps from the full breadth of services a vendor could provide. Also, planners can lose commitment from a vendor in revision circumstances. Many reps can be hesitant to invest their time and resources on amending prior commitments versus pursuing new deals.

Too many revisions can result in a loss of credibility for the planning team, much like the boy who cried wolf. Does a rep really want to dive in to a new brand buy with gusto if history suggests all of the work will just be changed in short order anyway? Why give very generous rates to a brand that may be canceling or moving inventory frequently? When the planning team can manage revisions appropriately, consistency in execution behavior can help build relationships with vendors instead of undermining them.

Managing Revisions

The best course of action any planning group can take to deal with plan revisions is to plan for them. Here are a number of best practices that can help convert revisions into a more manageable and possibly more beneficial part of the planning process:

Create a blueprint of plan elements during the initial planning process. Prioritize elements of the plan. Eliminate the need to reassess the elements of the media plan every time a revision is called for. Which elements create the foundation of the plan? Those are priority No. 1. Ensure that every plan element has a priority number. This exercise sheds light on which elements are "last in" for your plan. In a revision situation, cut the last priority first.

Get the correct clients involved early in the process. Revisions often result because of direction received from lower-level clients. If your brand consistently finds itself in the midst of a process where the ultimate decision-maker doesn't provide direction until after the fact, do what you can to amend the process to include the key decision-maker early on; revisions will decrease.

Establish with clients the number of revisions as part of scope. Not only can this exercise limit the amount of time invested on revisions during the year by the team, it can focus the process overall. Everyone in the process will take a step back to ask if the considered revision is really necessary. In addition, the planning team provides itself with a check against profitability loss.

Take the perspective of a new opportunity rather than a dismantling. Maybe the blueprint notion seems wrong for your brand. Try this: In the event of a plan revision, say a budget reduction, don't think about the situation as a cut. Look at the situation as a new project. With the same planning objectives, how would you solve the problem with a different budget? While this practice may not solve the problem of time pressures created by revisions, it can solve the problem of people-related side effects, helping keep the team engaged in a forward-looking mode.

As with death and taxes in life, media planning teams will always have to deal with the circumstance of media plan revisions. But there is no need to suffer through them constantly. Negative side effects can be mitigated with smart, proactive planning.

Does your team have plans in place to positively attack plan revision circumstances? If not, there's no time like the present to start. n

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