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Advantages of Working 'Outside-In'

Planners Who Approach Advertising from Consumer's Perspective Find a Straighter Path of Communication

By Mark Dominiak

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Way back in the first week of the year I experienced a media placement error so shoddy that I made note of it for use in a future column.

While driving, I was listening to a news update jampacked with coverage of the South Asian tsunami disaster. Following a few minutes of stories of human loss and disturbing statistics, the station went to break and the first spot to grace the airwaves was for wonderful oceanfront Pacific property for sale in Mexico. Given their infinite wisdom, I will courteously leave the client anonymous.

What were they thinking? During that first week in January, the U.S. population was certainly reaching its peak awareness of tragic imagery from areas affected by the tsunami. Furthermore, significant coverage had been given to scientists discussing the unfortunate circumstance of an event occurring in the Indian Ocean, where there is no tsunami detection network, instead of in the Pacific Ocean, where tsunamis are more frequent and are monitored. Given that the property was specifically on the Pacific beachfront, why wouldn't the client pull its ads until coverage cooled down?

Environment's Importance

Whatever the reason for the oversight, the example underscores the importance of environment as a factor in media planning and execution. Why is it that environment sometimes doesn't receive the attention it deserves?

The main reason is the advertising industry's institutionalized bias toward Inside-Out versus Outside-In thinking. What does that mean? Simply put, Inside-Out thinking prioritizes the seller's perspective and Outside-In thinking honors the consumer's perspective. An Inside-Out approach considers first what's important for the seller to achieve and then reaches out to the consumer, whereas an Outside-In approach gains insight from consumer behavior and markets from that learning.

A good example of the pitfalls of an Inside-Out approach might be seen, say, when an advertiser forges forward to sell oceanfront property just because selling seasonality is ripe, without stopping to consider that consumers might at that particular time be apprehensive about said oceanfront property.

In media's corner of the advertising world, many decisions are made based on the commodity aspects of reaching consumers: impressions, ratings, reach. Consumer usage of media is inventory to be bought and sold. Systems and processes are geared to measuring, planning and buying that inventory as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Consumers, however, don't see their media use as inventory. There is purpose to their behavior and rationale for their media choices, each selection intended to fulfill a need the consumer may have at the time. Moment by moment, as media is consumed, needs are met.

Any given moment of media consumption represents a small piece of perceptual real estate in the consumer's mind, where attention is focused intently or modestly on the content present in that time and space. Perceptual real estate—you can't get much more Outside-In than that.

Thinking about perceptual real estate as a starting point shifts media planning's approach to Outside-In, from the consumer's perspective back to the brand, helping planners better unleash the potential a given media environment has to offer. Conjuring up the notion of real estate itself is beneficial. Real estate is a space, territory, a small piece of property waiting to be developed. As media planners, the question is not which impressions to buy with the budget, but what we should build in the perceptual real estate available to us in the consumer's mind.

Here are a number of interesting examples of efforts that leverage the strength of perceptual real estate.

The Fast-Food Arena

Back in the '90s Domino's did a great job of leveraging the perceptual real estate inherent in its NFL buy. The traditional approach for presenting advertisers was to own a quarter, secure a billboard or two and possibly build some kind of statistical feature into the game. What Domino's built in its NFL perceptual real estate reflected a much better sense of consumer perspective than the traditional approach.

Focusing placement about midway through the second quarter of the game, Domino's would air a unit with its featured pizza deal in conjunction with a billboard that invited consumers to order the pizza at that moment, prompting delivery just in time for halftime dining. It was a shrewd strategy that acknowledged exactly what was running through viewers' minds about midway through the second quarter: What should I grab to eat at halftime?

To deepen the overall communication, messages running through "Domino's at the Half" reinforced the Domino's branding as product was potentially being consumed.

McDonald's is another fast-food retailer that has demonstrated a great understanding of the perceptual real estate associated with dining. It's not uncommon to see McDonald's messaging in late prime, late news or late-night touting offerings from its breakfast menu.

The timing is perfect for consumers winding down their evenings and starting to think about the next day's schedule. Foremost among those thoughts are morning routines and gathering information needed to navigate the day ahead: news, weather and-how about a breakfast idea?

Building the Brand

An excellent current example of a brand building strong message association in consumer perceptual real estate is "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition." Much has been reported about how good a job Sears is doing with its product placement within the program. But consider for a moment the unit it runs at the end of the show that ties the brand's presence together.

Viewers of "Extreme Makeover" arguably are drawn to the positive, emotional human-interest energy the program generates, stories of families not much different from most American families, except that some twist of fate has left them down on their luck and in a bad situation with their home space.

Over the course of the hour, viewers experience the gravity of the situation the family is facing. Not only does the "Extreme Makeover" team amazingly rebuild the family's entire home over the course of a week, but they do it in a way that addresses the debilitating circumstance that burdened the family in the first place, whether it's a chronic illness or a bad septic system. In short, they don't just give the family back their home; they give them back their lives.

It makes for good television and engenders emotional engagement on behalf of the viewer. The level of viewer engagement opens up prime perceptual real estate for advertisers to leverage.

Besides supplying product to outfit the new home, in swoops Sears in the closing moments of the show, when positive emotions are at their peak. Viewers have seen the family in a horrible situation and have proceeded to watch them return to a new home, overjoyed to find that the situation has been wiped away. At that point of emotional crescendo, Sears' unit airs, showing quick clips of that week's family going from dejection to joy, pointing out in the copy that Sears' products help make people's lives better.

Lots of impressions can be purchased in "Extreme Makeover." The impressions available at that particular moment occur at an emotional high point for the viewer within the program. Sears has used the perceptual real estate present at that moment and built a presence for its brand that stakes out a higher-order benefit territory its rivals will have trouble competing against.

Other Media

To demonstrate how the notion of perceptual real estate might play out in a non-television environment, here's an example in outdoor. In the Chicago market, there's a particular location on the Kennedy Expressway where the Metra commuter rail tracks pass over the roadway. It's not uncommon to be stuck in traffic and watch one of those trains zoom by overhead.

Metra has realized the unique perceptual real estate of the location and has placed a billboard on that overpass that asks motorists if they'd rather be riding Metra. Some may look at it as salt in a wound, but the likelihood is that a number of commuters have looked at that perceptual real estate one too many times and exchanged their car keys for a train pass.

Construction Materials

So if the starting point for the media effort is a piece of perceptual real estate in the consumer's mind, the question is what sort of message do you build on the property? While creatives may be considered the primary contractors in the construction of an advertising message, media planners have a lot to say about the construction materials to be used, namely unit selection.

Many times unit selection doesn't receive the attention it deserves because budget considerations drive final choices. That scenario is another manifestation of Inside-Out decision-making. If the plan is to truly honor valuable perceptual real estate in the consumer's mind, then the choice of unit should be dictated by what will feel right to the consumer, not what feels right to the budget. That's not to say budget be damned; it means the plan can afford only as many consumer-appropriate units as the budget allows.

Possibilities of TV

Television offers a host of unit options to choose from. Most often chosen is the 30-second spot, not necessarily because it best fits the desired perceptual real estate, but because it best fits the process. The next time your targeted perceptual real estate calls for television, stop to consider the wealth of all unit possibilities before quickly going to the :30-second. Here are a few non-30-second notions to jump-start your ideating.

How about a one-second spot? Yes, you read that correctly, a one-second spot. Back in 1999 Master Lock employed one-second units to generate buzz for the brand in advance of a campaign launch featuring a couple of new, innovative products. While the notion of a one-second spot seems counterintuitive, the reality is that the shorter unit has the ability to cut through the clutter assailing perceptual real estate precisely because it is so different from the units surrounding it.

As you might expect, Master Lock's media team faced an uphill battle securing the time with targeted networks. A one-second spot flies directly in the face of the institutionalized, Inside-Out inventory management system on both the selling and buying sides. In the end, enough networks figured out how to carve out time to create inventory space for the units, and a small blitz of spots ensued.

Contrary to what one might expect, the units generated significant recall for a paltry percentage of budget investment. On top of that, the units themselves generated a significant level of incremental media coverage, attributing yet additional innovation associated with Master Lock, which was the desired intent of the campaign launch.

Reconsider five- and 10-second spots. As is implied in the aforementioned Domino's example, perceptual real estate such as billboards or promotional IDs have the potential to strongly connect with consumers when used appropriately. Why simply state "Brought to you by ..."? Why not carve out some space with a call to action specifically relevant to the moment at hand?

In the ID space, think a bit more deeply about the environment in which they run. Many of the units run during game shows. Consider turning the five to 10 seconds of real estate into quizzes or contests. The viewer is already in that frame of mind. It's an opportunity for the brand to fill the viewer's cognitive need at that time, hopefully in a way that makes brand benefits shine.

Create 15-second spots as their own animal. How many times have you heard someone say, "We can cut down the 30 nicely into a 15?" Not enough attention is paid to crafting a 15 for a purpose in and of itself. Because they're short, not much info can be placed into a 15. So use them to deliver a very simple message in perceptual real estate where only a simple message is needed, like a reminder or teaser.

Use longer formats such as vignettes, sponsored segments or direct-response TV/infomercials. If the real estate you have staked out caters to a consumer's desire for information, fill that consumer need. Think beyond simply placing a unit within the programming, assuming consumers will make the connection. Directly attach the unit to information that demonstrates what your brand wants to communicate, whether the execution is sponsoring an existing segment or creating one from the ground up.

Beyond traditional news, weather and sports, local news environments include many other segments that run nationally and

provide fertile perceptual real estate for consumers looking to satisfy a need for information.

"Smart Stuff With Steve Greenberg," a weekly segment carried by local stations across the country, targets consumers with a penchant for early adoption of new products. "Smart Stuff" appeals to the viewer's sense of curiosity and desire to be innovative. That's perceptual real estate that could be mined by brands ranging from the newest gadget creators to cutting-edge content providers.

Or how about "Mr. Food," another segment syndicated to local stations? Watching the segment quickly places the viewer into perceptual real estate friendly to recipe ideas and food solutions. Not only does "Mr. Food" enjoy coverage in about 40 states and 150 affiliates, but the property also provides very nice Internet possibilities as well.

Environment is an incredibly important consideration in media planning. Yet it often doesn't receive the attention it deserves. One sure way to put appropriate attention back on message environment is to consider how the consumer views any given moment of media consumption. Thoughtful consideration of those moments can lead planners to perceptual real estate that provides a powerful foundation for brand messaging.

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