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The Right Moment for the Message

Reaching Consumers in the Perfect Mindset Is a Powerful Asset to a Plan

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

As the NBA winds down its season with a compelling slugfest between the Los Angeles Lakers and the Boston Celtics, I'm reminded of a powerful example of a solid media plan strategy married with impeccable execution that occurred during the 1997 NBA Finals.

That year featured the Utah Jazz vs. the Chicago Bulls. In Game 5, the main storyline focused on the Bulls' Michael Jordan and the fact that he'd been slammed by flu-like symptoms the night before the game. During the contest, Mr. Jordan had been described as a punch-drunk boxer, but he persevered, playing a trademark Jordan game.

What made the airing memorable from a media perspective was a placement by the Gatorade brand in the closing moments of the game. It was a nail-biter. The Bulls were up by one point, and Mr. Jordan was at the free-throw line looking like death warmed over. He missed his second attempt, only to pull down the rebound himself and subsequently hit a three-point bucket. Two quick basket exchanges left Utah with a three-point deficit and calling a timeout as Scottie Pippen helped his sagging teammate to the bench.

An assistant handed the slumping Mr. Jordan a Gatorade as the network went to commercial break. What came up next was an engineered Gatorade placement of a Jordan brand unit beginning with Mr. Jordan stating, "Michael Jordan on Life."

The spot spoke of adversity and competition, closing with Mr. Jordan noting that sometimes the most difficult competition you have to face in life is yourself.

Having worked at Gatorade's agency, I and others in the media department were aware of the Gatorade team's effort to ensure that purchased Finals units would be guaranteed an opening pod placement during the closing minutes of the game. The planning team knew the Jordan creative units were an asset, and there was every reason to believe that in any given game, Mr. Jordan was likely to work some magic in the final moments.

The Gatorade team was attempting to ensure that Gatorade consumers intersected the perfect brand message at exactly the right time, converting the positive energy of the moment into a powerful branding statement.

Capitalizing on exactly the right moment is a tremendously powerful asset to any media plan. Why? As Honoré de Balzac once said, “Sometimes at the best moments, a single word or look is enough.” When consumers are in the perfect mindset, a single brand message delivered at that moment can help a brand accomplish its objectives.

A Timely, Relevant Example

A “right moment” strategy isn’t only the province of brands that can fund multiple NBA Finals spots or employ sports superstars in their creative message.

A local example running in the Chicago market now demonstrates just how powerful the right-moment concept can be during the average day. The media-planning team for Michigan.org is using conventional placements scheduled with target-prospect right moments in mind to create solid impact.

Here’s how the strategy plays out:

Prospects commuting to work in the morning are greeted with drive-time radio spots describing in various ways how pleasant a Michigan getaway would be (in contrast to being stuck in rush-hour traffic). When commuters arrive in the central metro area, they are likely to cross paths with double-decker tour buses wrapped with beautiful scenes of Michigan landscapes.

Those same buses cruise up and down the streets to potentially be seen from office windows or during lunch time. The evening commute greets drivers with different Michigan.org radio messages. To cap it off, local breaks during late-evening prime time and late news bring the Michigan message to life with sight, sound and motion. Every message encourages a visit to Michigan.org to begin a getaway.

Many aspects of the effort are intelligently rooted in the right moment. It’s frustrating to be trapped in a car going to or from work when the world outside is full of pleasant summer activities. The Michigan.org plan capitalizes on that frustrated mindset to suggest a desirable alternative. The nature of the creative also is pleasant and soothing, in direct contrast to the stressful environment the driver is experiencing.

There’s also more to the transit placement than meets the eye: The message appears on tour buses. Commuters experiencing the transit message see vacationers looking back at them over the top of the creative message. In other words, they’re getting a glimpse of people doing exactly what the consumer would rather be doing—enjoying a vacation. And hey, commuter, here’s an idea for your vacation: a stay in Michigan, complete with a simple Web address to get you started.

Then when the prospect finally arrives home, shakes off the dust and pressures of the day and has a chance to reflect on what he’d rather be doing, there are television units conveying the complete Michigan message.

The Right Moment

The conventional media-planning process can be an impediment to leveraging the power of the right moment. Planners immersed in the process can fall into the trap of identifying media vehicles that reach large numbers of target prospects, doing a cost analysis and simply trying to reach the greatest number of prospects with the resources available.

But identifying the pond containing an attractive number of fish doesn't necessarily equate to outstanding planning. Drawing a parallel from the words of legendary stock trader Jesse Livermore, "It isn't important to buy as cheap as possible as it is to buy at the right time." Are the fish in the pond ready to gobble up the bait included in the advertising message? If the fish aren't hungry, or are uninterested or distracted, a media plan that pours efficient impressions against them can very well result in no impact whatsoever.

The most effective action planners can take to ensure that the right moment is leveraged in plans is to understand the consumer's purchase process. Is there a purchase process audit component to the team's planning process? If not, an audit should be created that includes information from the client concerning the purchase process and purchase cycle of the brand and category. It also should include public-domain information that may be available from category resources such as trade organizations or publications.

Finally, the planning team should do its best to interact with brand and category consumers. Personal interviews or groups can provide a wealth of purchase process information. A planner's goal should be to try to understand the purchase process from the consumer's perspective.

Once purchase process insight is in hand, it then should be overlaid with media behaviors. What media interactions connect to key parts of the purchase process? At those points of intersection, are there media types that do a particularly good job of enhancing the interaction (such as the tour buses in the Michigan.org example)?

Planners may find that solid media contact points don't intersect very well with the purchase process. If there isn't a need state associated with an otherwise attractive contact point, those impressions shouldn't be dismissed but they certainly should be re-evaluated. They may provide other advantages to the plan.

Media teams need to proactively work to understand how the brand's purchase cycle meshes with prospects' lives and where the best media contact points really lie. When those right moments become evident, planners need to make sure the plan does everything possible to ensure the message has its best opportunity to sell the brand.

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