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Media Business
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Innovative Thinking Pays Dividends

A Strategy That Transcends the Confines of Conventionality Can Bring Surprising and Lucrative Results

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

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With the new football season gathering steam, I couldn't help but get caught up in the energy it generates.

Watching games on recent weekends, I began to reminisce about those not-so-far-gone days when my buddies and I gathered at the park every Sunday morning from September through April—three hours of out-of-condition wannabes tempting injurious fate before afternoons of armchair quarterbacking.

My reminiscence prompted unlikely inspiration for this week's subject: media planning innovation.

Mad Inspiration

One weekend during our waning years, an interesting play including two pieces of innovation occurred. By that point, all of us were nursing injuries acquired over the years. One veteran in our group had shredded both anterior cruciate ligaments a few years earlier but, as the founding group member, stubbornly came every weekend even though he had to wear a huge, clunky brace on each leg to protect his gimpy knees.

On the play in question, our four stepped up to defend their four, our hobbled friend wide right and the other two receivers wide left. At the snap, those two receivers broke straight for their sideline, pulling their two defenders (me included) away from the heart of the field.

Our hobbled friend ambled a short distance out and quickly turned for a reception. Our defender, intending to stuff the gain or cut in for an interception, darted right for him. At that point, the interesting part happened: Our hobbled friend turned right back upfield and ran (sort of) past him.

The quarterback just got the ball away up over our shocked defender into the hands of our hobbled friend, who now had 60 yards of completely open field in front of him. It was a little stroke of genius that had us all standing there open-mouthed. That would be innovation No. 1.

Innovation No. 2 came from me. Stranded open-mouthed in defense on the far side of the field, I was struck by the familiarity of the image of our hobbled friend clunking down the sidelines, and in a state of mad inspiration screamed out, "Run, Forrest, Run!" with the best Southern drawl I could manage. We had recently seen the movie "Forrest Gump" and our friend was the picture of little Forrest desperately struggling toward the end zone.

Unexpected Outcome

Two things happened. First, eight men immediately broke into uproarious laughter, and second, our hobbling friend promptly fumbled the ball out of bounds short of the end zone. It was the first and only instance of being tackled by a taunt in all the years of our play.

Both parts of the anecdote, the play and the taunt, represent the essence of innovation: having the wits to break the mold and to do what is new or unexpected and turn advantage to your favor. We didn't expect our friend to go for a big play on two bad knees and it otherwise would have been considered poor sportsmanship to poke fun at his disability, yet each move was successful in the situation.

I once had the privilege of hearing a respected agency creative director give a very compelling answer to the question "What makes an ad world class?" His answer was, "World-class advertising is advertising that changes the paradigm of the way a category is perceived. When a consumer sees it, they never think about the category the same way again." In short, innovation.

The same principle holds true for media planning. One category I used to work in was frozen pizza. An audit of category media behavior demonstrated that every brand invested media resources in a miserly fashion, with short bursts of low weight levels concentrated mostly behind regional strengths.

One of our brands was the first of its kind in the frozen category, which in taste tests beat other frozen brands and performed extremely well against the national fast-food brands. Our course of innovation was obvious. Don't behave like a traditional frozen competitor; behave like a fast-food brand.

We designed plans accordingly and immediately claimed better consumer attention because of it. We were on air more frequently and at higher levels. We purchased dayparts and properties in which frozen pizza never or rarely appeared. Our plan helped to differentiate the brand because of its strategic approach.

Defying Convention

Being innovative is all about breaking conventionality. Over time, a certain amount of inertia tends to build around brand marketing or media plans. Process and execution fall into expected patterns. Brand managers feel things should be done a particular way. Competitive spending analysis shows that the category operates in a particular way. We buy that way because that's how a particular media commodity works.

This inertia reinforces conventionality. It's more comfortable to operate on a paradigm others think is proven rather than try something new or risky. Media planners should never forget that what is comfortable has nothing to do with what our job is. Our job is to find a strategy that most benefits the brand and execute it in the marketplace. Anything less is a compromise.

When stuck in the throes of conventionality, planners must strive to be bold, audacious, unexpected. Implement a strategic approach that throws conventional caution to the wind even in the face of accountability, return on investment and commoditization pressure. The unexpected stands a much better chance of breaking through and grabbing consumers' attention as they pursue their habitual behaviors than do tactics they are used to seeing.

In case you missed it, there was a tremendous example of this principle in action just a month ago. Target's coup as the sole advertiser in the Aug. 22 issue of the New Yorker certainly broke down a number of barriers.

While Target gained wonderful exposure and excellent branding environment, The New Yorker took quite a few shots. Critics were aghast that the New Yorker went so far in allowing the line between advertising and editorial to be blurred. In my view, those who think the line between advertising and editorial is locked in stone represent inertia, while Target and the New Yorker have tried to break the ad/edit conventionality, audaciously striving for innovation.

And just last week, U.S. News & World Report blurred the line between editorial and advertising in its Letters to the Editor section, of all places. The magazine ran a number of ads from DHL utilizing the space in a very innovative way, capitalizing on the level of reader involvement inherent in the section.

Breaking the TV Mold

What is perhaps most interesting is that these noteworthy innovations are occurring in the realm of print. So what about television? While much attention has been given to areas such as product placement, those types of executions do not have the same intrusive, conventionality-breaking type of impact that the print examples do. How might brands impactfully break conventionality in television?

Simply having presence in big events doesn't rise to this standard. Taking a cue from the New Yorker example, maybe what's called for is an advertiser to sponsor entire shows, consistently. Up until now, it has been enough to block out key category competitors from a show a brand might want to sponsor. The conventionality-breaking move might be to block out any other brand from being in the show by securing all of the units available.

Another approach might be to secure an entire night on a network. Or maybe work with a cable network to secure six or eight straight hours of time on a particularly visible night. The notion could even work on networks like PBS. Couldn't it be possible to solely underwrite a multihour block of programs on some important night of the week?

Of course, the first reaction of many might be, "That kind of strategy is just too expensive." While that may indeed be true, it's really just the voice of inertia talking. The fact of the matter is the cost of one of these strategies really wouldn't be known until one tried to negotiate it. It may turn out that some approaches are more affordable than might be expected.

Big Benefits

There are a number of strong reasons for media planners to break conventionality to spark innovation for their brand.

- Strategies that break conventionality increase the chances of generating brand awareness.
- Opening up new territory gives the creative team a more fertile playground for messaging efforts.
- As evidenced in the New Yorker and U.S. News & World Report cases, breaking conventionality generates news and public relations, which if managed appropriately can have lives of their own.
- It changes the nature of the competitive playing field; competitors react to you versus the other way around.
- Even if audacious ideas are not implemented, they force the entire team to think out of the box, which in itself is innovation.

The end result should at least help prompt some small amount of innovation for the brand, which is a good start.

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