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Neutralize Clutter to Set Off Message

By Employing Basic Buying Strategies, Advertisers Can Increase Chances Their Message Will Stand Out

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Special to TelevisionWeek

Story continues below...



If you were to do a straw poll of marketing professionals asked "What is it that advertising does?" you'd probably receive about as many different answers as the number of people you asked. But in the end, advertising is really about only one thing: enabling a brand's message to stand out so strongly in a communication environment that consumers will buy or buy into that brand.

Most in the ad industry would argue that the main burden of enabling standout messaging falls on the shoulders of the creative team by virtue of its unique art. We in the media realm know that is not truly the case. While creative plays a crucial role in helping a brand's message stand out in the marketplace, the challenge is jointly and increasingly shared by media planners.

Media's Increasing Role

When life was simpler and there wasn't the flood of media options that are available today, crafting unique campaign ideas was perhaps the highest hurdle to clear in the process of helping brand messages stand out.

Times have changed.

Recent years have seen an explosion of choices available to consumers in the market. Not only has the number of media choices grown exponentially, the raw number of brand offerings available to consumers has as well. The result is a clutter of both message environments and ads consumers must navigate through to procure information or be entertained.

Clutter also significantly raises the hurdle in creating messaging that can help a brand stand out. It can no longer be expected that good creative on its own merits will provide stand-out messaging for the brand. To give well-crafted creative its best chance of influencing consumers in the marketplace, there is now equal burden on media people to neutralize environmental clutter.

Many Faces of Clutter

Clutter is an issue with many facets. The definition straight from Nielsen's Glossary of Media Terms starts to provide a sense of how multifaceted the issue of clutter truly is.

"Clutter: All of the extraneous nonprogram elements within a given program or time period, e.g., program titles, billboards, station promos, commercials, network identification, local station identification, public service announcements, etc."

As accurate as that definition may be, it only starts to describe the true scope of clutter because it looks only at elements within a given program or time period. While there's gravity behind those 15 to 20 minutes of nonprogram elements, many more dynamics must be considered for media planners to better understand clutter and therefore stand a chance of neutralizing it in the marketplace.

For starters, there's the reality of how many given programs exist in the first place. HBO and the small handful of cable programs available to the roughly 15 million cable households of the early '80s must have seemed extravagant on top of ABC, CBS, NBC and a local independent or two. Today, many consumers can receive in the neighborhood of 200 channels.

Yet even with that wonderful portfolio of choice, consumers see most of it as clutter, viewing only around 10 percent to 33 percent of channels available to them. As the Nielsen data chart from the Television Bureau of Advertising details, the average consumer doesn't seem to have a lot of interest beyond about 15 channels. All of that fragmentation has led to a great degree of ratings erosion, meaning there is less network inventory out there to sell than in days past. Not only does it create a situation in which existing nonprogram time is used ever more aggressively to promote viewing, it exerts pressure that may lead in part to the creation of more nonprogram inventory to sell.

Moreover, there are masses of new brands and advertisers entering the marketplace that add incremental pressure to shrinking inventory pools. A look at CMR trend data on this subject shows that, in network, the number of advertisers and brands has virtually doubled since 1980. In spot, the proliferation is even greater, with advertisers up 150 percent and brands up 170 percent.

To further compound the issue, many of those advertisers are looking to stretch limited resources in any way they can, often making a compromise to :15s in lieu of :30s. A further look at CMR trends puts this fact into perspective. Since 1985 the use of :30s has dropped by a third, while the use of :15s has almost tripled.

Even if the total amount of nonprogram time increases only minimally, the move to smaller units means consumers are being hammered with more messages than ever in program breaks. To consumers, more messages to digest equals more clutter.

Technology, of course, is a great equalizer. Back in the '80s consumers as a rule couldn't escape much of the clutter in the environment without getting up from their easy chairs to do something about it. Then came the introduction of remote control

devices, which finally gave consumers a way to manage clutter on their own.

The advent of the DVR not only has given consumers a better tool with which to manage clutter, it demonstrates consumer distaste for advertising messages. A recent Accenture study cited a 70 percent skip rate of TV ads in the United States. This development is not a good sign, considering that current DVR penetration of 8 percent to 10 percent may grow to 40 percent or more in the next five years.

Neutralizing Clutter

It appears, then, that neutralizing clutter in the message environment has the potential to allow media planners to accomplish two useful goals. The first is to give the brand's message a better chance to stand out from the noise of the environment. And second, planners can better honor their target consumer's preference by providing a more clutter-free environment for media consumption.

How can media planners neutralize the effect of clutter in the messaging environment?

There are two basic strategies to employ:

Avoid cluttered environments to the best degree possible

Eliminate clutter in the environment chosen for the brand's message

In either case, a planner's first thought may be "Easier said than done."

Clutter-Free Real Estate

But avoiding cluttered environments may be easier than you think. The first and hardest step in successfully avoiding cluttered environments is an exercise in escaping the initial pitfalls of media convention.

In short, all planners tend to fall into particular habits as they construct media plans, one of which is relying on the short list of media types they use to assess target behaviors. It's easy to do cross-tabs or rankers using standard files already loaded into a system to identify target-skewing properties. It's a process most planners use to identify environments as prime for their brand's placement, and it's as far as most planners go.

A more time-consuming but potentially more productive exercise for planners is choosing lesser considered media alternatives and coding them into a run for assessment. Properties uncovered in this way are exactly the ones that tend to receive much less advertiser consideration and hence are less encumbered with clutter.

For example, include PBS-related questions in your coding. Get a sense of how involved the target consumer is with the PBS space. You may not be able to run standard units, but those that run in PBS space enjoy a far less cluttered environment.

The same could also be said for cinema. Think about including movie attendance questions in your coding. The cinema environment is friendly to more standard unit sizes and content and is restrictive enough to give a brand some space.

Also think about the in-program space. There are certainly enough examples out there of how brands are mining this new territory. Lately, it seems you can't turn the corner without reading about someone doing something noteworthy in "The Apprentice."

But what about other programs or in other ways? For example, there's the Princeton Video Imaging school of thought. In short, place the product or a message into programs virtually. Sports broadcasts or syndicated shows have received the bulk of attention from this technology thus far.

Or how about on-screen elements, like crawls or bugs? Nothing says that ESPN, Headline News or soccer matches are the only areas in which these ideas will work. Are there in-program environments that make sense for your brand? If so, contact a rep to start exploring possibilities.

It's also smart to spend a good bit of time focusing on data related to consumer behaviors not attached to any particular media property. One may ask what good it does to identify an environment in which a media opportunity does not exist. That is precisely the point. Nothing is stopping the industrious media planner from subsequently approaching a "real estate agent" affiliated with that property and negotiating a custom media presence for that environment.

Someone out there originally had the notion of placing ads on bathroom stall doors, or on small monitors in elevators or on buses or on hangers from dry-cleaning shops. As the old adage says, "You never get anything unless you ask for it." If you can find a pristine environment, pick up the phone and make a call.

Of course, the downside to industrious farming of less-cluttered real estate leads to a more cluttered environment. C'est la vie. Marketers must evolve to better reach potential users, knowing that those consumers will eventually evolve to tune out carefully engineered message innovations.

Eliminating Clutter

The second strategy is to eliminate clutter around the spot. Basically, buy up a lot of acreage or all of the property around yours. This can be accomplished with a number of different tactics.

First, employ longer units. Pods are generally only a few minutes long. If longer-length units are employed, fewer units will appear in the pod, reducing clutter and allowing the consumer to focus on the brand's message.

Next, think about creating programming in order to sponsor an entire show. If your brand owns all of the real estate, other brands can't clutter up the space.

Hallmark has invested in "The Hallmark Hall of Fame" to good effect over the years. Johnson & Johnson has done a good job with Emmy-winning telefilms "Door to Door" and "The Wool Cap" that have run on TNT.

If creating programming from scratch seems too industrious a proposition, wholly sponsor content that is more likely to attract attentive consumers on its first network airing. Ford's sponsorship of NBC's broadcast TV debut of "Schindler's List" is a good example of this tactic in action.

There are two ways to achieve a similar effect but on a much smaller scale than sponsorship of a two-hour program.

The first option is to choose a show that skews well to your brand. Engage your rep in a conversation to purchase all of the units in one particular episode.

This type of tactic opens up a broader playing field for the creative group. With that type of real estate, it's likely the units they create will be longer and more engaging for the consumer. Whatever the final look of the units that run, the likelihood is that the feel of clutter in the messaging environment will be dramatically reduced, providing the brand's message with standout placement that has a better chance of influencing the consumer.

The other option, if your brand doesn't have the resources to procure that much real estate, is to identify the best programs for reaching your target and at least try to buy up a pod's worth of units here and there. You may not be able to give your brand an entire program's worth of perceptual real estate in which to stand out, but the three or so minutes you might provide may just be enough to really connect the brand to the target.

The big negative to any of these clutter elimination tactics is that they will require a significant amount of brand resources to

execute. Bottom line is either you care enough about the problem of clutter to throw money at it or you don't.

Additionally, every one of these tactics is contrary to the traditional process of buying and selling inventory. Implementation will require creativity, patience and tenacity. But the previously stated adage still applies: 'You never get anything unless you ask for it.'

If recent years have taught the advertising community anything, it's that old rules no longer apply. Media planners have nothing to lose and everything to gain by at least pursuing potential clutter-eliminating strategies. Perhaps the most important gain would be a messaging environment free of clutter that allows a brand's message to truly stand out and connect with the consumer. Mark Dominiak is principal strategist of marketing, communication and context, Insight Garden.

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