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Team Player Strategy A Winning Pitch

Shared Vision Paradigm a Powerful Approach to Meeting Clients' Needs

By Mark Dominiak

Special to TelevisionWeek

Story continues below...

October playoff baseball is in full swing, and this season is not at a loss for compelling stories. In a post-game interview about his recent win against the Yankees, Detroit Tigers pitcher Kenny Rogers offered some good food for thought about the attitude and focus it takes to win.

Asked what approach he used to be successful in his outing, Rogers talked about the game being the biggest of his career. Since it was so important, he made sure he was going to leave everything he had out on the field. Rogers believed in it so strongly, he said it more than once.

It sure worked for him in that game. He pitched seven and two-thirds innings and gave up only five hits to a tough Yankee lineup, with eight strike-outs and no earned runs. Leaving everything you have on the field certainly has its advantages.

Why is it, though, that when it comes to interacting with our counterparts in the vendor community, media planning teams don't follow the same powerful advice? When it comes to reaching out to vendors and reps for properties we need to purchase in the marketplace, planning teams hold a lot of information close to the vest during the interaction process. Why is it planning teams don't do what Rogers did and leave everything they've got out on the field?

Worrywarts

If sales reps were asked, planners would hear a litany of reasons why vendors don't receive as much information as they need to do their jobs effectively. The driving emotion behind those reasons is fear; planning teams are worried bad things will happen if they don't retain control of what they know.

They worry that if they share detailed information about the nature of the communication effort, proprietary direction may not stay in the room. In short, planners are worried that if they really let reps in under the tent, reps will turn around and share what may be juicy strategic direction with any competitors the reps may also happen to call on.

One simple way to alleviate this fear is a simple nondisclosure agreement. If the planning team is worried, just ask the reps to sign an NDA before any briefing begins. That way, the brand and planning team is protected and vendors will understand how serious the team is about creating the best possible marketplace impact for the brand.

There is also a fear that if the full depth of information is shared, the agency may lose negotiating advantage with the vendor. Planning teams seem to have this ingrained fear that if vendors are given as much information as the planning group has, it will inevitably lead to higher CPMs.

What planners lose sight of is that the ultimate goal really isn't to buy lots of target impressions for the best possible CPM. Great media plans work against a vision of creating significant impact for the brand in the marketplace. The goal is not to just buy impressions; the goal is to buy the contact-point ideas that create envisioned impact. What the planning team really wants is to negotiate the best possible rate that can be obtained to execute against those ideas.

Without enough guidance, reps will be inclined to simply sell what is easiest for them to sell, which is impressions against a demographic. If that happens, all the players in the process will ultimately lose. Reps may get a buy, but since it isn't designed for impact, the brand probably won't see the best possible marketplace performance. At that point, the agency will be under the gun for executing a plan that didn't generate results and the media property will look like it was unable to influence consumers.

Getting on the Same Page

What planning teams need to realize is that when they let their fears get the best of them, they are cutting themselves off from some very powerful tools they could be leveraging on the brand's behalf. Those tools are shared vision, new knowledge and trust.

Most planners who have been through some type of leadership training are familiar with the illustration of a lack of shared vision: The team's goal is a big arrow pointing north, but since the team doesn't have shared vision, dozens of stick figures are moving in many directions, most counter to the direction of the team's goal.

In communications, that type of activity leaves a net result of very little movement toward the brand's desired direction. Effort ends up being a great waste of energy and resources on behalf of many people to move the needle only slightly in the direction the message was intended to go.

The great equalizer is information. When all of the stick figures in the little drama are deeply informed on the background and

rationale for the direction in which the arrow is pointed, they all start lining up in that direction. Even if only the same amount of energy and resources are put in as in years prior, results will be significantly greater when more individuals are pulling the overall team toward the intended goal.

That's why vendors who are well informed are a huge asset. When they fully know the intentions of the brand, they will be one (or many) of the stick figures pointed in the correct direction. They will add energy and momentum to overall brand efforts.

Conversation not only fosters shared vision, it opens up the door to new knowledge. Media planners can't possibly know all there is to know of what the vendor can do or what properties or execution possibilities are out there. It is also not possible to know whether desirable innovations that seem outlandish to the planning team are in fact viable options from the vendor's perspective (even though they might push the envelope). Without the kinds of conversations that come from shared vision, a planning team may never learn this valuable information.

Additionally, groups of people that engage in deeper working relationships will grow to learn and understand more about each other. A valuable outgrowth of that understanding is trust. It may not seem like a big deal, but it can be an invaluable asset to the brand. Imagine a circumstance in which a brand might have some marketplace crisis. In relationships where trust exists between the planning team and their vendor counterparts, a brand can react more quickly in the marketplace.

Withholding Information

Without things like shared vision and trust, rates may look better, but in reality everybody loses. Messages don't perform as well in the marketplace. Clients change agency partners more quickly. And vendors actually have a lot to lose.

Clients will tend to think that their message on this network or in that magazine didn't work very well. Part of the blame will fall smack onto the agency of record, but there will be little nagging thoughts about the property as well. No vendor wants that type of perception.

And, practically, time is wasted as well. Every time a client changes an agency of record, a vendor has to re-establish relationships with the new agency of record, possibly from scratch. The time spent establishing basics of new relationships is time that could have been invested with the agency planning team on new ideas that could pay dividends for the brand, which would make the property and the agency look good.

A Different Approach

There are likely many ways a planning team might decide to institute deeper information-sharing with their vendors, but here is at least one notion to use as a straw dog.

Think about how much time a planning team wastes meeting individually with vendors to recap the same background information and objectives time and again. A strong idea would be to coordinate one comprehensive meeting including reps from all properties under consideration and briefing them all at the same time.

The media planning team could have the account planning team attend. Perhaps the account planners can give the vendors a brief on the target consumer. What about having the creative team attend? Maybe they can show spots, print and interactive executions. If those aren't available, storyboards or scripts could be used. Vendors could be briefed on why the campaign direction was chosen.

Of course, the media team would additionally discuss how the plan strategy ties into and flows from agency learning.

If there are worries about confidentiality, have vendors sign agreements as they arrive for the meeting. In subsequent weeks, any reps the team needs to converse with or who request time with the planning team can meet for discussions. In that way, individual conversations are invested in raising the bar on brand efforts in the marketplace, not endlessly recapping the same

basic planning information.

When considering the power of the shared vision paradigm, this type of approach seems much truer to Kenny Rogers' approach of leaving everything out there on behalf of the brand. Isn't that what clients are paying planning teams to do?

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

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