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Media Planner
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Retailers Leverage Holiday Media

Strong Market Presence, Deep Relationships With Customers Keep Registers Ringing Year-Round

By Mark Dominiak

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As I write this, my household has successfully emerged from the turmoil of the Black Friday weekend marketing blitz no worse for the wear.

It used to be that the most important part of Thanksgiving weekend was getting together with family for food and fellowship. Oh how things have changed. The last decade has seen the social nature of Thanksgiving shift from dinner tables to shopping centers. Families used to plan activities around the airtime for the special "A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving;" now they plan around 6 a.m. Sears door-buster sales. How has it come to pass that retailers market the holidays so heavily?

As a media person I can't help but watch the communication activity with keen interest. With so much riding on the holiday

season, many retailers do an awful lot to pull out the stops. It's not uncommon for retailers to generate 25 percent, 30 percent or more of their year's sales during the holidays. But that's not the only reason the holidays are important to retailers. To truly understand holiday retailer mania, one must first understand the marketplace commitment retailers must make to communications programs.

Success over time requires that retailers gain important perceptual real estate with consumers in two ways.

First, they must establish legitimate mass-market presence. Basically, establish a large enough market footprint to generate significant sales. Media plays a role in helping retailers establish mass-market presence by gaining valuable pieces of perceptual real estate.

Recognition: Has the retailer established its name deeply enough in the marketplace to be remembered by consumers? Media's role is one of generating awareness.

Reputation: This is about importance. Is there enough market presence for consumers to consider the retailer as an option? Media's role is to maintain awareness over time. Help the brand demonstrate viability by being a constant, salient presence in the marketplace. Think recency.

Expectation: Can the retailer convince consumers it can deliver on its promises? Media can help by ensuring placement in authority vehicles. Placing the message in environments where retailers can take advantage of consumer's trust of content. News broadcasts, niche programs or publications endemic to a retailer's category are all environments where retailers can trade on authority of content providers. Think about how often you see Lowe's or Home Depot ads on HGTV or TLC.

Offering: Does the retailer have a worthwhile offering? Generally, retailers express this as a mix of product, price and service. Usually a retailer is strong in one or two of these areas and adequate in the other.

Failure at one, or weakness in all, means the retailer won't succeed long-term. Media's role is to provide timely multimedia contact points for messaging to demonstrate the retailer's delivery of product, price and service promises.

Second, a good retailer will develop a deep relationship with a significant part of its consumer base. Think of the 80/20 rule. Eighty percent of sales come from 20 percent of consumers. These are the consumers that shop the retailer outside of the holiday season. A successful retailer does an outstanding job differentiating itself from competitors, establishing its brand as preferred among a core group, essentially converting consumers from a transactional relationship to one of commitment.

Developing longer-term relationships with a core consumer group requires retailers to reach deeper perceptual real estate with communications. Media plays an important role in establishing these deeper communications.

Ritual: Can the retailer become so important that it becomes part of consumer routine? Starbucks is a great example. This might seem like a difficult hurdle for a media planner, but true appointment programming is a good place to start.

Programs or magazines consumers go out of their way to make time for are perfect environments for this type of messaging. Media people should dive deep to understand what it is about the vehicle that prompts strong consumer bonds and work hard with the creative team to ensure the message delivers on the bond.

Differentiation: This isn't about a unique selling proposition. It's about personality. What is it about the retailer's brand that makes it different from the competition? Think about friendships you may have. What is it about a particular friend's personality that provides a comfort level? Uniqueness? Retailers must establish that same type of feeling with consumers.

Media can help by providing standout placement ideas for messages. An example of this is Target, which occasionally will break from standard, multipage inserts featuring price/item and do die cuts or theme-based inserts featuring products in a more lifestyle/personality type of format.

Receptivity: When expectations aren't met, how does the retailer respond? Positive retailer response to consumer needs deepens relationships.

Media can help retailers demonstrate their receptivity by providing service and interactivity with placements. Answers to frequently asked questions and tutorials work well in appropriate environments. Interactive placements provide instant consumer gratification. [Click here](#), something happens immediately.

As you might expect, gaining these areas of perceptual real estate with consumers is difficult for many retailers to achieve. It requires significant time and financial commitment. Observation of most retailers' efforts over a calendar year will show that few ever get beyond the more transactional facets of communication. The holiday situation provides an equalizing opportunity for retailers that may not have the resources to be consistent over a year's time frame.

Even though they can't do so for most of the year, many retailers will appropriately allocate resources during the holidays to push deeper emotional buttons over the shorter time frame. This is extremely important to many retailers, because delivering a more complete communication effort to a holiday-shopping-minded populace attracts many new transactional consumers and potentially converts other consumers to deeper relationships.

More holiday transactional consumers equals needed holiday profit. Holiday consumers converted to a deeper relationship level provide more profitability during the rest of the year.

So as you watch the communication blitz this holiday season, make special note of the retailers trying to take advantage of the fleeting opportunity. They have a lot more riding on it than you think. n

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