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May 18, 2008 8:45 PM

Getting to Know Your Sales Reps

Media Teams Could Gain Advantage by Building Closer Relationships

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

A long-standing paradigm in the media industry has been for both media planners and buyers to view sales reps as adversaries. Planners and buyers tend to keep reps at a distance, doling out information sparingly and managing relationships to exercise as much control as possible.

Conventional wisdom is that by keeping their cards close to the vest and sales reps at arm's length, media people gain an advantage in the negotiation process, better servicing client needs. It may be that media people worry that too much information could mean disadvantageous pricing or that the rep might purposely or accidentally share proprietary information with a competitive agency or client.

While those may be valid concerns, there's a classic line from "The Godfather" that offers a different sort of wisdom: "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer." The implication is that if you build closer relationships with those who sit on the other side of the table from you, there is benefit to be gained.

Among the most important benefits planners can gain by working more closely with sales reps are shared vision; productively directed energy; deeper relationships; and time productivity.

Shared Vision

Anyone who has invested time in leadership training has seen the classic stick-figure representation of a group operating without shared vision. In that picture, stick figures move in different directions, all working at cross-purposes to one another. The contrasting visual is the stick-figure group moving in exactly the same direction. The point is that individuals all working toward a common goal will achieve what they set out to do while those who aren't won't.

Whether media planners, buyers and sales reps work at cross-purposes depends on how they interact. Sales reps might not intentionally work against the media team goals, but if they're operating with an information deficit they could very well contribute little to a brand's marketplace efforts, hindering a media plan's ability to achieve goals.

The best way for planners to ensure reps are working with shared vision is to let sales reps into the media-planning process. When reps are asked to provide spec costs, that's what they'll provide. When sales reps are told what they need to provide is inventory, inventory is what they will provide. But when sales reps can

understand exactly what it is the media plan intends to accomplish in the marketplace, there is quite likely more they can provide to meet that need.

There was a lot of talk in the preamble to ABC's upfront presentation last week that attacked this exact point. Simply buying demos and ratings just don't cut it anymore. In the presentation, ABC proposed planners and buyers work with their sales folks to determine an Advertising Value Index. The suggestion was that if planners shared deeper insight into marketing objectives beyond simple buying demos, the network could more substantively identify programming alternatives that fit the brand's needs.

Whether an Advertising Value Index is a helpful tool is beside the point. What could clearly be heard in the suggestion was the desire on behalf of the sales partners to better understand brand and media plan needs in order to provide better solutions.

As was evident in the ABC presentation, there are far more platforms and content in development than any planner or buyer can hope to keep track of, let alone assess. Further, expansive staffs no longer exist in planning departments to keep abreast of all the new properties entering the market. The media team needs to utilize the assets available from the sales team not only to streamline the assessment process, but also to point planners in the direction of content opportunities they may not even know existed.

Positively Directed Energy

Keeping sales teams well informed about the plan's objectives can also help focus the reps' energy positively on what the brand needs to accomplish. When needs are expressed only via avails requests or requests for proposals, the reps won't know much more about what the brand needs than what is reflected in the paperwork.

That type of paperwork-only exercise can have an unintentional consequence. Once there is a black-and-white request on paper, that correspondence will become the filter through which efforts are gauged. Reps will invest energy to make sure all of the points in the RFP are addressed. They will ask questions as to what each point means. They will be concerned about what competitors also received the request and so on.

In effect, that type of process places reps in the proverbial box we all spend so much time trying to think outside of. Why put restrictions on sales reps from the outset?

The process should be about helping the brand succeed.

Deeper Relationships

All of the technological advancements, automation and impersonal communication we rely on today have to a great extent undermined the value that flows from personal relationships.

It's hard sometimes to understand exactly what someone means in a few lines of text in an e-mail. Nuances and direction that are obvious to the author can be lost on the reader. What item is really the most important? How can you tell simply via the exchange of notes?

There is great positive energy and equity to be built and leveraged in face-to-face meetings, handshakes and looking someone in the eye. If all a media person ever does is correspond with a salesperson via e-mail, that media person should be prepared to be let down when they really need help. Tremendous value can be built

up by such old-fashioned acts as phoning someone or sitting down for a 15-minute meeting.

Personal relationships can be a real asset when things heat up. In a new-business circumstance or when a client needs some change to be made on short notice, planners or buyers with deeper relationships in the sales community are much more likely to make things happen for their client than those folks who deal with their sales contacts in a more impersonal manner. It is a lot harder for a salesperson to let down a media person who has taken the time and effort to keep him in the loop, look him in the eye and provide him with helpful information.

Time Productivity

How many media planners out there really enjoy or have time for composing, sending out and poring through requests for proposals? Wouldn't it be more productive to call or sit down with sales reps and simply tell them what the media team needs? Then the media folks could answer most of the questions then and there, eliminating all the subsequent phone calls and e-mails. Then there's the side benefit of building relationships and better communicating key points via person-to-person interaction.

Or how about taking a more drastic step and bringing many reps in at the same time? Think about how much time could be freed up by communicating person-to-persons just once instead of multiple times. Has your planning team ever tried that tactic? It is not uncommon that an environment that includes many reps interacting together can foster partnership between noncompeting but complementary reps. Looking for time productivity in unique ways might actually open the door for compelling integrated ideas.

The notion of bringing sales reps closer to the media planning and buying process can open the door to some significant benefits. At this time of year, as the ever-evolving upfront process gets under way, it may be a great time for planners and buyers alike to take a step back and reassess how they are interacting with their partners on the sales side of the desk. A few strokes on the keyboard may be quicker, but a few moments for a conversation and a handshake could be more valuable.

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