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Tapping the Power of Storytelling

Strategic Teasing Can Help Capitalize on Human Nature, Put the Brand in Control of the Conversation

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

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This time last year we covered the subject of people's interest in stories and how powerful a tool they could be in the media planner's bag.

How stories are served up can also be a powerful planning tool.

Here's an approach that human nature has trouble ignoring: the teaser. Did you hear the one about ...? Do you know what happened to the man who ...? It was in this location 30 years ago that

Did you ever set up something that way and then not follow with the story? Try it sometime. You'll be surprised how quickly someone will ask, "Well, what about ...?"

This type of storytelling bait is exactly how teasers work in the advertising world. One small tidbit of information in an ad that piques curiosity can get consumers hungering for the whole story. These qualities make teasers an especially effective tool because they can help media planners conquer three very typical challenges faced when creating plans:

Too much complexity in brand message.

Conventional traps of how media are used.

A need to call consumers to action.

Advertising works best when it communicates one simple idea to consumers, yet that rule of thumb seems largely lost on brand marketers. Raise your hand if you have a client with a laundry list of communication points they want to make sure are included in creative messages. I'll bet a lot of hands went up (at least on principle).

Clients find it hard to be comfortable with simple messages. They are steeped in knowledge of what's important to their brand and genuinely passionate about wanting marketplace success. As such, they commonly fall into the trap of pressuring creative teams to cram too much information into advertising messages.

That ends up being problematic from two perspectives. First, messages become difficult for consumers to digest. That means there is an increased likelihood of consumers moving on from interaction with brand ads without understanding the key brand message. Second, in a communication environment chock full of clutter, complicated brand messages have less chance of standing out.

Keeping It Simple

Teasers used as a media planning tool foster simplicity. By their nature, teasers do not tell complete stories. They just give a small peek under the tent. With the notion of a teaser component in hand, creative teams can focus a portion of the communication effort on one key message, ensuring that consumers will receive a pure dose of that one key message.

Not only does one key message mean that consumers can focus, it also means that amid the environmental clutter of complicated messages present for other brands, there is a better chance the brand with the straightforward message will stand out.

The main trap communications teams fall into is using media in a habitual way. When clients present a problem that requires a number of communication points to be addressed, the team generally goes to the drawing board and creates executions that include all of those communication points. Each media type receives an execution that covers all of the communication points on the list.

In effect, messages are developed to be individual, free-standing components that include every important facet of the brand's message. Wherever the consumer contacts the brand's message, he or she will have a chance to understand all that the brand has to say. This mentality flows from the mistaken impression that any point at which a consumer intersects the brand is a sales opportunity.

Cramming all of the communication points into each message fails first because it doesn't take the consumer's perspective into consideration. Beyond the fact that including too many communication points fosters complexity, some message points may be irrelevant to the environment in which they are appearing. Why cram information into a message appearing in a place where consumers are not in an information-seeking mode?

Second, consumers use media for a variety of reasons. Messages need to be developed for the medium with consideration of what the consumer has chosen to use it for, not what clients believe needs to be said.

If the planning team has done its job correctly, it will have identified for the communications team the appropriate media

environments for reaching the target consumer. And it won't present this information as just where consumers can be reached. It will also convey to the team why consumers have chosen these environments.

With that knowledge, the creative team will be better armed to develop messages, linking appropriate brand communication points to the "why" of the consumer's media consumption at that particular point.

A final way the "every message contains all the information" approach is a trap is that it fails to appropriately utilize the complete spectrum of marketing communications. The goal should not be to identify all of consumer contact points around the marketing wheel and deliver a complete consumer message in each environment. Successful communication comes from understanding how different marketing elements intersect with the consumer's purchase process and delivering appropriate brand messages at those points to advance consumers to the next stage of the process.

Teasers are a great way to start consumers off or redirect them in their purchase process down a path the brand chooses. When done properly, a teaser can tell consumers exactly where to go or what to do next. And at that next point, more of the brand's story can be told and the consumer can be prompted to advance to the next point down the purchase process.

Dual Benefits

Two benefits flow directly from this approach. First, the brand can focus conversation. Rather than overwhelming consumers with too many brand details at once, the brand can start by driving home the most important message, then invite the consumer to hear the next portion of the message down the road.

Second, the teaser approach enables the brand to gain control of the conversation. Instead of trying to catch up with the consumer to deliver messages, the brand can direct the consumer to the next message opportunity. If done smartly, the next opportunity will be at a logical point further along in the purchase process. Call to action doesn't always have to be "Buy now." It can also be "Meet me at this place when the time is right."

Teasers may seem like a small idea, but they can tap into the powerful lure of stories as a way to engage consumers with brands. And as a planning tool, teasers can help planners foster simplicity, avoid conventional media traps and prompt consumers to marketplace action.

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