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A Good Yarn Can Sell Your Message

Connect Ads to Compelling TV Programming With Strong, Emotive Storytelling That Absorbs Consumers

By Mark Dominiak

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Special to *TelevisionWeek*

Last week my kids and I were in channel-surfing mode and wandered across "The Princess Bride" on A&E. We quickly began repeating lines from the film.

Miracle Max: "With `All Dead,' there's usually only one thing you can do."

Inigo: "What's that?"

Miracle Max: "Go through his clothes and look for loose change."

"The Princess Bride" has always been one of our favorites and we quickly became engrossed in the story.

This particular cinematic interlude not only sparked a good idea for a column but also provided a welcome reminder of how compelling stories can capture viewers' attention. After all, this is the perfect time of year to watch the power of compelling stories in action. Classic holiday stories such as "A Christmas Carol," "A Christmas Story" and "It's a Wonderful Life" will probably be on many viewing lists during the next couple of weeks.

It's also a likely bet that storytelling will be part of many social agendas as well. Get-togethers with family and friends usually include a healthy dose of narrative sharing. Christmas Eve in our home always ends with bedtime reading of "The Night Before Christmas."

Storytelling is perhaps the most powerful communication tool human beings have ever devised. We accomplish much through the action of storytelling. We share ideas, experiences, emotions and rituals. Stories are an outstanding way to convey complex ideas and principles.

Stories help people deepen connections to one another. They engage us on many levels-with the spoken word, with conjured visual imagery, with body language and with raw emotion. Very few forms of communication, let alone advertising, can deliver as complete and compelling a message as can stories.

At its best, advertising as a communication form can do a wonderful job of telling compelling stories, powerfully engaging consumers and deepening relationship bonds between consumers and brands. Media plans can play an important role in helping advertising communications reach this lofty level.

Here are four planning strategies that can enhance the ability of the advertising message to convey a story:

- Identify powerful story environments and imbed messages within them.
- Purchase multiple units in narrative environment
- Use long-form units in appropriate story environments.
- Let the medium be the message; use premium storytelling media.

Powerful Environments

This is the simplest of the strategies. It relies on consumers' deep engagement in story content they've selected. The assumption is that if consumers are deeply engaged in programming, the chance of completely absorbing advertising communication is increased.

A hot example of a program in which to ply this strategy is "Lost." In giving cheers to "Lost," TV Guide's Dec. 19 issue states, "It turns out audiences will come back every week to follow stories-if they're good."

Capturing a consumer's attention within a quality environment week in and week out is a good thing. If creative messages can be crafted to take advantage of compelling story environment, communication impact will follow.

The Sequential Story

A powerful story environment changes with the nature of the target a planner is trying to reach. It's unlikely many media planners found the recent airing of "Samantha: An American Girl Holiday" on The WB worthwhile fare to watch, but for young

girls and moms, it was a must-see. The two-hour presentation tapped into the strong connection many young girls have with American Girl dolls-not just the toys but the stories that surround them as well.

Tide took wonderful advantage of the program content and storytelling environment to drive home branding.

Its effort included a series of spots designed to tell a story, such as animated spots showing families preparing for a special event threatened by a winter storm.

Each unit showed families washing or folding clothes before leaving for the mysterious event. The campaign included multiple billboard placements and within-pod animated spots followed by Tide-branded :30s.

The final spot revealed town members heading to a clothing drive-not even rough weather could stop the good-hearted folks from a kind deed. Viewers were then encouraged to join Tide in a clothing drive.

Capping off the integration, the "Samantha" presentation itself included a clothing drive for orphaned children. At program's end, girls were asked to chip in like Samantha did to help Tide and American Girl gather clothes for the homeless.

Long-Form Units

Arguably some of the best story content on television since its inception has originated on "The Hallmark Hall of Fame." Quality stories, quality actors and quality production have been Hallmark's hallmark for years. Viewers know they will be treated to compelling stories.

Hallmark has done a wonderful job as an advertiser within the environment it has created. Units of choice are 60-second or longer spots and each unit is a story in its own right. Creatives love to sink their teeth into the opportunity 60 seconds of real estate provides. The challenge for media planners is to provide creatives with that opportunity.

Medium as Message

The best place to leverage this principle is at the cineplex. Consumers enter theater environments for the specific purpose of watching a story. Comfortable seating, lowered lights and a huge screen all work together to make the storytelling experience more dramatic. Well-crafted messages placed in a cinema environment enhance the moviegoing experience and are welcomed by consumers.

Two other worthy medium-as-message environments are video/DVD and in-content product placement. In both environments, the challenge is for messages to present a compelling story or for the brand to be effectively woven into the story.

When planners simply make the space purchase and neglect to work closely with creatives in crafting executions, message communication will fail to leverage the opportunity of the storytelling environment.

As you dive into storytelling environments this holiday season, think about how you might better use these powerful opportunities to connect brand messages to engaged consumers with your 2005 plans.

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