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Applying the Power of the 5th Habit

Take a Path of Less Resistance: Present Your Message With Programming That Inspires Viewer Group Affinity

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

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During our family's July 4 cookout festivities, a number of our friends were engaged in a spirited discussion about this summer's movies. Conversation topics ranged from which films had been seen to individual critiques to one husband's aggravation with trying to explain "Star Wars" mythology to his wife.

His wife, fairly frustrated with the twists and turns in plot and characters, concluded that such a confusing story wasn't worth diving into. At which point, in patronizing male fashion, I asked if she was a fan of daytime dramas. "No," she replied, "I'm not. But I do love my Lifetime movies."

Having spent a number of years working on the marketing of female and homemaker products, the media person in me couldn't help but take note. I often have sat through qualitative research group discussions in which women talked about their love of Lifetime movies. After the first time I experienced a group in which Lifetime comments came up consistently, I wanted to understand why so many women were bonded to the programming.

The answer: The power of the 5th habit.

Whether it's women who love Lifetime movies or men who won't miss a minute of their favorite sports team's coverage, the reason for program bonding is the same. It stems from an insight very compellingly described by Stephen Covey in his book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People."

While there are insights galore in "The 7 Habits," I'm referring in particular to Mr. Covey's 5th habit, which is "seek first to understand, then to be understood." At its core, the habit is about listening-empathic listening, truly trying to understand the frame of reference of a person with whom you may be interacting.

When people feel they have been heard and understood, they feel validated as human beings. They feel appreciated. They open up, lowering communication barriers. In that type of communication environment, human beings better connect with each other. Problems can be solved and relationships can be deepened.

Connectedness to Media

Many media behaviors follow the same principle, as I discovered when digging into the Lifetime example. In short, people have a high degree of connectedness to media that demonstrate an understanding of who they are.

Women who enjoy Lifetime movies or men who love to watch everything surrounding their favorite sports franchise can essentially be considered members of affinity groups. Encarta defines affinity as "a feeling of identification; a natural liking for or inclination toward somebody or something" or "a feeling of identification with somebody or something" or "a similarity or likeness that connects persons or things." In this case, we're talking about people feeling connected to programming.

Think about the nature of Lifetime movies. One husband around our table glibly described them as featuring a "disease of the week," which is partly true, but there are also movies, some based on true stories, about the wide range of issues women all around the United States face every day. Those issues, unfortunately, are all too common, tough to deal with and in many cases life-changing. Lifetime does a good job telling those stories from a perspective to which many women can relate.

That's important because women find it validating to watch a movie in which an issue is portrayed that they may have experienced or that someone they know may have experienced. In essence, Lifetime programming is saying, "We know what you're going through." That makes it easier for programming such as a Lifetime movie to connect at a deeper level with its viewers.

Men who are fanatics about sports franchises aren't much different from the Lifetime viewer. For whatever reason, guys are drawn to particular sports or franchises that reflect their individual values and give them a sense of well-being. In selecting their team, men have basically chosen the affiliate group with which they want to be associated.

That team then becomes a badge of honor. It's an outward expression of who the man is. In a sense, there's no difference between the favorite team jersey a guy sports and the war gear worn by clans and tribes throughout history.

Media coverage of that team facilitates the individual's identification with the badge he or she has chosen and fosters connectedness. When the team wins, there's positive validation. When the team loses, validation may not be positive, but it's good to commiserate with others who feel as bad as you do. You know they understand how you feel.

A Final Example

Beyond Lifetime and sports, there are many other venues with an audience basis in affinity groups, but one in particular bears commentary.

Oprah Winfrey has done an incredible job over the years in giving women a platform they identify with. Ms. Winfrey's content

practically screams, "We understand." It's obvious that Ms. Winfrey cares about the issues she covers, and she does a good job of bringing to her dais real people from many walks of life to tell their stories. Viewers who may be experiencing similar circumstances find validation and connectedness.

Think Affinity in Planning

When you select programming or media for your plan, do you choose those with an audience consisting of a large affinity group or those that simply have a high skew? If you have choices, programs or media with an audience basis in affinity groups have the benefit of showcasing messages in an environment in which communication barriers are lowered because the viewer better relates to that vehicle and feels appreciative.

That means the viewers in those environments are more open to communication. Isn't that environment choice better for a brand wishing to initiate a conversation? Doesn't that provide a better opportunity to establish or deepen a consumer's relationship with your brand? Doesn't it increase the odds of making a sale?

If you think the answers to those questions are yes, maybe you should work up criteria for your next plan that evaluate programs or media choices based on their level of affinity.

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