



Integrated Planning: Standing Out in the Cloud

Businesses spend a lot of money on brand communications because they know that effective communications are vital to brand health and wealth. The imperative is to build brand preference among consumers and to hold onto it in the long term. But the risk is greater than ever that communication will not hit home or that it will be counteracted by uncontrolled influences.



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In today's world, it's a certainty that brands will encounter numerous uncontrolled interruptions as they try to engage and persuade people. We need to better grasp the reality of clutter and turbulence in the modern communications world and the dramatic effects these phenomena have on advertising impact. And though the term "the Cloud" is already familiar in the context of Internet-based computing, we think that a cloud is also an apt metaphor to describe the fluid and unpredictable mix of messages and influences that surround today's consumers.

Clutter

It is a general trend that more clients are using more media to communicate to more consumers in more ways. As Internet penetration grows worldwide, so too do the opportunities to communicate, both for existing advertisers and for new players who enjoy lower entry costs for marketing. Our estimates suggest that Internet-enabled people experience at least 40 percent more display ads. How many messages are getting lost in all this noise?

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We all know about the evils of TV advertising clutter, but for decades, even more clutter has existed in radio, print, posters, and outdoor advertising. People have become acclimatized to it and have become very good at detecting tiny bits of relevance buried in masses of irrelevance. In response to still more clutter, people simply—and unconsciously—gear up for a higher level of selectivity.

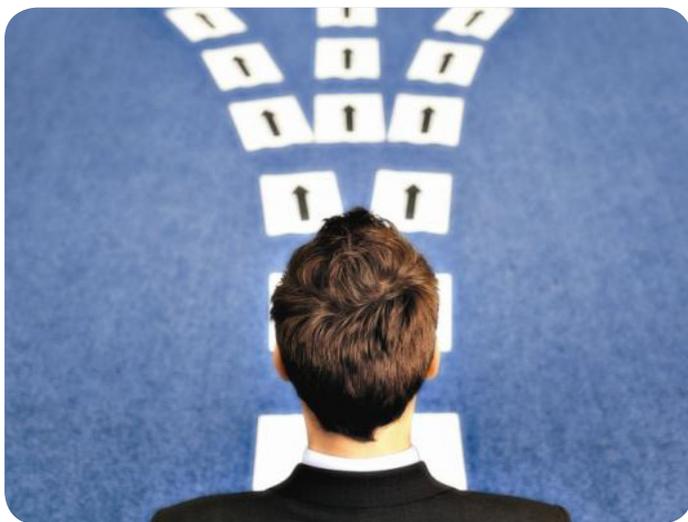
And we have seen the results. We have seen the impact different levels of TV clutter have had across countries: The more clutter there is, the harder it is for the average ad to cut through. Here the word "average" is important. Advertising that resonates with its intended target can significantly outperform weaker competition. But producing better-than-average advertising may be easier said than done.



Turbulence

In the past, advertisers and their competitors would follow similar plans. They would battle for hearts and minds across the same territories and time frames. Today, however, the spread of messaging is becoming more diverse over both media and time as clients mix individual campaigns with ongoing engagement programs.

Advertisers have made these adaptations in response to changes in consumer behavior. Through social and search media, people have more ways to talk to each other about products and services; nowadays it is easy for people to do their own research or get advice from experts. A simple online search reveals a vast new wealth of options to explore beyond actually buying the major mainstream brands. One shopper might decide to buy the shop's own brand since someone told her it was just as good. Another might be attracted by the offer of a fun-loving new category entrant. Someone shopping for vacation packages might change course midstream and decide to build his own holiday, while creative types might be inspired by an online forum to make their own hummus.



At any stage on the path to purchase, a shopper might veer off in a different direction. There is no telling when or where a consumer might encounter a new idea or a competitive or confounding message. As my daughter would say, "How random is that!" How do you manage communications in such circumstances?

A New Model: Cloud Thinking

We think marketers can still succeed in this new world, but success will require a new way of thinking, which will lead to a different model of communication and messaging. We think a different paradigm is needed, one that focuses not just on the consumer and the media, but also on the environment in which today's consumers exist.

In thinking about the complex infrastructure of tomorrow's communications, we like the aforementioned metaphor of a "Cloud." The Cloud is the composite noise surrounding every person. Each individual's Cloud consists of all the influences that person is exposed to that could possibly affect brand perceptions. These influences could occur at any time at any place through any mechanism. They include communication activities of the brand or its competitors, brand experiences, things other people have said or written in the media, and in-store activities.

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The Cloud varies in density at different times and in different places, and is continually in motion as the prevailing winds blow items closer to and farther away from the person in the middle. The Cloud accompanies each person through all of his or her daily activities, good and bad, fun and boring, planned and unplanned.

"Cloud thinking" gives us much needed humility in thinking about people's consciousness of brands. At best, any one brand can make up only a very small part of a person's Cloud, and the pressure it exerts there will depend on the frequency of its contacts as well as the degree to which people experience those contacts as resonant.



Communications Principles for the Future

Thinking about the communications infrastructure as a Cloud leads us to identify a few key principles of communication planning.

Always understand the “now” of the brand

Strong brands need to stand for something, especially in this new, complex, and interconnected world. But the Cloud makes it difficult for them. In the Cloud, it is all too easy for even strong brands to lose their clarity. There are so many points of contact and so many conflicting impressions. So, as marketers focus on making connections with individuals, they need to remember that few brands, and even fewer consumers, are truly “clean slates.” Consumers will always synergize their brand impressions against the prevailing associations in their personal Clouds. Uncovering these associations—which form the attitudinal backdrop for a brand—is the secret for brands hoping to resonate with consumers. This makes it vital to always know the “now” of the brand—that is, what this attitudinal backdrop is. This is why tracking in one form or another will become even more vital as a marketing tool to understand the current intensity of people’s emotions, knowledge, and experiences relating to a brand.

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Identify the center of gravity

For long-established brands like Coke and Harley-Davidson, attitudinal backdrops will have been created in the pre-Cloud era and will gravitate toward a compelling center of gravity, such as a mass agenda or a brand ideal, that enables people to instinctively recognize the brand and what it stands for through whatever brand impression they encounter. Such iconic brands may not need to spend time and money on creating new mass agendas. But new or struggling brands do—and they need to find a way to build and maintain these in the Cloud.

Plan for meaningful coincidences

Sometimes people make intentional contact with a brand, as when they use it, buy it, research it, or discuss it with someone else (particularly when they’re in a seeking mode). The more often this happens, the better off the brand will be—as long as the brand meets expectations after it has been sought out and acquired. In fact, for a brand not to “be there” when and where people are looking for it is one of marketing’s biggest financial crimes.



Historically, we have been able to rely on television advertising to “prime” consumers and encourage response to other brand activities. We have clearly seen from CrossMedia evaluations that prior exposure to TV commercials significantly improves response to other brand activities; at the same time, these other brand activities deliver deeper connections than TV can do alone. When a job is tough—like a launch or repositioning—we have seen how important multiple media exposure is. But in the new world, achieving these media synergies within a defined time period is going to be more difficult.

A lot more effort will have to go into understanding people’s lives and finding moments when they are “open” to the brand and when the brand’s communications could be relevant to them. On the positive side, digital media present increasing opportunities to be part of people’s lives in more places and on more occasions, and should help advertisers by providing far more contextually relevant opportunities to talk—e.g., on the bus, in a coffee shop, in the pub, in a waiting room.



Maximize the impact of every contact

It's hard for brands to push or pull Cloud-enveloped consumers directly, so influence is more likely to come from small nudges as individuals run into a multiplicity of brand connections in different orders over time. Communications will have to give up the notion of storytelling in favor of facilitating the process through which consumers piece together an overall view from a long tail of connections. The challenge will be to ensure that any combination of elements, encountered in any order, will be effective, and that any gaps in exposure (even someone skipping all TV ads) will not matter too much.

Though their specific tasks may differ, each impression must stay true to the core idea of the brand, and must be designed to prime and recruit other impressions in the Cloud. It will be vital to find something that works through every connection. Iconography, symbolism, idiom, and implicit communication will become far more important to support the delivery of powerful and synergistic brand impressions.

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Throw away the "pseudo-scientific" media plan

In the future, marketing campaigns won't have discrete beginnings, middles, and endings. Already we see a move from campaigns to continuous communications. Already we have clients asking us to evaluate ongoing social programs integrated with long-term brand content, as well as sponsorship programs combined with advertising activity to boost specific tasks. While there will always be plenty of science in the evaluation of response to in-market exposure—digital media measurement ensures this—*planning* will need to become more creative, connected, and bold. Media planning will be about distributing various forms of brand content that will be relevant to people in different decision states, regardless of the order in which it is distributed. The end game will be "share of Cloud."



We certainly look forward to seeing visualizations of expected market impact that are far more inspiring than the current Excel worksheets of media research numbers!

Conclusion

Cloud thinking helps us more easily embrace the complexity of the present and future communications world, and embracing that complexity is essential if we are to help brands succeed. Cloud thinking encourages planning that is creative, connected, and bold, both within and across disciplines. As a result of this new way of thinking and the planning it generates, brands will be able to make solid and genuine connections with consumers in an environment that is constantly in flux. Through those connections, brands can build the strong and long-lasting consumer relationships that lead to financial success.

To read more about integrated media planning, please visit www.mb-blog.com.

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