

COLUMNS

Marketers should look beyond just data

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Authenticity, quality and performance are key to differentiating a brand in this competitive environment. Image credit: Drum, Shutterstock

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Imagine being transported back to the 1960s and having to explain to a stereotypical ad agency executive like you, I am imagining Jon Hamm's character from the *Mad Men* television show where the battle for eyeballs would be fought and won today.

The contrast between the tools in Don Draper's arsenal and the data-laden, digital-focused tools marketers have available today highlights the profound impact that time and technology have had on our industry.

Getting personal

Today's era is defined by highly targeted, personalized advertising based on characteristics that brands and businesses can identify about you, me or anyone else on the Internet.

The initial delight around a curated advertising experience has been met with recent blowback around data privacy, with Facebook and Wells Fargo serving as two prominent examples.

Moreover, this personalized experience may not be as tailored as advertisers make it out to be.

Ever notice how your Facebook and Instagram ads focus nearly exclusively on recent search history or the stereotypical set of products that "people like you" might want?

If consumers are going to reject this brand of personalization, companies need to now find less intrusive, more authentic ways to connect with customers.

StitchFix's "[personalized stylist](#)" or Spotify's annual year-in-review "[Wrapped](#)" podcasts stand as particularly memorable examples of this done well.

Do not get me wrong. Both traditional media and digital advertising channels are still important tools in building brand awareness, but they no longer provide the validation of high quality or resonance with consumers.

Once upon a time, ad placement in *Vogue* was an implicit endorsement from the publication, although these days the buying of media has been democratized and made widely accessible that validation is no longer implied.



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Human touch

While personalization appears to be the dominant trend enabled by the digital age, there is a second axis to modern marketing that gets plenty of press but is not as well-understood as we would hope: the availability and use of data in modern marketers' worlds.

We now have access to more data than ever, but what has not changed is how we teach people to use data.

In an increasingly messy world, an understanding of the math and statistics to actually use data well is more important than ever, but it is not a skill set that is often taught to marketers.

Complex modeling to truly unpack that problem is a discipline unto itself and, realistically, it is too complex for most non-enterprise businesses to invest time, money and energy.

What is the solution? Follow your customer listen to them. Give them ways to tell you what motivated their behavior, whether that is in your selection of advertising channels, surveying them when they are standing at your cash register, or sending surveys after the fact.

Chances are, your customers will tell you a different story than the sum of your advertising dashboards. That is a problem that we as marketers must figure out.

The way consumers are now validating products and experiences is more reliant on human connection and social endorsement.

Influencer marketing is a valuable, recent construct that plays on this idea, although it is limited to those who have established spheres of influence that are large enough to be valuable to brands.

Moreover, what brands are purchasing from influencers is still, effectively, digital media rather than conversions.

We think the missing piece to this ecosystem is a digital sales platform, where any person is able to serve as a salesperson for brands of their choosing, and businesses of any size have access to high quality sales talent.

Old is new

As I think about building my organization and function in 2020, I am anchoring on three key themes in rank order that I think are essential to differentiate a brand in today's day and age.

These are not new, but their ordering certainly runs counter to the CPA, CPL, data-driven and obsessively analytical performance marketing culture that the digital age has fostered:

- **Authenticity.** We, like all businesses, need scalable ways to build personal connections with customers by tapping into situational relevance, not just demographic relevance

- Quality. Findings ways to unleash the best of what customers know about the quality of your product is likely more powerful than anything your business can say directly
- Performance. As the digital arms race continues, we will need to find more creative ways to leverage dollars in driving conversions, not just purchasing expensive media

WHETHER THE dominant forces in the marketing ecosystem look more like Don Draper in the 60s or Mark Zuckerberg in the 2000s, we still have the same underlying challenge: how do we communicate the value of what we offer to the right people at the right time?

Consumers are more aware than ever about how technology is making that possible for companies, and it is shaping how they respond.

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