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How to Restore Qualitative Diligence

Take These Steps to Bring Right-Brain Intuition Back Into Play and Apply Moderation to Left-Brain Strategies

By Mark Dominiak

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During a recent wacky moment in my house I started calling my kids by each other's names. A thought came blazing through my brain: "You've become your father. Man, when did that happen?"

Isn't it weird when things creep up on us and we realize we've become something other than what we previously thought? I think that's the situation many media planning people find themselves stuck in today.

Our perspective has become biased by numbers. We're swept up in a left-brained media world. Consolidation is a strong innovation because of numbers. We can now leverage vast scale, reap bottom-line benefits for holding companies and enjoy

financial media autonomy.

Unfortunately, those same consolidations have divorced media organizations from their agency creative, account planning and management counterparts. Media planners found it hard to deliver collaborative value in the communications process before consolidation. Now it's even tougher.

Number-crunching tools are another left-brain offspring. Leading media organizations create and liberally use lots of them. During plan development media planners slice and dice syndicated data with so much proprietary magic it can make a client's head spin.

How about optimizers? Plug in your inputs and the software derives the best plan option. Then there's econometric modeling. If the regression formula is smart enough, media planners become obsolete.

As a plea for moderation in this left-brained world, here are five pieces of right-brained advice to restore qualitative diligence to media planning and increase the odds of creating marketplace impact for brands.

Don't Wait for Agency

Management to Kick Off Planning

Media people need to begin planning before nonmedia disciplines initiate work. Why? By the time media people are brought into the process, planning direction likely has already been set.

You know the story. "The creatives have a great idea for a television spot," or, "The account managers agreed with the client on media elements to be produced." Other disciplines rarely check to see if their media choices are target-appropriate. It leads to missed opportunity.

If part of the early process, media people can make a powerful contribution to the communication effort. Knowledge of target media consumption behaviors make cumulative insight better, helping creative elevate the message content to higher levels of performance.

Think First

Humans have the remarkable gift of problem-solving skill, which uses the ultimate tool: the mind. Yet we willingly surrender our intellectual curiosity to predetermined processes and computer-driven tools, which derive solutions for us.

We need to stop this practice. We should use our minds first in the planning process. One doesn't need to go further than the example of optimizers telling us the best plan is the one that runs 100 points of cable a week. Our minds are the tools that tell us it's impractical to load up heavily in cable.

Why waste time running that option? A well-thought-out strategy, supported by numerical diligence, is more valuable than a strategy created by software.

Seek Out Advocates

and Adversaries

Advocates do a great job of pointing out gems in a plan, helping us confirm foundational elements and obtain some positive reinforcement in the bargain. An adversary might be an account person whose opinion differs from the planning team on strategic approach, or a particularly aggressive client. We generally try to avoid both constituents while planning.

Purposefully go to them early in the planning process. They will blast away at aspects of the plan. Let them. Then listen attentively. While it's true that sometimes they just have an ax to grind, it's also true that they have perspective much different than ours. These folks can help us see things we didn't see before. They can help identify weaknesses that need to be addressed for the brand to have the best marketplace impact.

Going to adversaries early on is smart, because it leads to stronger plans and cuts down substantive objections when the final plan is ultimately recommended.

Do the Opposite of

What Is Expected

I once sat in a kick-off meeting for an over-the-counter brand targeting sinus sufferers. We were given a meager \$2 million budget and "encouraged" to use network TV and radio in our plan. Account folks showed a seasonality chart for sinus medication sales and directed that the small budget be invested against highest seasonality.

We luckily pushed back during the briefing. "Does this curve represent sinus sufferer sales?" "No, it's total sales." Upon discussion, we realized that sinus sufferer seasonality was flatter. The apparent spike during Q4 through Q1 existed because nonsinus sufferers with a cold or flu happened to select a sinus remedy as their solution.

Our tiny \$2 million would get gobbled up quickly purchasing expensive Q4 inventory (yielding fewer impressions) and we would compete against the mammoth half-billion dollars of seasonal cold/flu competitive spending.

Few impressions versus huge competitive expenditures is a bad strategy. On the other hand, considering real sinus sufferer seasonality, we could confidently invest fewer dollars in late Q2 and Q3, taking advantage of better media pricing and dramatically reduced competitive pressure and influencing a market where true sinus sufferers constituted a larger share of potential customers. Questioning what is expected helped illuminate a strategy better at targeting sinus sufferers.

Use Numerical Discipline Late in the Process

I love numbers diligence and any tool I can get my hands on. I just wait to employ them until the latter stages of the planning process.

It's important to have tools validate smart media thinking, not dictate it. When a killer tool is put to work late in the process and shows a client how smart the upfront thinking is, the real value of media's contribution becomes evident.

Our qualitative skills are what differentiate us from one another, and we should use them more freely. A right-brained approach at the start of the process will lead to smarter strategy, more innovative use of proprietary tools and ultimately solutions generating greater impact for brands in the marketplace.

I'm pretty sure that's what clients pay us to provide.

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