

COLUMNS

Creative must drive programmatic advertising strategy

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Creative adds color

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As advertising strategies continue to adjust to the digital age, many marketers fear that an obsessive focus on data is having unintended consequences.

A frequent complaint among observers in recent years is that an over-reliance on data and targeting strategies has detracted from the development of high-quality creative that grabs consumers' attention and moves them to act.

Channeling news

One reason that attention has shifted from developing creative toward data science and number-crunching is a sweep of history that has brought digital ads to the fore.

As late as the early 1980s, there were only three channels on American television.

The vast majority of Americans in each city read the same one or two newspapers.

This incredibly large general-interest audience forced advertisers to focus on reaching the widest possible segment of the population through beautiful, high-performance campaigns.

In the decades that followed, however, the media environment grew in dizzying ways.

Hundreds of cable channels took off, splintering the audience that had once been divided each evening between ABC, CBS and NBC.

Where once CBS Evening News anchor Walter Cronkite was America's newsman, television viewers today can choose between hundreds of news shows airing at all times of the day or night.

But the biggest change for advertisers has not been on television.

Instead, the most profound changes have taken place in the digital ecosystem.

The Internet has connected billions of people and created millions of sources of news and information.

Today, more Americans get their news from Twitter than ever watched Cronkite.

As new sources of information have proliferated online, so have the opportunities for digital marketers.

Byte size

Digital advertising has become the cutting edge for every business, large and small.

Successfully tailoring advertisements to small digital audiences has become something akin to the Holy Grail.

The rapid growth of digital ads has flooded advertisers and marketers with massive amounts of information, the so-called Big Data, and targeting strategies.

While the amount of material that flows to firms can sometimes seem overwhelming, it has revolutionized how businesses understand and interact with their customers.

It has also allowed marketers to make much wiser targeting decisions.

Instead of reaching a general audience like the kind that used to read metropolitan newspapers or tune into NBC each evening at great expense, marketers can use tools such as programmatic media buying to reach narrower audiences that are more likely to be interested in their product or services.

Coupled with reliable targeting technologies, programmatic media buying has allowed marketers to make sure that every advertising dollar is being directed at the types of people who are mostly likely to buy their products.

Unfortunately, many pundits and consumers have noticed that brands are increasingly neglecting the creative components of their advertising campaigns.

Instead of prioritizing the look and feel of ads served through digital channels, many marketers have been a lot more interested in making sure the ads are served to the right people.

Programmatic buying, especially when used in tandem with target technologies that separate the wheat from the chaff for marketers, makes it easier for marketers to reach their target audiences within their campaigns.

But reaching them is only half the battle.

Get with the program

With creative planning such a huge role in the success of a digital advertising campaign, it is time for marketers to renew their focus on building creative that helps define their brands in a strong, positive and accessible fashion.

An emerging trend of brand response marketers is encouraging to those of us who believe that marketers need to move back to a creative-first mentality and leave targeting decisions to firms that specialize in reliable targeting and buying.

This new breed of marketers is well versed in Big Data and the need to harness it, but also understands that it takes more than just a digital impression to move a consumer to act.

Clearly, targeting the right audience is an important part of the puzzle.

But if the creative falls flat, the targeting has not done a candidate or a firm much good.

By thinking about the creative first, marketers are not forsaking data. Instead, they are seeking a happy medium where technology informs the creative and vice versa.

Marketers can go about adopting this brand response approach in two ways.

First, they can use the information that they are gathering from their digital media buying and data analytics work to more fully understand their audience. This includes many dynamics, including demographics, location and previous behavior on Web sites. This allows for a more tailored creative.

Second, the data that is used to tailor the message and feel of the creative can also be used to inform how the advertising appears.

For instance, marketers seeking to create a particular vibe around a new product may want to produce creative that fits as both YouTube pre-roll and a standalone Facebook ad. New forms of data can help guide those decisions.

WHEN MARKETERS harness the data that is coursing through their veins and embrace the artistry and persuasion that high-quality creatives deliver, they can achieve incredible results.

Cutting-edge media buying and robust targeting have freed marketers to return to a creative-first approach. They should take full advantage.



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