

Unabridged version of Mark Dominiak's 10-24-05 Television Week Article  
Look At Engagement as a Consumer  
Exclusive to TelevisionWeek

It's hard to debate there's been a hotter subject in media planning this year than engagement. Yet with all of the discussion, I would argue the media community is still not addressing the subject holistically.

There are generally two points of view on a subject. One is the view from outside-in and the opposite perspective, the view from the inside-out. When considering the subject of media planning, that translates to the marketer's process of planning media vs. the consumer's relationship with media.

Engagement as a metric

The lion's share of conversation thus far has focused on engagement as a *metric*. That's an important observation. A metric is a measurement. In engagement's case, a new way of measuring how effective a media type grabs consumer attention. It's another case of us as media people and marketers looking from the outside at consumer behavior and trying to come up with a better way of quantifying it.

There's been little discussion of engagement from the other perspective. In short, what does engagement mean from the consumer's point of view? From that viewpoint, engagement has nothing to do with measuring. It has everything to do with relationship; namely, the relationship consumers have to a particular media property or environment.

As planners, we should make extra effort to attack both sides of the opportunity engagement provides. We need to have the quantitative discipline necessary to make engagement a useful tool, but we also need to have qualitative skill to apply engagement to brand situations in the marketplace. That means understanding what motivates consumer behavior from the consumer's perspective. Understanding those motivations will help make media plans better facilitate engagement of consumers.

Facilitating engagement

Here's a plea to get more holistic with the engagement discussion. While attacking the important issue of how to appropriately measure engagement, let's not forget we also need to devote effort towards facilitating engagement.

Facilitating engagement is not just the province of the creative team. It also must be a required deliverable of media plans. Planners need to ensure that they do the best job they possibly can to ensure that the creative message connects with target consumers in environments conducive to engagement.

The next logical question asks 'What environments are most conducive to engagement?' Here's one best practice to use as a place to start. When attacking the planning exercise, consider two buckets that can facilitate engagement: shared experiences and individual experiences. In both areas, consumers draw environmental energy from their media experiences which help facilitate a deeper level of engagement.

Shared experiences

Media experiences shared as they occur, or communally after the fact, have the opportunity to facilitate engagement for a number of reasons.

In situations when a media experience occurs among a number of people, dynamics come into play that are not present during solitary experiences. First, individuals can be influenced by reactions of others present. A group oooh or aaah has a more potent emotional value than one experienced alone.

Also, a group setting brings with it a kind of immediate water cooler environment. People begin discussing thoughts or feelings immediately because there are others directly at hand who just experienced the same thing. In situations where masses of people were tapped into a media experience individually, but come together shortly thereafter, the water cooler factor comes into play again. People are eager for the opportunity to express their perspective to others.

These types of media environments have great value for consumer engagement, but unfortunately, there aren't as many available as there used to be. Have we reached a point where the only times masses of Americans are tuned into the same programming have dwindled to the Super Bowl, big award shows and disasters?

It seems maybe we have. Outside of event programming, there aren't too many offerings out there which stimulate engagement consistently. Lost, Desperate Housewives, Survivor, Dancing With the Stars and American Idol will all generate energy, water cooler conversation and consumer interaction. But the numbers of engaged consumers tapping in to these shows is low by the standards of even five years ago.

Are there other areas of television that generate a shared experience environment which could be targeted as opportunities for engagement? In prepping for this article, I thought a good area to delve into would be local news.

We're all familiar with downward prime share trends over the years. I had a supposition that if local news trends were compared to prime, there wouldn't be the same level of erosion. When other television offerings are over, wouldn't individuals living in a shared community be eager to tune in to local news, perhaps sharing news together afterward? Whether it be breaking news, tomorrow's weather or to get behind a local sports franchise, local news seems like it would provide an excellent potential for shared experience media energy.

The numbers tell a different story. In looking at trends of cume prime household ratings going back to 1983 compared to trends of cume household ratings for the big three local newscasts at the local late news hour in the top 10 DMAs, it's evident local news has eroded at almost exactly the same rate as has prime.

To be fair, local news broadcasts on Fox and WB affiliates in these markets could historically be factored in and add a small boost to local news numbers, but not enough to suggest local news is a strong opportunity for a shared experience type of environment.

So where does that leave us on the subject of shared experience environments as potential opportunities to facilitate engagement. Well, it leaves us right back where we started. Not very many opportunities. And it seems that those which are left are becoming less so over time.

Even areas outside of television that could possibly generate the same type of impact are experiencing erosion. The best example to cite is the motion picture industry. Even though one or two films a year generate significant buzz and shared experiences, box office returns are not as robust as they once were.

### Individual experiences

Since data suggests that Americans are spending more time than ever with media, the implication is that what used to be shared experience occasions have evolved into something else. That something else is a greater degree of individual media experiences.

While many would credit the rise in individual media experiences to dramatic increases in media options available to consumers, there is another, broader scope phenomenon that may be a bigger driver. We are a less socially active society than we have been in the past.

Americans in general are much less involved in political, civic and religious group activities than in the peak years leading into the '60's. There has also been a marked decline in the bevy of activities that were the fabric of American life in prior decades. Activities like weekly bridge clubs, bowling leagues and getting together at the corner diner used to energize social connection networks. They are now rare occurrences.

For a broader perspective on this phenomenon, pick up a copy of *Bowling Alone*, by Robert Putnam. In it, Putnam points out things like the friendly card game have been replaced by activities like web surfing, video games and casino gambling. These activities all happen to be 'distinguished by their solitary nature'.

Partnered with an American marketing engine geared toward providing consumers a myriad of choices, it's no wonder leisure time and play habits have shifted to activities that are personal and solitary.

### Implications

The challenge for media planners is profound. With a dramatically reduced list of shared media experience options available (and those at high premiums), individual experience environments must be used to prompt engagement. In those environments, there is no incremental energy to be drawn from a group to facilitate engagement, which makes establishing a connection with the individual that much more difficult.

The answer is not simply to shift more dollars into interactive media. Consumers still invest significant amounts of time with traditional media forms. What can planners do to make those forms more interactive and thereby engaging to consumers?

Digital television possibilities provide excellent opportunities. An icon appears on the screen, the consumer can use the remote to click for more information. How about learning from programming like American Idol? Give consumers choices and a phone number to call or a web site to visit. Those actions demonstrate engagement.

The West Wing is doing a live episode. While it has the flavor of 'everything old is new again', it's a unique enough offering that viewers' attentiveness, and thereby engagement, will likely be better for the episode. We need to work with the creative team and our sales partners to create engaging placements like these for brand messages.

If we don't invest effort in this part of the equation, we can expect to become more disconnected from end consumers, decreasing our chances prompting engagement. Clients want results. That's not just an accurate measure of accountability. It's also facilitated engagement which prompts brand sales.

