

Brand Building Along the Media Long Tail

As people use a wider range of media in their everyday lives, marketers likewise have new options to consider for communicating with them. But in a world keen on rushing us down a growing tail of communication channels, we need to revisit some key principles to ensure that we are wagging that tail and it is not wagging us.

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In today's world, modern technology has enabled a wide array of new options for entertainment, information, self-expression and connecting with others. As people gravitate away from their old mass media pursuits toward these newer offerings, they contribute to the creation of a "Media Long Tail," which presents advertisers with an abundance of novel ways to engage their consumers.

The phrase "the long tail" entered the marketing vernacular when it was used by Chris Anderson, editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine, as the title of an article in the October 2004 issue of that publication. The article, which was later expanded into a book, described a new business model for media and entertainment industries in the digital world. Borrowing the term from statistics, where it is used to describe a feature of certain distributions, Anderson used "the long tail" to express the idea that the demand for niche products is, overall, larger than the demand for mass market products. The strapline of the article says it all: "Forget squeezing millions from a few megahits at the top of the charts. The future of entertainment is in the millions of niche markets at the shallow end of the bitstream."



How does the long tail concept apply to the world of media? Clearly, under the peak of the media curve, traditional high-reach media like broadcast TV and newspapers are under pressure. Yet along the tail of the curve, beyond the traditional channels relied on for mass communication, are a multitude of small, potentially highly engaging contexts to consider, such as social networking sites, blogs, and games. Each of these contexts individually has low reach, but when combined, these vehicles may have an impact that rivals traditional TV campaigns. So is the future of communications out there among the myriad niche channels in the Media Long Tail?



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The Politics of the Long Tail

It's ironic that after years trying to get rid of the line between "above the line" and "below the line," we have not just one new line, but many—between those who think the old advertising model is broken and those who think it still works; between those who think today's consumers avoid advertising and those who think they're still interested; between those who think consumers are in control and those who think brands can still drive the agenda. It is almost like a political or religious divide: left versus right, "old media world" versus "new media world," "brand-centric" versus "consumer-centric."

Faced with this uncertainty, advertisers are wondering which, if any, of the new media options are right for their brands and how much they should invest. The answers lie not in the hype surrounding new media, but in a careful analysis of each brand, its strategy and its communication needs.

The role of media is to advance the brand agenda.

The Media Long Tail in Action

There is no question that the long tail of media presents tremendous opportunities to a savvy marketer. Nike proved this by using the tail to outmaneuver Adidas during the 2006 World Cup. As the official sponsor of the event, Adidas was able to prevent Nike from running any advertising during the 64 televised games.



Nike responded by developing a new media campaign around the idea of "*Joga Bonito*" (Portuguese for "play beautiful"). The campaign featured the broadband TV channel JogaTV, viral videos, and a social media site, co-sponsored by Google, called Joga.com. By the middle of June, halfway through the tournament, Joga.com was getting nearly twice as much traffic as Adidas.com. That is an advertiser really wagging the tail!

If we build it, will they come?

If we build it, who will come?

But when other advertisers, encouraged by the new media evangelists, have rushed heedlessly down the Media Long Tail, their results have been less pleasing. Hoping to create buzz and leverage the power of viral marketing for Chevy Tahoe, General Motors created a site with video clips, soundtracks and all the resources people needed to make their own ads for the 2007 Tahoe and post them on the site. When more than 3000 negative ad submissions were received, the site was forced to close early, but not before many of the critical ads escaped to YouTube.

To guide advertisers who want an experience more like Nike's than Chevy's, I'd offer up a few guiding principles.

Media must serve the brand agenda

Let's start with the role of media because, whilst it is great that media is in the limelight, there is concern that it is pushing the brand off center stage. It seems that the allure of many new forms of media, such as viral advertising or consumer-generated content, has become so great that just using them becomes the imperative.

But the role of media is to advance the brand agenda. The "Brand Idea" must come first. The contributions from the various specialized media must flow together with complete clarity, so that at the moment of purchase decision, people have strong brand memories to call upon, clear associations, a sense of brand leadership. The big question for any media activity is whether the media form and the creative expression within it can make the brand more attractive when people consider it for purchase.



Advertisers must have the confidence to set a clear brand task that is not led by the media or creative agenda. The question, then, is not what you should be doing with viral, but what, if anything, viral should be doing for you.

Throw out the interruption versus engagement paradigm

The cry of the new media evangelists—“Interruptive TV advertising is dead! Long live engagement!”—has led to some muddled and dangerous thinking. In fact, it has caused us to undervalue advertising that works. When people laugh out loud at a TV commercial, are they not engaged? Conversely, when a crazy new viral film appears from a friend in your inbox, does it not interrupt? Good advertisers have *always* sought to engage, but the new media evangelist definition of engagement seems to focus only on what is new, digital or interactive. As a result, media money is being channeled thoughtlessly down the long tail to things like interactive TV ads, virals, branded channels and special branded Web sites.

It’s hard to believe that “reach” has become a dirty word.

None of these channels are bad, per se—look at the success of Nike. Few people would dispute that an in-depth, interactive brand experience is likely to lay down learning more effectively than a fleeting exposure to a broadcast message. But the “engagement” planning paradigm seems to assume that people are ready

and waiting to engage with brands in a highly involved way—when really, few people want to do that. We have to more explicitly ask the question, “If we build it, will they come?” After all, there’s no point building a circus on someone’s lawn when nobody is home. We also need to ask, “If we build it, who will come?” since there’s a chance that the people who respond to an engagement activity will do so because they are already engaged with the brand—fine for reinforcing their loyalty, but a waste of money if they were not in the target audience.

The old, passive, interruptive medium of TV can still do a lot for a brand. TV ads were used to great effect in the IPA-award-winning campaign by Marks & Spencer called “Your M&S.” The ads attracted attention, delivered an emotional connection, and conveyed a tangible sense of the experience of enjoying the products.

So let’s kill off the interruption versus engagement paradigm. It is just silly; advertising that it classifies as interruptive can be highly engaging, and media it classifies as engaging can be a waste of money.

We cannot sit in silos any longer.

Look at media engagement in a bigger way

The concept of engagement has driven us toward a preoccupation with “active” media engagement as an end in itself rather than one of a number of media “states” that we can leverage for communications. While many years of media engagement studies have indicated a pretty clear link between media attention and branded advertising awareness, the existence of a link between media engagement and the absorption of *specific* messages or brand ideas is less clear. That link depends on how relevant a brand is, or can make itself, in a media environment. Consistency with the media content or the reason behind the media consumption is important. For example, when someone is passively flicking through a free commuter newspaper for distraction on a long train ride, a brilliantly written long copy ad or advertorial meets a need to deal with boredom. If it relates to the surrounding content (which might be a feature on beauty or family), it can also increase motivation to engage with the brand.



So whilst a medium should certainly be considered for audience engagement potential, it should ultimately be selected because activities embedded in it will enhance people's ability and motivation to engage with the brand idea.

Don't forget scale

It is hard to believe that "reach" has become a dirty word, but try asking for the likely reach of an interactive idea and see what happens! Yet it's because of reach that TV, newspapers and outdoor are still at the center of advertising campaigns and will remain so for a while yet. It would be wrong to believe that the reach distribution curve for media is as flat as the one for music artists cited by Anderson in "The Long Tail." The big five—TV, radio, outdoor, magazines and newspapers—still account for a majority of the reach distribution. But the drive for engagement and the lure of the new have distracted advertisers from the necessity of delivering effective communications to a wide audience.

What we should be thinking about is scalable engagement. This inevitably means mixing "top down" communications (hopefully no longer automatically classified as "boo, hiss" interruptions) with "bottom up" communications (starting from an engagement "sweet spot") to deliver an integrated plan.

Be media neutral and embrace the cross-media world

We have operated in a multimedia world for many years now, and we know that adding other "secondary" media to TV often adds to the advertising effects. But somehow we got away with working in silos in terms of audience and effectiveness measurement.

We cannot sit in silos any longer. Moving forward, media researchers will need flexible tools to measure far-reaching campaigns that may use an array of creative techniques to reach specific audiences or communities. For example, a car enthusiast who divides his hobby time among TV programs, automotive magazines, online searches and sharing photos by mobile phone can be reached through a variety of channels. Advertisers need a common currency to understand the effect of the various media, used individually or in combination.

On the media side, many companies now offer a range of different entertainment and information services that can be brought to bear on a particular target. In the UK, the content provider Kerrang! reaches 20 percent of the youth market each month through a magazine, a TV channel, a Web site, digital and FM radio stations, music events and compilation albums — a far cry from where they started with a five percent average issue readership of the original magazine.

Creative ideas, which once were developed to work in one specific medium, must now be developed to serve as the platform for multichannel communications: from TV to in-store, outdoor to search keywords. Creative formats such as video now need to span more contexts like TV, online, elevators, and mobile phones. Research must not only measure the overall response to a campaign, but must also analyze the effect of specific touchpoints to optimize communication effectiveness.

Following audiences and communication activities as they spread across media environments will be a major preoccupation moving forward. All media opportunities must be judged on their merits. Can they reach your target prospects? Can they encourage people to purchase your brand by building strong brand associations that will be triggered at the point of purchase?

Conclusion

The Media Long Tail is growing, and will continue to do so. It may grow more slowly in some countries than in others, but it is certainly growing ahead of the budget allocations of the advertising community.

People are going to new places, doing new things and living more holistic media lives. In one sense, we have no choice but to follow them, but at the same time we have a huge opportunity to build stronger brands by judiciously wagging this Media Long Tail.

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