

TV Week

News

November 16, 2008 8:34 PM

Don't Just Go With the Flow Chart

Adding Visual Enhancements, New Organization Can Boost Engagement

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

Remember the old saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words"?

According to Wikipedia, the phrase is meant to convey the idea that "complex stories can be described with just one still image" and "aptly characterizes the goals of visualization where large amounts of data must be absorbed quickly."

One of the most important sources of information a media planner creates is the plan flowchart. It serves multiple purposes: It is the final expression of the breadth of factors that influence and comprise the media plan; it quantifies the ebb and flow of the brand's message in the marketplace; and it serves as the foundation for creating critical direction components such as buy specifications.

In a time crunch (or, with some clients, by habit), flowcharts are the first page of a media plan that will be sought out. They are tacked up on walls, featured in summary presentations and often are the most critical portion of the media plan preserved as a record of the brand's media effort for that year.

However, the unfortunate reality of flowcharts is that most are created for purely utilitarian purposes. Planners often build them using Excel spreadsheets as a platform to quickly and simply lay out information in rows and columns. Media types generally are grouped together, with details laid out by week or month, with special attention given to incorporating individual period totals vertically and cumulative information totals horizontally. They are built to demonstrate that numerical goals have been maximized and that budget integrity has been maintained.

This traditional flowchart works at odds with consumer-directed media planning. Flowcharts do a great job of conveying rating-point, unit or budget details, but they rarely capture the strategic intention of the media plan. As such, the flowchart generally contributes to a perception that the media plan is nothing but a bunch of numbers and, by extension, that the planning team is essentially a group of number-crunchers.

Most flowcharts fail to express what may be the media plan's most important contribution to the marketing effort: its strategic intent. Numbers, totals and yield are all important pieces of information, but they are crafted with the intent that they will prompt consumers to take some sort of action as a result. Planners need to do what they can to make sure that in conveying important quantitative information, flowcharts also demonstrate how target consumers will be influenced by the brand's message.

Here are some tips on how flowcharts can better serve that purpose.

Concept Flowcharts

Early in the planning process, it may be valuable for planners to create flowcharts that do nothing more than demonstrate the general manifestation of strategic concepts. These flowcharts show few to no details beyond budget allocation by media type, line item or effort segment. Blocks and line items simply convey the strategic direction of a plan concept and can be very valuable, especially if a client has not been particularly helpful with upfront planning direction.

Armed with austere charts and few details, a planning team can better invest time in pursuing potential strategic directions for the client to consider. Clients have the opportunity to choose from a variety of options versus picking apart and redirecting the details of a sole recommendation. Concept flowcharts increase the planning team's chances of hitting on the right strategic solution and cutting down on multiple restarts of detail work.

In the Blocks

Most media planners have been taught to visually express the media plan via a flowchart with either numbers or simply black blocks denoting presence in a week. Unfortunately, it's a tactic that misses a tremendous opportunity to convey information.

Each block can be used to convey a variety of different bits of information or make the flowchart more visually engaging. The use of images also can help cement the information more substantively in the reader's mind. Further, creative use of what goes into the blocks can actually help conserve space on the chart, housing, for example, the list of media vehicles or unit sizes traditionally conveyed in the left column.

Instead of just listing a network or cable line item, a planner could use network logos or program images in place of colored blocks. Local TV and radio station logos, newspaper mastheads, magazine covers and Web site logos also could be utilized.

Organizing Information

There's no rule that says information on a flowchart must be organized by media type or by week, or that the costliest plan elements or a particular media type must come first. While that is effective as a jumping-off point for things like the creation of buy specs, it's not necessarily effective at conveying strategy.

An effective amendment could be to lay out the plan as a reflection of the purchase process. What comes first? Awareness-creating elements, perhaps. Other elements could be added in sequence, building all the way to in-store or customer-relationship management elements. Constructed in this way, a flowchart can better convey how media elements integrate and guide consumers through the purchase process.

A Physical Flowchart

There's frequently an awkward moment during presentations when a flowchart is projected on the screen and the audience groans at the illegible words and numbers in the tiny grid. Planners often will pass out more readable paper copies of the flowchart, but that disengages the audience from the presentation and focuses

attention on a page of numbers.

This situation can be remedied by the creation of a physical flowchart. For example, when it comes time to reveal the flowchart for a magazine plan, place a copy of each publication in the center of the table with tentcards recapping reach and frequency. That offers the audience a substantive demonstration of the breadth of the plan that can be examined and touched. With the publications at hand, positioning can be shown and creative can be mocked up in the magazines as it will appear when executed.

Miniature billboards also can be placed on the table, as can small presentation boards with programming images or logos. It's even fairly simple to compile a brief DVD segment of networks to be used or programs to be purchased. The flowchart projected on the screen can even be made interactive so that the presenter can click on areas of the chart and call up Web sites, video content or other elements.

Planners can create presentations that not only convey information more effectively, but entertain as well. Much more value can be gained by turning traditional flowcharts that simply recap quantitative distributions into platforms that visually engage the reader and convey not only numbers, but strategic intent. This evolution can help planners focus client attention on consumer impact rather than decimals and boxes.

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

[Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#) | [RSS](#) | [Share](#)

Tags: [Media PLanner](#), [Print Edition](#)
