Media Business
January 30, 2006

Long-Term Brand Plans Take Patience

Too Much Focus on Immediate Results Wastes Resources and Diminishes Ability to Deal With Change

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Special to TelevisionWeek

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Earlier this month we made a commitment to help media planners fulfill a 2006 resolution of raising the bar on brand planning efforts. We noted that an effort to raise the bar is an attempt to grow. There are six principles associated with growth that can help achieve a positive impact on media efforts. Those principles are time, environmental change, critical decision making, the need for others, learning and innovation.

Let's elaborate on the first growth principle: time.

Growth and Time

Americans demonstrate a remarkable disregard for reality when it comes to expectations of time. We're accustomed to the here and now. When needs manifest themselves, we expect them to be met as quickly as possible. We take for granted that the marketplace will supply products and services that save time and deliver need fulfillment quickly.

The modern world's hyper-productivity has obliterated the long-term context of time. Why drive across the country for a vacation when we can hop on a plane and be there in a few short hours? Why write a letter when I can phone a loved one immediately? Why rely on land lines when I can page, instant message or e-mail to a BlackBerry?

When time context can change so dramatically, why should any American expect to wait for anything? We've gone from cooking dinners at home or dining out to microwaving dinners in a few minutes or choosing from a bevy of drive-through, quick-service restaurants. When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight, we've come to expect nothing less.

Those expectations are not limited to personal need fulfillment. Short-term perspective is also a powerful motivator in the business marketplace. If markets can gratify consumer needs with virtual immediacy, then corporate profit can be delivered, brands can be built and sales can be accelerated as well. Executives, brand managers and investors alike have developed immediate profit expectations and have evolved standards and practices attempting to maximize return in the short term.

Whether it's the consumer marketplace or corporate expectations, time has come to be viewed as a sequence of events happening at a quick, linear pace. Our fixation is on what occurs next on the calendar as opposed to long-term vision and achieving long-term goals.

Unfortunately, growth is not a short-term proposition. Animals, people, businesses and markets cannot achieve growth immediately just because they desire it. Growth requires cycles of assimilation and renewal in the space of linear time to help a physical being or business increase its size or presence.

With physical beings, increase in size requires resources such as air, water and food. Businesses also require resources, such as information, knowledge and other assets. But resources don't catalyze growth just by exposure. Learning, understanding and hard work are needed before the people running the business can become educated enough to internalize information or merge assets. That education and internalization process takes time.

For entities such as businesses or markets, having accurate perspective on time for growth is difficult. Lester Thurow, an eminent professor of management and economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wrote in a piece titled "Economic Community and Social Investment" some telling words: "Private capitalist time horizons are simply too short to accommodate the time constants of education." This might be more simply stated as "People who want fast profit have difficulty being patient."

The Role of the Consumer

There is another perspective on the time requirement for growth we haven't yet considered: the consumer.

We marketers seem to think that once we launch a show or a campaign, consumers will just glom onto it and immediately provide return on investment. When we fall into this trap, we've lost perspective. Consumers need time to become educated about a brand, what it stands for and its benefits.

While it's true that some shows are destined to fail, how many cases can you recall of quality shows just needing a little extra time to "find an audience"? How long did it take "Seinfeld" to find an audience? The show's pilot did poorly in initial audience testing. If NBC hadn't given the show more time (even if it was only, what, three shows per renewal?), "Seinfeld" may never have become the cultural and marketing powerhouse that it did.

Short-Term Orientation

The major reason growth is undercut by short-term perspective is that energy that could have been used to grow individual capabilities or brand relationships gets focused on short-term crises. Short-term solutions do not have long-term vision. They are vulnerable to unforeseen changes in market circumstances such as competitive actions or others' immediate expectations.

That's just the trap outlined by author Stephen Covey as the Third Habit in his book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." The Third Habit is time management, which revolves around the relationship between urgency and importance. We all tend to focus attention on matters of urgency, things requiring short-term effort, whether trivial or not, instead of investing energy in things that are really important, which generally play out over a longer time period.

Growth Over Time

Business texts or case studies on growth tend to mention a number of best-practice consistencies for growth businesses. The two that stand out the most are (1) vision and patience to establish and follow longer-term plans and (2) inclusion of many smaller initiatives within the longer-term plan.

Best practice No. 1 is powerful because it keeps businesses focused on what's most important for the long term. It relies on the core strengths of the business. Focus on core strengths makes it difficult to be distracted by short-term fires that appear to be critical but in reality are not important over the long haul.

Best practice No. 2 adds great value by allowing businesses to test future areas of growth that flow from the core strengths of the business. Those test initiatives may be new product offerings that flow logically from the core business, or they may be futuristic offerings that are simply in the spirit of the current core business.

Initiatives like these provide a peek into the future, making the business overall more nimble and better able to deal with changing market environments. If something happens, growth-oriented businesses have ideas they can quickly roll out. Businesses fixated on the short term that have not tested other initiatives have to start from scratch.

When more time is spent on longer-range planning, proactive perspective and innovative elements are more likely to be built into media plans. Having proactive orientation is positive in that it helps cut down on some of the fire drills occurring in the short term. In short, a more visionary long-term plan has fewer short-term hiccups to deal with and generates more productivity for the brand-productivity in the form of marketplace efficacy and in turning up innovative strategies that can provide competitive advantages in the future.

Here are some ideas to facilitate creation of long-term, growth-friendly plans.

- First, try to convince the brand to create a two-year, three-year or longer-term plan instead of one designed just for the upcoming calendar year.

- Make a special point to include many small-scale tests of innovative strategic approaches. Lower the risk of wholesale failure by limiting tests to local marketplaces instead of national implementation. But reap the benefits of learning from the tests. The results may yield strategies that can keep the brand moving forward when marketplace circumstances change.

- Don't necessarily go for big change immediately; implement large-scale change by small steps over time. Give plan elements time to come to fruition.

- Build relationships with consumers by being consistent. Familiarity builds trust. That's important in building relationships between brands and consumers. Ray Oldenburg, in "The Great Good Place," talks about how strangers (or, we could postulate, unfamiliar brands) become accepted. "Mainly, one keeps reappearing and tries not to be obnoxious. Of these two requirements for admission or acceptance, regularity of attendance is clearly the more important." Find a perfect show or cable network to reach your target and be there consistently from week to week.

- Manage client expectations of time. Do a better job of establishing for them the importance of allowing plan elements to do their work over time. Be steadfast in maintaining elements, even when budget cuts threaten that strategy.

In the end, the most important thing to remember is that growth takes time. If you keep that in mind as you create media plans for 2006, you'll set a solid foundation for growth. But there are more things to consider. Next month, we'll move to the second growth principle: change.

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