



News

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Try a Fresh Perspective on Media

Looking Beyond Surface Reveals Insights Into Feelings, Relationships

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

Sitting in the waiting area at the eye doctor's office recently, I was challenged to keep my youngest daughter occupied while my older daughter ran through the selecting-new-eyeglasses routine. Picking up a copy of Highlights for Children, we latched onto a brain-teaser section and started attacking the questions.

One particularly compelling question concerned the humble orange. How, it asked, can you say five things about an orange without describing its shape or color? That question is tough whether you are a kid or an adult. And it points out the very human flaw of judging things first by how they look.

The question struck me as an interesting one to apply to media. Do planners look at media choices only from a surface perspective and forget to consider the deeper qualities of each medium? If so, might planners hamstring their ability to utilize media to their fullest potential on behalf of a client's brands?

All too frequently, the answer is yes. Media people tend to think about media based on what they deliver. Television tends to be viewed as a 30-second spot, rating points or impressions. Magazines are viewed as a four-color page. Newspaper is some size-standard advertising unit. Internet is evolving differently, but still tends to be a banner or rich media or search or digital video.

Unit and delivery descriptions are the equivalent of an orange's shape or color. Focusing on the sizes and shapes of media doesn't help a planner come nearly close enough to fully grasping the power of what media can do. A useful exercise would be to step back and freshen up our perspective on what each medium provides beyond its size and shape.

Gaining and maintaining broader perspective can help planners recognize more value in media choices and craft stronger media plans based on that knowledge.

Digging Deeper

According to Encarta, media are the "various means of mass communication thought of as a whole, including television, radio, magazines and newspapers, together with the people involved in their production." That definition is a helpful start, but does not get far enough below the surface. The insights gained from listening to my daughter as she considered the orange question helps in digging deeper.

In thinking about an orange, she provided her five answers from the perspective of how she or others felt about an orange. From a marketing point of view, that's insightful. How a consumer feels about something should always be at the center of what we do as planners or marketers.

How a consumer feels about a medium has virtually nothing to do with the ad units the medium delivers, much as feelings about an orange have little to do with its shape or color. Feelings about media have everything to do with experience and relationship.

Take the much-maligned newspaper, for example. There are many things about this "dying medium" that planners may forget to consider outside of a standard advertising unit. First, a consumer's relationship with newspapers is physical. A newspaper must be held to be experienced. Grasping and turning pages is a visceral act. The unique feel of newspaper stock makes the experience memorable.

Newspapers also require an investment of time and resources to consume. Subscription costs and reading time add up, so much so that a consumer's investment in a newspaper may be considered substantial. Further, there are routines associated with the newspaper: morning coffee, Sunday with breakfast, clipping coupons. Newspaper consumption occurs within rituals.

Many will argue that these attributes aren't relevant, because few newspaper readers will actually see or read an ad in the paper. That type of thinking actually helps put an exclamation point on the theory of not judging based on appearances. Daily contact is exactly what makes newspapers a valuable medium. In most markets, from 40% to 50% of the population are reached by a newspaper daily.

A medium that has the ability to touch half the consumers in a market is extremely powerful. Newspapers aren't just a deliverer of standard ad units, they are a potential delivery mechanism for all kinds of advertising messages. There is absolutely no rule written anywhere that says a planner has to run a standard advertising unit as the only way to take advantage of a newspaper's audience.

Why not consider an insert or a polybag? How about a wrap of the paper? Newspapers are a medium that have a daily relationship with large numbers of people. Those people make the effort to hold that paper every day. It could be argued that a standard ad unit in a newspaper is the worst way for an advertiser to tap into the consumer-newspaper relationship. A planner simply needs to start viewing newspapers a way to creatively place a message from the brand in the consumer's hand along with the day's news.

The same could be said for magazines. A colleague recently sent me a note and lamented print's inability to generate results. "I have done much tallying of results ... and have found that doing a print ad, even in a complete niche market, is not the way to go." Does a comment like that prove that magazines failed? Failed at what? Failed at producing and running the ad? Failed at putting that ad within a consumer's reach? Probably not. It's worthwhile to step back and consider whether magazines were used to best leverage the relationship they have with their consumers.

In their consumer relationship, magazines have plenty in common with newspapers. They have the same physical connection attributes. They have to be held, pages have to be turned; there are degrees of sensation that can be gained from the different types of paper stocks magazines may use that enhance or detract from the experience.

Magazines also require a significant amount of investment on behalf of consumers. At the newsstand or when subscribing, a consumer must go through some sort of decision-making process to make a commitment to a magazine. Consumers also have a significant connection to the content offered by a given publication. There is also an investment of money and time made when a magazine is chosen. A consumer must care deeply to take funds out of a wallet and invest minutes or hours with the magazine medium.

None of those observations are influenced by the type of ad unit a magazine delivers. Yet how often do planners consistently consider that breadth of magazine attributes when making planning decisions?

Television is not immune to the orange's problem. If anything, the availability and industry importance of demographics, ratings and cost-per-thousand may make television more susceptible to a planner's consideration of the medium by only its "shape and color."

That's unfortunate, because of all media types, television may have the most to offer in terms of consumer relationship beyond shape and color. Television's capability to convey messages with sight, sound and motion enables the broader ability to develop consumer connection at both emotional and rational levels. Television's sensory abilities, along with the element of time, make it an adept storyteller and a powerful entertainer and persuader.

Given the array of network selections and the variety of programming provided, it could be argued that television offers just about as much niche content as do magazines, meaning that consumers can browse and select things of interest just like at a newsstand. With the advent of the DVR, consumers also have the flexibility to, like a magazine, curl up with desired content at their leisure.

Foundation of Interaction

Television content also has the noteworthy ability to weave itself into the fabric of life. When was the last time you stood around the water cooler discussing a magazine article? There are always shows that ignite enough passion among consumers to provide a foundation of social currency. They can be the foundation of social interaction when they rise to the level of "American Idol" or the Super Bowl. Or they can be a simple, comfortable adjunct to a daily or seasonal ritual, like the late news or "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

In that light, television means much more to consumers than a 30-second unit or a cost per thousand. It is a medium with vital connections and relationships. In a rush for lower CPMs or to plot out rating points on a flow chart, planners shouldn't lose sight of those important consumer connections.

This is not to suggest that media planners don't grasp the breadth of what media are and what they provide to their audiences; they do. But human nature and the vagaries of business being what they are, time crunches, limited resources or simple habitual response can get in the way of remembering the importance of relationships between consumers and media. This is just a simple reminder that in the heat of the moment, we need to remember that media are much more than round and orange.

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