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## Stick to a Theme in Campaigns

In Tricky Economic Environment, Consistent Story Attracts Consumers

By Mark Dominiak Special to *TelevisionWeek*

Some experts are forecasting that consumers will become even more reluctant to make purchases, in the increasingly challenging economic times ahead, than they are now.

Given that bleak outlook, how can media professionals help their clients break through and create impact with consumers?

The most relevant best practice media planners can employ to help clients create impact is to focus on the consumer. As overriding as the impulse toward cost-based solutions may be in times like these, such solutions will be the least likely to create impact with potential customers. Planners need to take a big step back and immerse themselves in the uncertainty their prospects are experiencing.

Immersion leads to real consumer understanding, which, when woven into the fabric of the media effort, makes consumers feel appreciated. Understanding and appreciation are exactly what consumers need to feel in the current environment and can go a long way in increasing the likelihood that they will be open to advertising messages.

### A Theme to Guide Efforts

One way to make sure that consumer understanding is reflected in the media effort is to build the effort around a strategic organizing principle. Think of it as the theme of the media plan, as in the theme of a school paper or a book.

Few media plans are constructed using a strategic theme. It is far more common for plans to be created with a balance-sheet mentality, making it easier to lose consumer connection.

Plans that utilize a theme better exploit the context, not the commodity, of media. In so doing, they can deliver not only impressions but connections with consumers, opening the door for more positive communication channels. Establishing a theme shouldn't be an unfamiliar idea in the world of advertising; the agency's creative product is seldom expressed as a one-off idea. Creative executions are presented as campaigns, which in essence are themes for creative approaches.

How might theme ideas play out from a media perspective? Here are a couple of recent examples.

## Relevant Examples

If you were tapped into coverage of the recent film awards season, you would have noted the presence of Unilever's Bertolli food brand.

Using a theme that could be called "Oscar buzz to endorse Bertolli," the brand touted its Oven Bake Meals line with multiple spots in the SAG Awards. Bertolli also could be found in Entertainment Weekly's awards season coverage. Finally, whether the units were in support of local markets or purchased nationally, Bertolli also made an appearance on Oscar night.

Bertolli marketers realize a couple of things related to coverage of the film awards season.

First, the environment is a great place to reach a core target of on-the-go women who likely have a real need for quality, easily prepared home meals, especially in an economic climate where dining in is preferable to dining out.

Second, award season enjoys a higher level of media attentiveness than average. Not only is there the inherent intrigue of who will win, but there is the added allure of high fashion.

Women pay serious attention to detail when watching telecasts and reading follow-up coverage. Along with the buzz on who was nominated for or won what, dresses, hairstyles and accessories all garner attention. Placed within that communication environment, Bertolli appropriately expected to call greater attention to its ads than might otherwise be expected.

From the outside looking in, it appears that the theme of Bertolli's media plan was to intersect relevant target consumers in a way that maximized engagement. And Bertolli positioned itself well to take advantage of consumers curious to learn more by mentioning Villa Bertolli.com in advertising messages. Curious prospects are rewarded at the Web site with a \$2 coupon for Oven Baked Meals.

One of our current clients, Tampico beverages, also makes powerful use of a media theme. Targeted to young Hispanic moms, Tampico's lower-price-point, quality beverages offer a broad variety of flavors and packaging that satisfies many tastes and occasions.

Our challenge was to create a media platform in a test market that could impact young Hispanic mothers on a small budget. Reviewing behaviors and routines, we chose to focus resources within a theme of reaching moms amid their daily routines with their children.

Central to the media execution was an innovative radio schedule that utilized only one spot positioned at exactly the same time each weekday, when children are ready to enjoy their late afternoon snack.

In addition, we leveraged many local outdoor postings, selecting locations where moms ran many of their errands and near retailers where Tampico was carried. To round out presence, we used newspaper inserts with children's activities and information for mothers in conjunction with morning-drive radio.

Our strategic theme of connecting with mom during her daily routines with her kids worked extremely well. Brand awareness increased significantly as a result of the campaign and more markets are being rolled out in year two based on the strong test results.

## Benefits of Using a Theme

Using a theme as a litmus test can help to identify the best tactics and save time. When tactics fit well within the strategic intent of a theme, they will resonate deeply with consumers. Messages delivered via those tactical contact points stand a better chance of influencing prospects in a meaningful way. Meaningful communication increases the chance of creating positive return on investment.

A media theme that provides strategic focus also can help to competitively distinguish brands. When powerful creative ideas become more than any individual execution, they establish a look and feel that is immediately recognizable and attributed to the brand. They are no longer a series of related messages; they are a campaign. A powerful media theme can achieve the same impact by consistently delivering messages at particular contact points or in a context that can differentiate a brand from its competitors.

Another benefit is the shared vision that comes from the focus a theme provides. A powerful theme, grounded in consumer insight, can be readily understood among all members of the media and marketing teams. Not only can common understanding facilitate communication, it can potentially contribute to enhancing other elements of the marketing program and help in holistically integrating all marketing components.

## A Powerful Theme

There are a few best practices planners should consider when creating a theme.

Express the theme in a short statement of simple, plain English. Avoid media and marketing jargon. Favor an expression of the theme in consumer, human terms. If possible, craft a theme that establishes a link to the brand or to the foundation of the creative message. Reflect brand needs and equities within the theme if possible.

Make sure the media team is involved in the marketing process as early as possible. Early involvement can provide planners with opportunities to access people and insights to better inform the creation of a theme. Planners can bring perspective to the table that may be helpful to other team members in their roles in the process. Test ideas with team members and refine them based on input from others.

If your team is soon to begin a fresh planning process, take a step back and assess whether the current economic climate is influencing plan strategy. If it is, realize that too much emphasis on the commodity of media may unintentionally lessen the plan's impact. Strive rather to weave the fabric of the plan effort around consumer insight.

*Mark Dominiak is principal strategist of marketing, communication and context for Insight Garden.*

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