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Media Business
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Aim for Thanksgiving to Be Bountiful

Gatherings, Days Off, Event TV Make Holiday Prime Opportunity to Reach Light Viewers With Brand Message

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

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Here it is again: Thanksgiving week.

For media planners, this particular week should always garner a significant amount of attention during plan construction. You might think that only planners on big retail accounts need to pay attention to Thanksgiving week, but you'd be wrong.

While it is true Thanksgiving (or should we marketers just call it Black Friday Eve?) is extremely important to retail businesses, there is a very specific reason this week can be a very important component of any brand's media plan. That reason is the increased level of viewing that will occur over Thanksgiving weekend.

Leisure Time

Television viewing goes up and down over the course of the year due to various circumstances, including the impact holidays have on the amount of disposable leisure time available to watch television, prompted by an extended number of days off work. Of all holidays, two have traditionally generated a significant increase in HUT levels: Thanksgiving and New Year's Day.

The thing that makes the increase opportunistic is that it is largely made up of lighter television viewers who elect to use some freed-up holiday time to kick back with television. During average weeks of the year, lighter users are elusive. They may make an appointment to view a particular show from week to week, but their attendance from week to week is sporadic.

Lighter users tend to have less disposable time in general. They are more active individuals. They tend to be more deeply involved at work, invest part of their free time volunteering and generally take advantage of leisure minutes to do active things in or outside the home that do not include television viewing.

But around holidays many of the other pursuits into which they might invest available hours are also on vacation. That frees up time to spend in some other way. Retailers have done an outstanding job of convincing the consuming public that a great way to spend their precious vacation time is to stand in line waiting to pay for sale merchandise.

While it's likely true that many lighter television viewers do exactly that over the Thanksgiving weekend, the traditional uptick in HUT levels suggests there are also quite a few who invest the windfall of free time in viewing programming.

And that's what gives media planners a great opportunity. The knowledge that a higher proportion of an elusive audience will be captive and easier to target during Thanksgiving weekend is a powerful tool in the planner's bag.

Generally, there are only a few occasions during the year when planners can reasonably expect to capture a higher proportion of light users. Topping the list are the Super Bowl, the Academy Awards, the Olympics, depending on the year, and an occasional big-event show or miniseries. But those opportunities are expensive, few and far between and, except for the Olympics, last for only a few hours.

A valuable thing about Thanksgiving weekend is that it lasts all weekend, from Thursday through Sunday evening, and it spans network and cable, affecting all areas of programming. Increases in viewing happen regardless of the demo, enabling planners to hit pretty much any age or gender. That means a variety of choices and only the premium of fourth-quarter costs versus Super Bowl or Olympics premiums.

Is the uptick in viewing really that big? No, it's not huge. Depending on the year, increases might range from mid-single-digit percentages to double-digit percentages. And it may vary by market, depending on local weather conditions that particular weekend. But the important thing is that it is a real increase, largely made up of otherwise-difficult-to-locate lighter viewers.

Thanksgiving Fare Aplenty

This year there is no shortage of interesting programming available to target lighter television users. From NBC, there's the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade followed by a good potential draw in "The National Dog Show Presented by Purina." Both events will almost surely promote a special "Joey" Thanksgiving episode. There are also the traditional NFL match-ups, this year with Atlanta visiting Detroit on Fox and Denver visiting Dallas on CBS.

There will also be plenty of compelling movie selections, such as "Finding Nemo" on ABC and "Daddy Day Care" on Fox Thursday night; "Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones" on Fox Friday; "Runaway Bride" Saturday on NBC; and "Shrek" on NBC and the Hallmark Hall of Fame production "Silver Bells" on CBS Sunday.

Even cable will be offering some interesting Thanksgiving properties. TNT will run "Jurassic Park III" twice over the weekend, and Nickelodeon will premiere a new animated kids show entitled "The X's" Friday.

It may be that lighter television users are not a core part of your brand's user base. If so, there's not much sense in making the extra effort to target them. On the other hand, lighter users tend more to be opinion leaders and first adopters than are heavier viewers, which may be a reason to consider them for your brand.

In addition, your plan may already include elements such as magazines, newspapers or the Internet that do a good job of connecting with lighter television users. Even so, well-targeted television weight, like the opportunity provided by Thanksgiving weekend, can allow your plan to expand its reach against lighter users and do it in a timely way, with much more immediacy, than can print.

Finally, the ability of television to deliver sight, sound, color and motion and tell a story may allow the creative message to connect with lighter viewers in a way they haven't yet experienced your brand's campaign.

Planning Considerations

While Thanksgiving planning is moot for this year, here are some things to keep in mind when you begin working on your brand's 2006 media plans.

Because people tend to gather together over Thanksgiving bonding with each other, there's a greater likelihood television viewing will be more of a communal experience than usual. Depending on your brand, think about what this might mean and try to use the situation to your advantage.

For example, there is a good chance that the Macy's parade will be viewed by a good portion of the family. Mom and or Dad and maybe even Grandma will be there viewing the parade with the kids. Imagine how many families will watch the airings of "Finding Nemo" and "Shrek." Those are all great opportunities for co-viewing influence. Kids won't be shy about pointing out to Mom or Dad the toys they want for Christmas. They also won't be shy about reminding Mom to put macaroni and cheese or a favorite cereal on the grocery list for next week.

Thanksgiving weekend is a good opportunity to generate some buzz on behalf of your brand. While it may not have the same type of immediacy or scale as a Super Bowl party, ads seen on Thanksgiving weekend have a chance to get people talking. Conversation just may move from the water-cooler to the turkey table or the checkout line at Toys R Us.

There's a reason that cold and flu incidences spike up in the weeks following Thanksgiving (or that August is the biggest month for births, for that matter). Interactions between families and friends happen all weekend long. People will be having conversations with one another about all kinds of things. Try to make sure your brand has the opportunity to get mentioned in those conversations. Word of mouth goes a long way in selling brands. You can get word of mouth more quickly on Thanksgiving weekend.

Also, consider the mind-set present at the particular time spots will be scheduled. Choose to run your spot in a place where families will be viewing together to prompt kid requests or maybe a group trip to the movie theatre. Or perhaps plan spots to air later in the evening prior to next day's activity to prompt a dining occasion at your brand's restaurant, or to pick up your brand at the grocery store during the next day's grocery trip.

Not Just for Retailers

Thanksgiving weekend presents a great opportunity to reach consumers with brand messages, particularly if lighter television users are important to your brand. For many years, this opportunity has been leveraged mainly by retailers and purveyors of hot holiday gifts. But it need not be just them.

Planners working on many nonseasonal brands can take advantage of communal viewing and seasonal activity/planning mind-sets that Thanksgiving weekend viewers, especially lighter viewers, will be experiencing during the long holiday weekend. Thanksgiving weekend's media environment creates good consumer energy into which brands can tap. Why not plan for your

brand to benefit from that energy in 2006?

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