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Manage the Crisis Before It Occurs

Volatile Times Require Vigilance, With Contingency Plans Key to Process

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

As the last few weeks of news headlines can attest, many trying circumstances have challenged millions of Americans and wreaked havoc on media plans. The ongoing saga of the financial markets, along with a hotly contested presidential election, will continue to affect media plans throughout the rest of the year.

Considering the current environment, now is a good time for seasoned media pros to take a step back and for younger planners to familiarize themselves with best practices that might help maintain media plan integrity in a volatile market.

Keep Your Eye on the Ball

It's easy for any planning team to breathe a deep sigh of relief and move on to the next project once a plan and buy have been completed. Unfortunately, plans are like lay-ups in basketball; planners can't let up on their vigilance over the process until the last media unit has appeared. Not only can hiccups occur with any buy execution, but circumstances can conspire to turn the best-laid media plans into counterproductive messaging engines.

For example, a couple of weeks ago I experienced a classic example of a media plan losing its saliency. With economic volatility dominating the news, I turned on the local news radio station to stay abreast of developments while commuting. That particular day, one of the big stories was the failure of Washington Mutual and its purchase by JPMorgan Chase.

The very first advertising message that followed the story was a sponsorship of traffic and weather by, you guessed it, Washington Mutual. The announcer copy went on to talk about how great a banking alternative WaMu was. Free checking! Woo-hoo!

A story about people lining up at local WaMu branches to make sure their savings are secure is followed by an ad extolling how great it is to bank at WaMu. As if that weren't bad enough, a total of three WaMu traffic and weather sponsorship units aired during my time in my transit; certainly more units ran during the balance of the day.

Ordinarily, local news is an outstanding choice for any bank's message. In this case, however, the bank's being the lead news story, and a negative one at that, made the environment exactly the wrong one to be in.

While there could have been a number of contributing factors leading to the airing of messages that day, there may not have been any agreement in place that would have prompted or alerted the station to withdraw WaMu's sponsorship units. A contingency plan might have helped the bank avoid that situation.

The WaMu case underscores the need for media planners to work closely with buyers to include contingency plans as part of the buy. It also underscores the need for planners and buyers to connect with their vendor partners quickly to pull whatever units can be affected. Hours passed between the units I heard in the morning and those I heard late in the afternoon during the return trip. With announcer-read copy, it's hard to believe that a planning group aggressively stewarding the situation could not have influenced the situation.

Thinking Things Through

Crisis-management situations aren't the only ones that can arise and cause difficulties for the planning team. Sometimes uncomfortable situations can be brought about by changing market environments or as an unforeseen consequence of the planning team's own efforts. How could the planning team create its own counterproductive environment? Here's a great example I observed years ago on a retail account.

The client was a demanding vision-care provider that kept the media-planning team on their toes. Of the many deliverables important to the client, none was as important as bringing in buys at the lowest cost-per-thousand possible. A critical part of the media mix was local newspaper, which can command very high CPMs.

In order to leverage the strength of newspaper but meet the client's need for low-cost delivery, the planning team worked to implement remnant buys with newspapers in each client market. Sacrifices were made in positioning and day-of-week timing in order to secure the lowest rate possible.

A problem resulted from the strategy, however, when a creative execution used an approach with a sense of urgency. A bold headline progressed through the center of the page and read something like, "Don't Wait Until It's Too Late," with the last part of the headline blurring out as if vision was failing. Unfortunately, the remnant buys came back to haunt the planning team when the creative units started popping up across from obituary pages.

This problem could have been alleviated by the planning team if they had taken a couple of additional steps. First, they could have worked a little more closely with the creative team to understand the nature of the units that were on the horizon. Forewarned is forearmed.

Secondly, the team could have implemented some restrictions in the remnant space agreement. Regardless of what the copy was, the planning team should have included language in the buying guidelines prohibiting any ad from running opposite the obituaries. Unless a client happens to be a funeral home or cemetery, there isn't a positive environment associated with the obituaries.

Planners need to do what they can during the planning process to anticipate what eventualities might occur as a result of general environmental factors, factors endemic to their brand's category and problems that may result from chosen strategic direction. When potential pitfalls are identified, the planning team needs to work to ensure that a process exists to address those types of contingencies. This is one of the best ways for planners to eliminate the potential of a whole series of problematic circumstances.

Acting in Crisis

Having a contingency plan is a very smart thing. But at the end of the day, any contingency plan works only if the team acts on it when the situation calls for action. In the WaMu example, it's hard to understand how a team couldn't have mobilized in the early hours of the day to eliminate announcer-read copy. Planners need to be vigilant and act accordingly when needed.

I once was part of a planning team working on an airline-related account. My time on the business happened to overlap with the tragic events of 9/11. The core part of our team was based on the West Coast. As the events of that day occurred in the morning on the East Coast, I happened to be drawn into the crisis management activity on behalf of the client, given that the core team members had not yet started their day.

Fortunately for our team, contingency plans were solidly in place with all of our vendor partners as part of the planning and buying process. I knew who the key contacts were at the vendors who were part of our plan. Following quick client contacts in the early morning, our team immediately reached out to the vendors to implement our contingency plans.

While we did face obstacles reaching vendor partners based in New York, our plans worked effectively and the integrity of the media plan was maintained. If we had not had a contingency plan in place prior to the events of that day, it would have been very hard to marshal effective partnership with our vendors and appropriately alter the media plan in time.

A key part of the contingency process lies in relationships with vendors. Planning teams need to have strong relationships with their partners and be able to command the attention needed when the situation demands it. Clients need to be helpful partners in helping the planning team. Poor relationships can muddy up the waters and cost the client dearly when quick action is genuinely needed.

I've seen plenty of circumstances in which clients repeatedly demand tweaks based on "crisis situations" they feel they are experiencing. Many times, those situations are far from being a real crisis and serve to do nothing more than burn through good will and positive relationships with vendors. It's the classic "cry wolf" cliché. When a real crisis arises, vendors are much less likely to respond in a productive fashion.

Today's headlines are more than a reminder that many clients are experiencing real crisis situations that require immediate attention to maintain the integrity of media efforts. Planning teams who have taken thoughtful steps to manage those situations productively will be in the best position to help their clients weather the storm.

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