



BY DON E. SCHULTZ

YOU ARE MISSING THE POINT

REPORTING ON THE American Association of Advertising Agencies (4As) Media Conference in March, a leading trade publication quoted a prominent agency leader as saying, “We are figuring out how to create content that will appeal to people first, and then worry about delivery mechanisms later.”

Duh?

If I am interpreting this direct quote correctly, it seems this agency person has missed the global media revolution. Given the fragmentation and diffusion of traditional media, the emergence of new forms of outbound “push” and inbound “pull” marketing, and the amount of interactions between customers and consumers, one would think the quoted executive would understand that, while content is still critical, if consumers, customers, prospects and influencers aren’t attending to the media form, the creative content is irrelevant.

It’s that simple: Start with how you can reach, touch or come in contact with your intended audience, then develop the content. If your audience isn’t there, no big idea or breakthrough creative will have an impact. It’s like the sound of a falling tree in a forest. It may make a noise, but there may be no one to hear it. So the media decision would seem to come first today, not last.

Today’s real gospel seems to be media consumption by customers and prospects, not media distribution by marketing organizations. It really doesn’t matter how you, as the marketer, want to distribute your messages. The question is: Is anyone important out there using that media form?

I, and others, have made a few presentations for the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) and ESOMAR (European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research) on media consumption. To my chagrin, little seems to have resulted. Few marketers, their agencies

or even media researchers seem to really want to know what consumers are doing with their media time. They’re content to try refining the current measures on media distribution through whiz-bang statistical analysis and super-duper analytics. Too often, it seems, the focus is still on justifying the use of existing audience measurement schemes. The approach still seems to be: How do we justify big media, big audiences and, therefore, the need for big ideas. That seems to echo the quoted agency exec’s view: It doesn’t matter what consumers are doing with their media time; if we have a better creative approach, somehow it will reach them.

The real heart of the matter is this: Should we get better at what we do now, or should we do some things differently or, perhaps, start doing some different things? It seems the quoted agency person is casting his lot with “getting better” with content, even though the audience he wants to reach may well have been voting to do things differently for some time.

This traditional advertising obsession with “getting better at what we do now” manifests itself in many ways. It explains the industry’s current attraction to media engagement, how media improves the impact of the creative content and the almost continuous industry infatuation with finding ways to tweak the ways television audiences are measured, not to mention the unstoppable drive to determine the ROI of traditional media and promotional expenditures. All these, however, seem to ignore the fact that consumers are deserting traditional media in droves. Just witness the plummeting audiences for television, radio, newspapers and magazines.

What this focus on getting better at what we do now really seems to be saying is, “We can’t figure out what to do with the new media or how to do it, so let’s just keep hammering at how to be better in traditional media.”

Clearly, consumers are doing things differently. They’re spending increasing time with games, SMS, iPods, blogging, Facebook and a host of other new media forms. So worrying about where they are, what they are doing and what media forms they are using would seem to be the first decision of people such as the quoted guru, not the last.

Advertising leaders need to start at the other end of pipe, where their audiences are, and then worry about the creative. True, this reverses the order of things and changes the role of the agency, and certainly changes the role of the creatives. But, in today’s radically different marketplace, it seems the only logical approach.

Is this a lost cause? Am I simply trying to push water uphill? There seems to be a ray of hope—the demise of the highly promoted, industry-applauded Apollo project. This was, in substance, simply another, more expensive, more complicated, more technologically advanced way of doing what is being done now: measuring advertising and promotional message distribution. No matter how many gimmicks and gizmos and RFIDs and other geeky things were connected, all it was really going to do was to provide a better way of measuring message distribution. Fortunately, there were enough marketing managers who saw the futility of this “getting better at what we do now” project and failed to support it financially. The question now is, however, do these same people have enough gumption to do things differently or do different things going forward? Only time will tell, because first you have to get people to think differently than the quoted agency executive. It’s not an easy task. **m**



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