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Media Planner: Plain Talk Can Improve Collaboration

Using Jargon Rather Than Meaningful Language Creates Barriers to Progress

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

“The quality of our thoughts is bordered on all sides by our facility with language.”

That statement, which provides useful instruction to media planners, is attributed to J. Michael Straczynski, author of novels, short stories, radio series and comic books who is perhaps best known for writing the television series “Babylon 5.”

Media planners aren’t necessarily at the creative hub of the marketing communications process, so it may appear they don’t need to master turning a phrase. When collaborating, however, planners must be careful not to let surface appearances dictate conventionality. How well planners communicate with others in the marketing process can have a major impact on achieving positive marketplace results.

As Mr. Straczynski suggests, the language used by planners when communicating can be critical to getting the most out of any collaboration. Media planners should think hard about the language they use in communicating with non-media collaborators. Why? Media people use a lingua franca in their world that many outside the discipline find arcane or even intimidating.

Reach, frequency, rating points, impressions, composition, coverage, engagement and literally dozens of other buzz words can overwhelm media conversations or documents. While the language of media might be second nature to media people, it can create barriers between other stakeholders in the process. Barriers aren’t good, because they can undermine media’s effectiveness in the process and miscast ideas or strategies that may indeed be powerful, but misunderstood because of nomenclature.

Important stakeholder groups require somewhat different approaches to the type of language used to increase communication effectiveness and maximize the value of collaboration. The trick for media planners is not to fall into the trap of expressing themselves in the lingua franca of media but in terms of how their work will influence consumers. Here are some thoughts for planners to use in approaching conversations with three key stakeholder constituencies: the account team, clients and the sales rep community.

Account Team

Legendary journalist Edward R. Murrow once said, “The newest computer can merely compound, at speed, the oldest problem in the relations between human beings, and in the end the communicator will be confronted

with the old problem of what to say and how to say it.”

Computers dominate the contemporary media process. Planners sit at the hub of spiffy new systems and massive amounts of data and are required to contribute solutions to the account team. As Mr. Murrow’s quote suggests, planners are confronted with the problem of what to say about solutions generated by their systems.

The main problem here is that if planners decide to communicate solutions to others by using the language of numbers, they will end up appearing to be the cliché they fight so hard against: bean counters. The trick for planners is not to talk about the numerical output of their work. The focus of discussion needs to be how their work helps the account team better understand or influence the brand’s target consumer.

For example, MediaMark Research & Intelligence runs might show strong indices for late news, late-night TV or overnight radio dayparts. If this implication leads planners to suggest plan tactics favoring these elements, they should not communicate tactics to the team using the language of comps, coverage or indices. They should focus on implications that target prospects seem to be up later at night consuming media and provide ideas that hope to exploit those media contact points. Language must change from one that uses dry, black-and-white numbers to a more human one.

Say the media team learns that Thursday looks like a real opportunity to influence prospects. Language should not focus on the number of units or rating points delivered in the day, but on the impact the brand will have on that day. A picture should be painted of how selected tactics will be perceived by the consumer and how that will achieve brand goals.

It may not seem like much, but when planners can make this subtle change in the language they use in team discussions, they will be perceived by the team less as numbers jockeys and more as consumer strategists who are accorded a deeper level of respect for their level of insight.

Clients

When collaborating with clients, the problem with media lingua franca can be completely different. Many clients have little or no understanding of the meaning of many common media terms. When faced with a heavy dose of media terminology, clients might be bored, intimidated or overwhelmed. Media people need to be mindful of that reality when they present to and interact with clients. If the objective is to excite and engage clients, another approach is needed.

At its core, any media plan being presented to a client is a creative idea. Why not take a cue from how the creative team communicates with clients, as aptly described by a quote from the very creative 18th-century English poet Samuel Coleridge: “Works of imagination should be written in very plain language; the more purely imaginative they are, the more necessary it is to be plain.”

Simply put, media people need to present media plans and ideas to clients using more words and pictures. It is imperative to minimize numbers and flowchart detail. Presentation slides should have an economy of words and images that convey ideas, tactics and strategies. Use of logos, colors and shapes goes a long way.

Present flowcharts as blocking charts, not as detailed Excel spreadsheets. Detail can be presented in an appendix or handed out as needed. The goal is to create the same level of excitement in a media conversation that occurs in a creative conversation. The key is to move the language in the direction of right-brain,

emotional, intuitive language and away from logical, left-brain, numerical language.

Sales Reps

Collaboration with partners in the rep community can lead to a wholly different result. In that situation, media people are interacting with partners who fully understand each other's language. The problem that can occur is that being immersed in a common frame of reference, using an ever-expanding language of arcane media terminology, both parties might lose sight of important brand goals that need to be accomplished. As Joseph Priestly, an early pioneer in the field of chemistry, said, "The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate."

Because the end result of conversations with vendors is generally a transaction, media people tend to advance vendor conversations in that direction. When that type of dialogue occurs, media people tend to get what they pay for: inventory. If media people want to take the conversation to a higher level and have the plan achieve more on behalf of the brand than just a simple execution of impressions in the marketplace, they need to take the dialogue to a different place.

Vendors must be made to understand the impact the brand desires to create with consumers in the marketplace. The language required is one of strategy and consumer insight so vendors can then understand the strategy the media team is hoping to achieve and not just the level of inventory to be purchased.

Operating with that knowledge, vendors can become a larger asset to the media team. They may know about other offerings or mechanisms to deliver messages via their properties of which the planning team was unaware. That can lead to better enhancements of buy tactics or open the door to more useful added value.

How planners communicate with their collaborators can get in the way of what planners really want to accomplish—namely, providing an effective platform in which a brand's message can connect and resonate with a consumer. They need to take advantage of whatever language can best serve their needs in any given situation. Sometimes the deft turn of a phrase might lead to a better media solution than the magic of numbers.

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

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