Leverage the power and profitability of Web video!

News

February 17, 2008 9:00 PM

Drilling Down to the Finer Points

'Microtrends' Offers Insight Into Power of Various Niche Population Segments

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

One of last year's best-selling nonfiction books was "Microtrends: The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow's Big Changes" by Mark Penn, a one-time pollster for President Clinton who is consulting in some very impressive circles, and co-author E. Kinney Zalesne, a consultant with similar Washington credentials.

"Microtrends" covers 75 niche population segments on the cutting edge of trends that may contribute to significant changes in today's world. Those segments all contain populations of around 1%, a kind of catalyst level that includes enough people to create societal momentum that can spark change.

Much of "Microtrends" addresses the potential political impact of these segments, but there are also plenty of implications to be found by segment or in general that are of interest to media planning. Here are some implications that bear further discussion:

Disintegration of Mass
As a planner reading through "Microtrends," you can't help but note the multitude of factoids underscoring the extent to which mass-media strength has disappeared. At some point, it should become evident the pursuit of mass reach in media plans is becoming a losing proposition. As price premiums for fewer broad-reach media properties continue to increase, the more realistic alternative seems to be building mass incrementally by aggregation of attractive segments.

That may be a labor-intensive proposition, but it's quite possible media choices attached to segments don't command the same level of premium that the remaining mass properties do. In addition, niche vehicles also enjoy greater connectivity and engagement with their audiences than do mass alternatives, theoretically having deeper impact on the audiences they reach.

The fact that consumers are moving their media behaviors from mass to niche seems to be a strong sign that consumers are more invested in niche media choices than mass media choices. As planners, shouldn't we be listening more closely and ensuring impressions meet consumers in the environments they care about more?

Consumer Empowerment
Many of "Microtrends'" segments demonstrate the awakening of consumers to the power they wield as individuals. Among segments such as DIY Doctors, Internet Marrieds, High School Moguls, Modern Mary Poppinses and Non-Profiteers, it is easy to note rejection of old paradigms, whether those paradigms be

established business practices or social frameworks.

Included in these segments are consumers taking a very proactive stance on their own healthcare; they will not simply follow a broken health system. There are young people decidedly not taking the old career path of finishing college and hiring into a company. They're simply forging ahead as entrepreneurs on their own timetable.

There are also contemporary nannies who realize the value of their service to high-income families. They are not bound by convention, choosing to negotiate the best situation possible. There are also growing numbers of individuals choosing to work at not-for-profit organizations that aren't subject to the whims of the stock market—organizations whose mission is helping others, not themselves.

The media planning implication is that the notion of caveat emptor is just about dead. No longer do consumers need to be wary of sellers or old social and business practices. Proliferation of technology and information has given consumers power to dictate terms in many situations where they historically had no choice in the matter.

The same holds true with media choices. That's not breaking news, but as "Microtrends" demonstrates, the new empowerment embraced by consumers is taking surprising directions. Media planners need to exercise due diligence in understanding target consumer needs and behaviors and do what they can to honor consumer choice in media selection, delivering creative messages in platforms that provide consumers with choice and flexibility.

Hispanics Rising

A number of Hispanic segments are also included among "Microtrends'" 75: Protestant Hispanics, Militant Illegals, Native-Language Speakers and Interracial Families. What's interesting about these segments is not their number, but their nature. There seems to be a "buck conventionality" subplot to these segments; Hispanics electing not to worship as Catholics? Continuing to embrace the native tongue even though immigrants for years have quickly graduated to English? Demonstrating overtly against the government even when deportation is a risk?

The theme of eschewing conventional wisdom again is prominent. For planners, this may mean not only embracing Hispanic media platforms within plans, but also realizing that conventional use of platforms may not be enough. Hispanics are demonstrating their acculturation will not follow the same trajectory as past immigrant populations. Planners need to take care to use Hispanic media in fresh and unconventional ways. Conventional use of media may not do much to influence a target population that appears to be following its own drummer.

Bases of Operation

A variety of the "Microtrends" segments focus on those embracing what might be described as a second base of operation. Whether it's long-distance commuters, those maintaining spousal relationships across cities, those who've segmented their home into a comfortable nest and an office or education center or those opting for two unique nests, many Americans now are conducting important life activities from unexpected places.

Cars have become mobile offices for those who travel hours each way to and from their primary office. Airports have become a third place of operation for those traveling not simply for business, but to get from their office to home. Homes have become not only offices, but schools.

And every one of those new bases represents a potential media connection point to reach target consumers.

Wireless, mobile phone, satellite radio and many forms of outdoor are increasingly important in reaching commuting or traveling consumers. High-speed internet, direct mail and even packaging from shipped items have become useful ways to reach consumers interacting with the world from the comfort of their homes.

The trend toward these new bases suggests planners may need to be more sensitive to consumer life behaviors. It may not be enough to know consumers spend a lot of time in the car or that they have an Admirals Club membership. Planners should know the whys behind those behaviors and endeavor to marry the media execution to the context in which behavior occurs, giving the message a better chance of truly connecting with target consumers.

Power of Community
A final implication apparent in many of the "Microtrends" segments is the notion of community. Until the past 30 years or so, community has focused on the local geography in which people lived their lives, building social capital between each other. People have used those connections and social capital to help each other out and accomplish big things together.

Sprawl and subdivision development practices worked in large part to dismantle traditional communities and in effect create communities of isolated square footage. Why go to the multiplex when there's a home theater in the basement? Why go to the park when you have a large fenced-in yard? Why meet friends at a crowded restaurant when you can entertain on a deck with the newest kitchen conveniences?

Yet none of those developments ended the real need for human connection. Within the confines of isolated geography, people are still reaching out to each other for connection, and technology has stepped up to fulfill the need. In a world where you may not see your neighbor very often and don't find much in common when you do, you can locate whole communities of people who share your interests in a matter of minutes on the Internet.

A first-quarter 2008 Insight Garden client effort demonstrates the power of Web community. For a client brand without great resources that nonetheless needed to generate significant consumer action, we chose two Web destinations. One was an Internet extension of an established off-line content provider. The other was a relatively new and growing online social community hub. Based on gut instinct, the community Web hub received more plan impressions at a ratio of 3-to-1.

Our instincts proved correct and the community site returned consumer response at a rate of more than 10-to-1 over the Web extension of the established content provider. Why might this be? Content and experience on the community site tend to be built up from participating consumers. On the extension site, content is basically forced down the network from the off-line brand.

For people interested in connection and community, a brand embedded within the community's interactions becomes compelling, potentially prompting higher response.
In the old days, advertisers could exploit community hubs to deliver their message to engaged consumers. Newspaper, outdoor and radio were vital information sources within communities of interacting people. As many "Microtrends" segments demonstrate, the communities still exist, but the information sources have changed. Planners need to identify and use those new sources to help create impact for their brands within new community definitions.

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

Permalink | **Comments (0)** | **TrackBacks (0)** | **RSS** | **Share**

Tags: Print Edition