

Does anyone still pay attention to ads and commercials?

Part two: One solution—don't change too much too soon.



The linear, sequential, one-way mass communication that had been the norm since Hammurabi had his 280 edicts carved in stone for all of Babylon to see 3,768 years ago is now, like Hammurabi, history.

At some point in the 1980s the mass communications paradigm began to change fundamentally, and the pace of change has accelerated exponentially ever since. Communications are now multi-faceted, simultaneous and universal. And constantly getting more so.

Last week's article outlined some of the factors driving the new communications environment: massive media proliferation, message mega-proliferation, media multi-tasking, multi-message media, multi-media media and audiences' mini attention spans.

Several hundred channels of TV, millions of web sites, mobile media, spam, outdoor that blinks out a new message every ten seconds, 47 radio formats, interactive point-of-purchase displays, 19,532 magazines, search, newspaper and many, many more bombard a typical American with 5,000 marketing communications messages every day.

Media multitasking has become the norm. People watch TV while surfing the web or read magazines while listening to radio. There are multiple messages on one screen. And links between TV and cell phones and web sites.

The leisurely three seconds during which advertisers could capture the audience's attention at the beginning of a commercial has been cut in half. And that second-and-a-half is an incredibly luxury of time compared to the nanosecond we get to hook searchers and visitors online.

All the change – and the ever-faster rate of change – make this one of the most interesting times in the entire history of marketing. And although the ancient Chinese supposedly considered "May you live in interesting times," a curse, marketers should consider it a benediction. Because interesting times give nimble, aggressive marketers a tremendous opportunity to take advantage of change.

So where do you start? A Goldilocks strategy. Don't change too much too soon. And don't change too little too late. And you'll get marketing to today's mini attention spans just right. This week's posting covers the first half of the equation: don't change too much too soon.

It's great to be an early adopter. Companies that get involved with new media early have a head start if and when those new media go mainstream.

But "involved" doesn't mean betting the farm. New media build buzz long before they build business. Marketers who jettison tried-and-proven media which are still effective risk losing the customers the old media bring in before the glamorous new media can generate a substantial customer base. Some examples:

What's the most powerful marketing communications medium today? If you answered "Internet," you might want to reconsider. Today's strongest marketing communications medium by far is television. The average American spends almost six times longer in front of the TV screen than online, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Yes, ratings are down, and they're probably never coming back up. But there's no other medium that can come close to TV's near-universal reach. Younger audiences don't watch nearly as much TV as Boomers. But 15-to-19-year-olds still spend two-and-a-half times more time watching TV than online. TiVo is a looming threat, but it's not here yet. Only 1% to 8% of a typical show's audience records and watches later (virtually always fast-forwarding through the commercials).

Digital media guru Cory Treffeletti put it into perspective: "*TV is, and will be for the foreseeable future, the most high-impact and leading advertising medium. There is still no form of media that can provide a stronger, more highly impactful, more widespread audience than television.*" TV may not be the 800-pound gorilla of marketing communications any longer. But it's still the 700-pound gorilla, and that trumps anything else out there.

The kind of hooks that have captured audience attention in the past still work. Only they now have to do it in half the time.

Newspaper is down. But it's not out yet. Local daily newspaper circulation is plummeting, and that smaller audience delivery is beginning to be reflected in lower advertising rates.

Those lower rates are good news for marketers targeting newspaper readers: older, affluent,

educated people who are prime prospects for financial services, luxury cars, healthcare and more. Newspaper has been transformed from a mass-reach medium to one that targets boomers-and-olders with very little waste circulation among younger – and less affluent – groups.

But what if you need to reach a younger audience? Newspaper still works. College newspaper. Although very few people under 30 read local dailies, an *Editor & Publisher* study found that 82% of college students read their school newspaper.

And with newspaper, marketers have the luxury of a big space to capture attention and then hold it through a relatively long persuasion process. And that "big space" part is important. Study after study shows that attention and recall increase as the size of the ad increases.

Direct mail is e-mail on steroids. (But it's legal.) Four out of five direct mail pieces are thrown away unopened. Sounds pretty grim until you compare it to the number of marketing e-mails that are flushed unseen into spam filters. Industry studies show that even opt-in e-mails are often snagged by ISP's spam-catching algorithms.

So only one-fifth of direct mail pieces get opened. That adds up to 21 billion mailers that do get read. In other words, the average American reads 70 direct mail pieces every year.

Despite the fact that the direct mail industry was more than half a century ahead of online at quantifying every aspect of marketing communications programs, there's still an extraordinary amount of truly incompetent DM out there. Factor out the some of the abysmal mailers produced by folks who think "I get mail all the time. I can do my own," and the opening rate for professional produced pieces may approach 50%.

Like contextual search, DM can target precisely. Lists can be sliced and diced to deliver a target audience in the market for just about any specific product or service. And the mass customization made possible by new digital printing technologies can tailor pieces to very narrow

parameters. In some cases even to individual interests. And a piece that is all about the recipient's interests is a sure-fire way to grab their attention.

Vertical magazines are guaranteed attention-grabbers. General interest magazines are taking hits, the entire soft porn category is flaccid and news magazines are hemorrhaging readers and advertisers. But vertical pubs are doing fine. All the near-term survivors will be multi-platform print/internet message delivery systems, but the ones that get that balance right will thrive.

They'll thrive in circ because folks who love boats will want to hold *Boating* and *Motor Boat* right in their hands as they ogle yachts that cost more than their homes. Heck, some of them cost more than all of the homes in the oglers' subdivisions.

And magazines will thrive in advertising revenue because the enthusiast readership is ready and eager to pay attention to ads that are intelligently crafted to appeal to their interests. 48% of readers say ads add to their enjoyment of magazines. 61% have a positive attitude toward magazine advertising. That makes them a very attractive place to grab readers' attention.

People are still all ears for radio. Weekly radio listening fell 14.6% over the last ten years. But 93% of Americans still listen an average of 19 hours a week. The internet has had an impact. Now 20% of at-work radio listening is online rather than over the air. But broadcast radio's extensive audience and relatively low cost make it an extremely effective reach and frequency medium.

Satellite radio's threat to terrestrial broadcast has never materialized. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, satellite radio has only 17.9 million subscribers. Less than 8% of the 232,960,000 people 12 and over who listen to terrestrial broadcast radio every week.

The formulas for grabbing attention for commercials in broadcast radio are classics: humor, music, theater-of-the-mind drama or on-air personalities riffing – somewhat irreverently – about the brand.

Outdoor is experiencing multiple personality disorder right now. Digital billboards, eye tracking displays and interactivity with mobile media are at the leading edge of the evolution of traditional media (more about those next week).

But a conventional vinyl posting is still a conventional vinyl posting. And it's still a powerful immediate-purchase medium.

A Perception Research Services study found that the overall "seen/noted" average for all outdoor media was 70%, but recall was just 26%. An Arbitron study showed another aspect of the immediate effect of outdoor: 29% of respondents said outdoor prompted a visit to a retail store within a week.

So although conventional outdoor may not be of much use in building a brand, it's great at generating immediate actions – like getting travelers to pull off the interstate in response to a "KFC next exit" sign. At least it is if it follows the formula for attention-getting outdoor: graphically powerful and limited to five to seven words.

Yes, you still need a traditional web site. With social networks, widgets, in-game placement video skins and three new marketing apps that were probably developed between our writing this and posting it, is a conventional web site really still important?

Yes. In fact, it's indispensable.

A Marketing Sherpa study analyzed the information prospects want from web sites in different phases of the significant purchase buying cycle. Price, product information, product/service competitor comparisons, customer service information and company information were the five key factors.

Two factors, product/competitor comparisons and customer service, are, to some extent, out of the control of the brand. Prospects will compare competitive products or services by going to competitors' web sites. And customer service reports from users are pretty much completely controlled by social and/or peer networks.

But price, product information and company information are essential information a traditional web site must supply. Surprisingly, the "About Us" (company information) page matters a lot. Although it's the fifth of five areas of interest in all stages of the decision cycle, by the purchase stage it rises to a level of importance about 60% of price in making the final brand pick.

Don't change too much too soon? But the whole marketing world is changing! We agree. The whole marketing world is changing. Well, maybe not the whole marketing world. Because ultimately marketing works inside the minds of marketers' target audiences. And although the tactics of communications change, the basic mechanics of motivation don't. Nor does the fact that most people are inherently conservative and evolve away from their habits rather than changing abruptly.

The shift has started, but it's far from complete. Don't abandon strategies and tactics that work today just because they may or may not work tomorrow.

Next week we'll consider some of the changes marketers may want to implement immediately.

Next week: Part 3 – don't change too little too late.

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