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Media Business
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Preparing for Life's Sudden Changes

No Need to Fight or Flee When the Unexpected Happens: Embrace the Cataclysm, Turn It Into Opportunity

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

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Over the past couple of months, we've been covering subject matter designed to help media planners fulfill a 2006 resolution of raising the bar on brand planning efforts. We noted that an effort to raise the bar is an attempt to grow. There are six principles associated with growth that can help achieve a positive impact on media efforts. Those six principles are time, environmental change, critical decision-making, the need for others, learning and innovation.

Having elaborated on resolution-making itself and on the first principle, time, let's now turn our attention to environmental change.

One of the most familiar quotes attributed to Benjamin Franklin is "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." If Franklin lived today, he might add a third life certainty to his pair: death, taxes and change. Change cannot be avoided in life or in the marketplace.

In the world of physics, Newton's first law of motion states that an object in a vacuum will remain at rest or in its present state of motion until acted on by an outside force. While it may sound a bit odd, people, brands and corporations also tend to operate by Newton's first law. Think about how people, brands and companies wrap themselves in comfortable habits and practices, going about life with the same approach day in and day out.

Then something throws a wrench into familiar habits and practices. Change is the outside force that disturbs the present state of motion. A good image to conjure in your mind is the introductory scene in Disney-Pixar's "A Bug's Life." The film opens on a line of busy ants carrying bits of grain and fruit to a central place. As the line moves, a leaf drifts down, casting a shadow that causes an ant to whimper, "Oh, no!" When the leaf breaks the line, he screams, "I'm lost! Where's the line?" Environmental change has impacted the ants.

Roddy McDowall's ant character calls out, "Don't panic! We are trained professionals. Stay calm. We are going around the leaf." To which the initial ant replies, "I don't think we can do that."

"Nonsense," replies McDowall's ant. "This is nothing compared to the twig of '93." It may sound like some silly bit of Pixar fun tailored for kids, but doesn't it really capture the essence of how changes affect us in our pursuit of corporate routine? We go about daily business in our habitual state of motion and then, when some outside event interrupts our comfortable planning routine, we're unsure of how to respond.

This little example also perfectly illustrates the basic human reaction to abrupt environmental changes: stress. McDowall's ant character first calls out, "Don't panic!" Whether it was the intrusion of the cave bear into Cro-Magnon man's prehistoric domicile or the present-day manifestation of stress in the unexpected client call, each event would trigger the panic response in human physiology: Fight or flight.

We arguably live in a time when that panic response gets triggered far more often than at any time in human history. In their book "The Deviant's Advantage: How Fringe Ideas Create Mass Markets," Watts Wacker and Ryan Mathews describe our present time using the placeholder phrase the Post-Information Age. They characterize this as a new age in which "the culture is characterized by constant, relentless and all-encompassing change." They postulate that the scope of change will accelerate over time and never stabilize.

Business and Change

Businesses shouldn't underestimate the profound impact of change in the marketplace. Yet every day, they do. The reason why is loss of perspective. After fighting tough battles to carve out a viable position in the marketplace, a business will believe it has figured out how to win in its category. In media planning, we craft plans that work in the marketplace and continue to implement them over time, thinking we have the winning formula for our brand.

Ignoring changes as irrelevant or attempting to attack them with the same habits and practices that led to prior success are traps all too common in today's business world. These are essentially a "flight" reaction to the human panic response that will lead to two unequivocal truths.

First, ignoring change, the equivalent of sticking one's head in the sand, is a poor strategy for success.

Second, there is no guarantee that business can use old solutions to address changes in the marketplace. Yet ego clouds judgment, application of old solutions continues and we unwittingly give competitors the opportunity to flank us.

Wacker and Mathews comment on this opportunity in "Deviant's Advantage": "Everything around us, from the most fundamental instincts to the most esoteric expressions of our aspirations, has changed and those changes represent market opportunity."

Smart competitors are very aware of the powerful opportunity that environmental change represents. In "Every Business Is a Growth Business: How Your Company Can Prosper Year After Year" by Ram Charan and Noel Tichy, there is a quote from Gary Wendt of GE Capital that captures the upside of change nicely: "You always look where there's change. Change is what creates opportunity."

There are really two opportunities provided by environmental change circumstances. The second opportunity is the most obvious one. Change creates a vacuum of uncertainty in the marketplace. Those who can see the uncertainty as an opportunity for competitive gain will attack the circumstance with proactive measures, opening up ground between themselves and competitors. This notion is the core of the third growth principle of critical decision-making, which we will discuss next month.

The first opportunity is much less obvious but lies at the core of understanding why environmental change is important as a growth principle. This is the opportunity to change ourselves. As Stephen R. Covey says in his book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," "The physical creation follows the mental creation." In change situations, a translation would be that marketplace implementation to capture opportunity follows the action of changing ourselves, our perspective, to embrace environmental change.

No one finds it easy to admit they may not have the skills necessary to deal with particular situations. Yet when change occurs, it's quite likely that this is exactly what will happen. If the environment has changed, it's different. The things that make it different may be things a person has absolutely no experience whatsoever dealing with.

It's easy to just continue using the same skills that worked in the past more intensely, thinking that will be the road to success, but it's really just fear in action. The more courageous course of action is to acknowledge that new skills are needed to embrace the changed environment accordingly and to orient one's self toward acquiring those skills.

Change and Media

If you are a media planner trying to keep up with the explosion of media choices available to consumers, you very likely understand and agree with Wacker and Mathew's assessment of constant and relentless change. As planners, we must realize that this stream of environmental change is inevitable and we may never be able to completely wrap our minds around every facet of it.

We just need to take the simple bit of advice offered by McDowall's ant: Don't panic. As changes impact comfortable skills, habits and practices, they will create stress that triggers the human panic response. Our challenge is to harness the energy provided by our response and take time to acknowledge changes for what they are. In effect, we use environmental change as a trigger to change our own perspective and our own skill set.

So what do you do if you're a planner in this situation? A good first step might be to step back and take an inventory of best practices, skills and information you are currently using. Do an honest assessment of those areas and look for places where what you have in your toolbox is inadequate for the current situation. Then draw up a game plan for obtaining or learning the skills and information you need to take your game to the next level.

If planners can do this, they are on a path to growth. As Frederic M. Hudson says in his book "The Adult Years: Mastering the Art of Self-Renewal," "Without change there would be no growth or development, no creative breakthroughs or discoveries, no becoming."

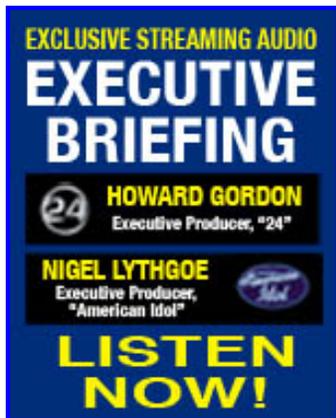
The most vital part of media planning is creative problem-solving. We need to appreciate that any time change impacts the current standard and routine of media planning it is a tremendous opportunity to dive back in to the most fulfilling part of what we do.

Planners need to recognize that change is a powerful force to be reckoned with and those planners who prepare themselves with foresight to embrace it stand a much better chance of surviving and thriving than those who do not. As Benjamin Franklin also said, "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."

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