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Media Planner
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Open Your Mind to Consumer's View

Outside-In Orientation Makes for More Effective Strategic Plans and Greater Influence in the Marketplace

Story continues below...



By Mark Dominiak

Special to TelevisionWeek

Not too long ago I struck up a conversation with a brand client about her feelings on what represented excellence in media planning. She promptly showed me an example of what she felt demonstrated excellence.

Reaching into her briefcase, she extracted a spreadsheet detailing scads of magazine insertion information for all of the brands

within her division. Her rationale was that the spreadsheet demonstrated excellence because it enabled her to fully understand where and when the brands' dollars were being invested, allowing her to have her finger on the pulse of execution and ensuring no waste as a by-product of overlap.

Her response illustrates how biased many marketing professionals are to inside-out perspective. By that, I mean thinking first about what is important to us from our desks rather than what is important first from the consumer's perspective. The more appropriate orientation is outside-in, letting the consumer's view of the world drive us as we create and execute communication plans. There is arguably no more important facet of that perspective than the actual purchase process the consumer goes through in choosing products and services.

During the media planning process, planners and clients go through a process similar to the one consumers do in the marketplace. Consumers take four steps: need recognition, information search, evaluation and purchase. The corresponding steps planners and clients take are objectives and strategies (needs expressed), pre-planning (explore vehicles/behaviors), presenting and evaluating a plan and executing the plan.

If plans can be better engineered to incorporate outside-in insights from each of the four key process areas, media planners can:

- Encourage client focus on consumer behavior.
- Create plans that reflect the consumer's purchase process.
- Better influence consumers in the marketplace.

Here are some tips to attack each of the four areas.

Objectives and Strategies

We tend to reflect them as a series of bullet-pointed statements that delineate business goals the client wants to achieve. An example might be, "Generate a 5 percent increase in sales," which is important but is an inside-out statement.

One way to re-engineer to an outside-in approach is to link objectives and strategies to specific needs communication must fill in the purchase process. Statements like "Intersect consumer at point of alternative consideration" are more indicative of communication needs and a truer outside-in approach.

Note that the plan's job doesn't stop with writing the statements into the text. The plan must actively work to deliver on the statements.

Pre-Planning/Researching Vehicle Alternatives

This is an exercise of identifying where the fish are. Find them and place your message there to prompt action.

That approach doesn't work consistently. The reason is that consumers may indeed be in the places where messages are planned to run, but they may not be in the appropriate purchase process mind-set. If the message is designed to prompt a specific consumer action the message environment must be conducive to the message.

The tip here is to have a two-tiered screening process. Once you have identified where the fish are, take the second step of honestly assessing what role they play in the purchase process. Do not fall into the trap of using a vehicle or message environment that does not sync with the behavioral prompt the message is striving to elicit. Efficiency is no excuse. Cheap, poorly targeted impressions are just wasted.

Presenting and Evaluating a Plan

The flowchart is perhaps the signature document in media planning. It is also a document that does a remarkable job of ignoring the consumer. Think about it. Media vehicles are listed down the left side, bucketed in their appropriate category: broadcast-network, spot, cable, radio, then print, out-of-home, Internet or other media. The body of the document is a grid of how inventory is scheduled and total investment made down the right side. This is about as inside-out-reflective as it can get.

To be fair, some flowcharts will do a good job of reflecting things like category seasonality across the top. But they are just as likely to reflect media seasonality indices or promotional periods as well. It is much rarer to see a flowchart that reflects the consumer's purchase process.

Here's the tip: Engineer the flowchart to reflect the purchase process down the left side. Bucket vehicles according to what consumer response they are designed to prompt. The flowchart document will evolve to a reflection of how consumers are being guided through the purchase process.

A tool of this nature is more valuable in the evaluation process than a balance sheet. You can still generate a standard scheduling flowchart, just don't use it as part of a plan's evaluation process.

Plan Execution

Negotiation with media sellers in today's world is dominated by commodity approach. Everyone wants to use organizational scale to one-up the other guy. When buyer and seller are each looking to win the negotiation process, the approach has become inside-out and the consumer loses.

Here's a novel idea: Planners should work in a more partnered, strategic fashion with vendors. They should ground the vendors in the strategy of where their property is designed to fit into the purchase process and what action the messaging is designed to prompt.

The wonderful upside of this is that vendors can better create packages that fit the specific strategic approach. When they provide bonus spots or other media elements, they can do so with the purchase process in mind. It's remarkable how easily a program can be designed to drive a consumer from a need-recognition prompt on television to research on a Web site to a store visit to a purchase. Media sellers are better partners in helping the plan achieve its ends when they know what it is attempting to do.

Excellence in media planning starts with solid grounding in the consumer's perspective. One of the most important aspects of that perspective is the purchase process. Better engineering media plans to deliver messages within that process increases the odds of positively influencing consumers in the marketplace.

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

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