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Break With Old Rituals If It's Time

Constantly Adapting to Change Can Keep the Client's Message Impactful

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

A number of recent conversations have reminded me how important it is for planners to be sensitive to change that occurs in the world of media, using new circumstances to help plans reap benefits for their clients. As a way to provide context for innovative thinking, consider the perspective of two books that discuss the opportunity inherent in changing environments.

In "Who Moved My Cheese?," a short but powerful book by Dr. Spencer Johnson, pairs of mice (people) find themselves faced with a difficult situation. When the abundant cheese supply from one corner of their maze suddenly disappears, the routines they have built around the cheese and their existence are threatened.

The pairs of mice react differently to the situation, providing insight via clever narrative about how people deal with change. One mouse records a variety of lessons learned on the wall of a newly discovered cache of cheese. Those lessons provided a solid breadth of insight and contributed to keeping "Who Moved My Cheese?" on the New York Times best-seller list for years.

Relevant to media planners is the lesson about being a slave to rituals. One pair of mice sniff out the changing circumstance in advance and evolve out of the old routine. For them, rituals aren't as important as growth. After a variety of hardships, one remaining mouse does the same thing, eventually escaping his partner's stubbornness in clinging to old rituals and behaviors.

While it seems simple, the lesson of breaking free from old rituals is a hard one for media planners to put into practice. Internal forces, clients or partners all can provide significant impediments to change.

For example, large planning organizations likely have invested significant resources in legacy systems that may not remain relevant in changing circumstances. The pressure to use those systems, because of principle or because of scale, can stand in the way of growth.

Clients also can be tied to rituals or ritualistic thinking. A planning team's goals may be tied to historical delivery of rating points or perhaps cost-per-thousand benchmarks. But times change and sometimes ritualistic thinking may get in the way. Just last week, Advertising Age ran a story on the evolving nature of Chex Mix's media plan. In the article, the client brand manager noted how marketers' thinking had focused on "reach, reach, reach" and that now it's shifting to "quality of reach." If clients don't evolve his thinking, planners might be forced to pursue the "reach, reach, reach" when they know they really should be pursuing the quality.

The concept "abolition of context" is a major theme in "The Deviant's Advantage" by Watts Wacker and Ryan Matthews. Mr. Wacker and Mr. Matthews describe abolition of context as ideas that move from the fringe of social acceptance to social convention. One of their key notions is that in the modern world, not only is the distance from the fringe to the center shorter, the time it takes for an idea to move from one point to the other is occurring at an accelerated pace.

Abolition of context is a phenomenon that often affects the arena of media planning. For starters, solutions available to planners change constantly. Think about how fast the breadth of media options changes. It's hard for media planners to keep pace with all of the new media forms emerging from day to day, let alone the individual vehicles mushrooming from each form. Just when planners think they have their heads wrapped around new offerings, out come a variety of yet newer ones to trump those which were just understood.

But abolition of context doesn't just affect solution possibilities; it affects communication processes as well. In the mid-'80s, desk-top computers were just beginning to appear in media planning groups. At that time, client expectations for plans or buy performance reports were largely driven by how quickly the word processing pool in a media unit could type and correct documents for media teams in advance of a presentation. It might take a week or two to finish up a report.

Then desk-top PCs appeared in each team along with perhaps a fax machine. Clients' time expectations changed from weeks to days. As organizations started putting a desk-top on every desk and the computing power of each machine advanced, expectations became hours and not days. With laptops, BlackBerrys and text seemingly in every planner's hand, expectations have moved to minutes, sometimes 24/7. That rapid evolution played itself out in only about 20 years.

When the notion of rituals and a fast-changing landscape of media choices and processes are combined, it is easy to see how it can be difficult for media planners to try to proactively exploit change to their client's benefit. In the last week, I have experienced conversations with a buyer, a rep and a member of an account team that could have led to planning inertia or positive change.

My buyer and I were discussing the relative priority of a number of buy parameters; the first one on her list, prompted by years of conventional buy exercises, was cost per thousand. I countered with quarterly options as the No. 1 priority. It seemed a little odd to both of us not to be focusing on CPM, but we realized the client has little perspective of and places little value on that stat. Being nimble enough to attack incremental sales opportunities is far more important than reaching a few more eyeballs out of context.

With the rep, a discussion covered the notion of purchasing a strategic idea and not a package. He noted that years of convention have conditioned salespeople to immediately try to package inventory to sell while at the same time driving down package CPMs. We talked about this approach being admirable, but if it yielded a plan that simply delivered masses of impressions, the client might not see anywhere near the marketplace impact needed. At that point, what was more important? Dispensing with harder-to-sell inventory in order to meet not only sales goals and CPMs, or creating enough impact for the client to become a return customer?

In yet another conversation, an account person rhetorically questioned the value of a third-page unit in a magazine. I reminded her that the nature of the unit wasn't what was important, but how the unit was used. While it might be true that a random third-page purchased to drive efficiency could very well be lost in any book, what if the third-page unit was partnered with a facing unit to create a bookend and complete the message via connected units? Or what if three consecutive thirds were purchased instead of one simple

page? The resulting impact could allow the more humble third-page units to stand out far more than a conventional page.

In order to better embrace changes that impact media planning, planners need to add a new step to the process: Incorporate an environmental assessment step early on in the planning exercise. A number of questions should be asked in the process:

What planning process will be used to create media solutions?

Are there parts of that process that use legacy components that might be less sensitive to current problems the client faces?

Do parts of the current process limit the scope of solutions or creativity that will be employed in the process?

The process will include working with others critical to the creation and execution of the plan. How does communication and interaction with those individuals shape up? Are they behind the times? Is the planning team? What can be done to ensure that dialogue and interaction are fresh? Or are people being included in a way in which they can add the most impact? That may mean defining roles by bringing in others more deeply or in a different way than has been the case in the past.

What about metrics to be used along the way? It's possible that legacy metrics will have no value given current brand needs. Evolution to new metrics may be required. The client's perspective may need to be addressed. Are they tied to old conventionalities? Have they stated pre-planning needs in the same old way? It may be that the planning team needs to work closely with the client to realign process and goals with current environment realities.

Whatever the case may be, it is increasingly important for media planners to realize when the cheese has moved. The world of media planning is one in which new contexts will continue to occur at a rapid pace. Planners who can become skillful at exploiting the opportunities in changing environments, nimbly adapting to changing circumstances, will help create marketplace impact for their clients.

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