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Exploit Phases of the Flu/Cold Season

Analyze Illness-Induced Changes in Consumer Behavior and Adjust Your Advertising Purchases Accordingly

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

Story continues below...



Have you noticed the number of local news reports popping up the past few weeks reminding people to get their flu shots? Amid all the Hurricane Katrina coverage, it may have slipped by that it's almost cold and flu season again.

On the other hand, if you tapped into "primetime>live's" Sept. 15 broadcast, you may have sensitized yourself to the impending flu season while watching its report about the potential threat caused by the avian influenza ("bird flu") currently impacting Southeast Asia.

You may ask, "What's flu got to do with media planning?" Well, quite a lot, actually.

Depending on what your brand's category happens to be, you may be surprised to learn that media people working in brand categories for which things like flu are big business drivers can do quite a bit through planning efforts to maximize impact of every impression invested—even in a circumstance where the timing of best business potential is uncertain.

As weird as it sounds, cold and flu activity is somewhat predictable. And understanding how planners tap into timely information in these circumstances may add some useful tools to your planning tool kit. These tools can help planners maximize the sales potential that cold and flu season may present for their business. Or they may help minimize the negative impact illnesses might have on brands that could lose business due to bedridden consumers.

Flu Models

If you think back to your high school or college days, you may have taken a statistics course of one sort or another. If you did, it's likely that at some point in the course, the conceptual data being covered used the example of a disease infecting a population of people.

Much serious work has been done in the areas of statistics, mathematics and epidemiology, yielding, among other things, models that can accurately predict the course of flu outbreaks among populations. If you get into it in any depth, you'll encounter a host of interesting concepts, including incubation periods, incidence, periods of infectivity and morbidity.

If you know what to look for, there are many valuable pieces of information planners can use to inform planning decisions, such as:

- How long from initial occurrence in a population (read designated market area or market) will the illness infect a significant number of the population?
- How long will large portions of the population be affected?
- When will the largest number of people in the population be affected?
- When will the occurrence have essentially run its course?

In essence, when is the best business opportunity for my brand and is there enough useful information available to impact the marketplace in a timely manner? The dynamics of a flu situation deal with populations so large that, considering incubation periods, rates of infection, duration of illness and the like, statistical models can indicate four to eight or maybe 12 weeks out when a particular population will reach its critical stages of infection levels.

Plan Evolution

There are two areas of plan modification planners must consider in circumstances such as those existing during the cold and flu season.

- Changing consumer perspective during an illness
- Building flexibility into execution to exploit opportunity

First things first. As a planner, put yourself in the consumer's frame of reference. From the consumer's perspective, a cold or the flu is unplanned. That means consumers will be in reactionary behavior modes.

While they may have previously stocked their pantries with sundry items, it's quite likely they won't have a number of essentials on hand to address their current situation. That means impressions delivered in a timely fashion have a good chance of influencing a spur-of-the-moment purchase.

In addition, it's important for planners to think about how consumer media behavior may change during an illness. Consumers may make a foray out to a doctor and maybe a store or two for needed items, but then their behavior is likely to include cocooning. And their attentiveness level during the recuperation period probably won't be great. People feeling miserable don't retain information very well. It's also likely regular routines will be interrupted for at least a week or two, whether it's the morning Starbucks ritual or typical media behaviors.

In this kind of circumstance, perhaps the most important thing planners can build into their plan is execution flexibility. Media plans that can be influenced by events with uncertain timing should not commit resources completely. From an execution perspective, perhaps the wisest course of action is a low base level of efficient, consistent national presence, reserving a practical amount of resources for opportunistic regional heavy-up weight.

The goal of opportunistic resources is to time heavy-up weight execution to attack markets as they become fertile for brand marketing. What constitutes opportunity may be based on what the planning team gleaned from understanding altered consumer behavior during illness or may be based simply on raw numbers; market A has a huge number of people coming down with the flu, so add impressions to market A in a timely way.

Since reflection upon consumer behavior would suggest that respiratorily challenged consumers might not be inclined to concentrate on the written word, it seems that broadcast media such as television and radio make the most sense for heavy-up efforts.

In this type of scenario, using opportunistic funds to create contingency deals with vendors makes good sense. Vendors guarantee some level of inventory to the brand on short notice in exchange for a guarantee of opportunistic spending. Lead time from a trigger call is negotiated up front, likely to be in the range of four weeks, which is manageable for the vendor and statistically realistic in projecting illness levels in a regional marketplace.

So, basically, when information available to the planning team projects a market to near its peak of illness in eight weeks, the buying team is alerted to release opportunistic funds to start in four weeks for a schedule of four or more weeks, giving the brand increased presence in the market exactly when the majority of the market is suffering from cold or flu. If all dollars had been committed up front, they may not have been allocated to coincide appropriately with actual circumstance, lowering effectiveness.

Brands That Benefit

It almost goes without saying that brands of cold and flu remedies can thrive by being sensitive to circumstances like seasonal illness. But other commodity brands, like teas, facial tissues or canned soup, can benefit also, albeit in other ways. For example, most consumers keep facial tissue and soup on hand. The key in this situation may be not to release funds when things are at their worst, but just after the worst has passed, prompting consumers to re-stock now-empty pantries.

Consider also how this type of thinking could benefit retailers of various types. What if you were a retailer planning a big grand opening? What might happen to your event if it occurred right at the peak of a market's illness? If you were tapped into market-by-market flu data and you noticed that the illness peak would hit in eight weeks, right smack in the middle of your event, eight weeks of lead time would give you the opportunity to reschedule those key funds and activities to a later time when there were more consumers in the market to take advantage of your offers.

The same could be said for restaurants or fast-food franchises. Why run a heavy-up to a marketplace that may be largely stuck indoors recuperating? Reallocating funds on the fly and holding off until after the peak has passed (and consumers, weary of being ill and cooped up, get back into the marketplace) may generate a better return on investment.

What about local cable providers with video-on-demand offerings or retailers such as Blockbuster? Being sensitive to market peaks may point the way to weeks when more consumers are stuck indoors looking for something to watch on television.

Where to Go

If this concept holds interest for you, here are two places where you can start experimenting with available information:

- fluwatch.com
- flustar.com

And, of course, you can always jump online and do a search more pertinent to your needs. You'll find many local health-care providers have set up regional flu activity networks for their regions. It's possible you may find one for your area.

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