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Brand Needs Key to Media Allocation

'Purchase Process Continuum' Must Be Considered When Making Choices

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

One area of the media planning process that can greatly increase efficacy of the media plan is the media allocation exercise.

Most media organizations use either proprietary tools or customary practices to determine which media will be utilized for a brand effort and what resources each media type will receive.

How those tools are applied in the process can make all the difference in generating the greatest possible marketplace impact for the brand.

Planners sometimes fall short in plying media allocation tools or processes to their best extent. Whether it happens to be time constraint or failure to understand the breadth of what can be accomplished, some planners simply generate an allocation of resources across media types, selling in recommendations and turning over specs to buyers. If an allocation process is that straightforward, it is not as potent as it possibly could be.

Two important considerations need to drive any media allocation to increase the odds of success. The first is an understanding of the distribution of customer prospects across the purchase process continuum. The second is adherence to objectives. Media allocation must be crafted to honor the brand's needs.

Purchase Process Continuum

In any category, potential customers occupy some area in the purchase process based on their need for that category at a given time. A customer may be ready to trigger a product purchase or he may be at a point where he is just realizing a need is emerging. Further, the actual purchase cycle of a category, short or long, can influence how many potential customers are reasonably accessible as sales prospects to any brand at a given time.

A number of categories, including consumer packaged goods, are characterized by many potential consumers compressed into short, frequent purchase cycles. Everyday product needs and the relatively low cost of CPG products lead to short-term purchase routines. Packaged goods are used up quickly or disposable. New brands or non-preferred brands have many opportunities to infiltrate the process and convince prospects they are the best brand choice.

Favorite brands have ample opportunity to retain trust.

On the other hand, bigger-ticket items like durable goods are characterized by a purchase process opposite that for packaged goods. As with packaged goods, many prospects might at some point have a need for the product, but the durable nature and high costs associated with a durable category translate to consumer-need states spread out over a long time frame, lengthy gaps between succeeding consumer purchase-need states and a longer purchase process when the need finally exists.

In addition, bigger-ticket items tend to come with higher financial risk, drawing out the decision-making process. Products purchased in this regard are intended to provide utility over a longer time frame, so prospects will invest more time in the purchase process to make sure they get it right.

If the dynamics of purchase cycle weren't daunting enough, consumer familiarity with a brand adds another layer of complexity. When a brand enjoys a high level of consumer familiarity, it can be easier to influence a prospect to purchase whether the prospect happens to be just entering a need state or is ready for purchase.

Products with little or no familiarity face a more difficult challenge. Consumers with no familiarity will first need to learn of the brand and understand its benefits before the brand might be considered a viable purchase option. Simple familiarity may be enough to trigger sales in low-risk, packaged-good situations, but deeper relationships need to be fostered for bigger-ticket product purchases.

Adherence to Objectives

Often, objectives are assessed independently of purchase process. That's a mistake. Both should be considered interdependently. For example, say a brand is relatively unknown and resides in a category with a long purchase cycle, requires significant investment and therefore triggers a highly involved purchase process. The brand, however, may state its objective very generally as generating awareness with the intent to significantly boost sales.

Thinking about where non-aware customers might be in the purchase process continuum, various problems result. Prospects near to purchase of an expensive item are fairly unlikely to be swayed by simple awareness. Earning a big-ticket purchase requires quite a bit more consumer confidence than basic awareness can engender. Familiarity, preference and trust are also very important relational benchmarks a brand must achieve with prospects. Simple awareness won't get a brand that far and only small fractions of low-hanging sales opportunities can be expected.

On the other end of the spectrum, generating awareness among prospects farther out from the actual purchase occasion is positive, but awareness early on in an extended purchase process contributes only small influence. Media must maintain constant pressure after initial awareness to lead the prospect through the purchase process up to and beyond the point of purchase.

Crafting the Allocation

Media allocations must take care to deliver impressions across the breadth of the brand's purchase process continuum and with media types relevant to any given point. In that way, a plan maximizes its chances of influencing consumers who happen to occupy the variety of points across a purchase process continuum. Use of different media types is helpful, because each media has strengths others don't at different purchase

process points.

Television will do a wonderful job of generating awareness, but may fall short in building preference, relationships or trust. Magazines can do a great job of providing more detail and rationale, but may not necessarily do a great job of creating broad awareness. The Web also might not be able to generate huge awareness, but it can do a great job of connecting prospects to deeper information and word-of-mouth sources that can build trust or even help facilitate a purchase.

Planners must take care to understand the dynamics of their brand's purchase process and be able to align any media allocation generated by their tools or practices to the purchase dynamics of the category. Are there enough media types in the allocation to move prospects from any given point in the purchase process to the next point? Are there holes in the allocation? How would the allocation need to be altered to fill the gaps?

Perhaps the gaps can be filled in other ways. A paid media buy could attack specific allocation elements that do well against critical parts of the purchase process. As part of the negotiation, how about using the scale of the buy to obtain added value elements that will fill the gaps in the purchased media allocation? It might also be possible to work with sales teams to build packages that weave in elements across various media to appropriately attack contact points.

Just having media present in an allocation doesn't complete the planner's task; integration is important as well. Integration doesn't just mean that elements have the same creative look and feel for all executions across media types. Executions in each medium should work together to move a prospect further along the process and are hopefully connected to the other media elements. The intent is basically to deepen the relationship between the brand and the consumer.

There are things planners can do in working with media sales reps to foster integration, like challenging the vendor to provide an integrated package rather than just inventory. It's important to realize that vendors won't know a planner is striving for integration unless they are told. Bring sales reps into the process a little more deeply and let them understand what the plan is intending to accomplish. In that way, package proposals can provide a lot more than just impressions.

Another critical integration-building activity is collaborating with the rest of the account team, especially the planners' creative counterparts. Investing time with the team to help them understand the media allocation rationale and how elements of the media plan are interrelated can help the team design campaign ideas or message executions that more effectively move consumers along in the purchase process.

It's generally always better for a planner to enter the marketplace to purchase a killer idea than to just purchase the inventory required to fill out an allocation. Collaboration with the rest of the team can result in just that.

One of the most potent tools a planner can use in the planning process is the media allocation exercise. But planners need to take care not to simply let a tool or process generate a result. Media allocations should be guided by an understanding of how consumer prospects fall in the purchase process continuum and by the communication objective of the brand.

When appropriately crafted, a solid media allocation can meet a potential customer appropriately within their purchase process, create a vital connection and advance the prospect one step closer to brand purchase.

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