

Occupy Digital | Branding Magazine

Long ago, in a world far, far away, brands made ads and put them on television. People watched these ads. Not because they really wanted to, but because they lacked a device, called a remote –never mind time shifting– and were no more willing to leave that warm spot on the couch than we are today.

Brands had hoped that the internet would be the answer to recapturing those golden days of consumer attention once again –this time, not because of the lack of technology but actually because of it. The increasing sophistication of filters that can send brand-love messages directly to that special consumer-someone in the mood for a little bonding promised a land of sales and money on the other side. Technology has enabled the ability to form ever-more sophisticated profiles built from our searches, social pages, and scans, selling this to brands as a way in. But a little scratching on the gold-plate of this ideal reveals it for what it is: a modern targeting technique, albeit a big step up from zip-codes, but certainly no answer to what consumers expect of brands in the digital space.

Awareness or Connection...

Awareness has for a very long time been a vital and necessary doorway that is far too often viewed as a destination by brands. In the pre-remote dynastic era, brands could simply reach the largest number of folks a certain number of times, and connect using simple math. It would be great to say that brands have graduated from calculator media buying, but many haven't. Because along with the ability to target on the web came the ability to count really, really high numbers. And that got really intoxicating.

Suddenly, brands were able to have the exact number of people that had seen their message. And, understandably, that left them feeling a little dizzy, at first, until they realized that all that awareness might have bought them some curiosity, and maybe mild interest –depending on how cool the come-on was. But that awareness was often not strongly correlated to sales, as marketing parlance goes. Awareness, not being an end unto itself, continued to be a poor measure of whether it engaged the person on the receiving end.

As if that wasn't insult enough, into this new wild-west web, came the upstarts, staking a claim on the same prairie as brands with their own parking lots and pension plans. This was one of the promises of the web actually coming true: access for all. Banner ads for new products and services could actually flash right next to those from the big names. Thus was born the democratization of awareness.

Democratizing Awareness

Democracy, as we have seen in the U.S. this past year, can be painful. Likewise, the citizenry can voice in a very public way what it is they actually want from a brand; what they see as a brand's place in their virtual social world; and how they themselves are different than the so-

ten-years-ago pre-digital generation. But that means you have to be able to actually ask those questions in the right way, getting at the emotions roiling beneath. And, of critical importance, connect those things together.

The hard-working smart folks at brands have been busy trying to solve these problems, usually being forced to piece together research that has never met, never mind have terms of agreement. There are so many syndicated studies of digital usage available now; it is the new basic black t-shirt of research companies. As stated previously, there are a lot of ways of counting out there. But studies of what digital platforms rise to the top, in terms of visits and usage, tells you nothing about a brand's place on any of them. Again, we are back to the awareness catch: going where the fish are doesn't mean you have the right bait.

Truth Lies Beyond Demographics

So, digital studies started including demographic data. Who are these people anyway who are using these platforms? Maybe the brand can match the demographic profile of a digital platform to their own customer demographics and then, Zowwie Batman! We can find our kind of people easier than ever.

Okay, says the brand, knowing things like age and gender and income and education, is insufficient. We need to know what attitudes folks have, and how they match up with what we know from that three-quarter of a million dollar study we did this year that gave us cool profile names like "Cautious Wanderer" and "Conservative Rebel." Surely, now, we can make this work!

And that is as close as most brands have come to-date to being able to link the emotional component to digital usage. Problem is, it's an emotional pulse taken completely outside the category environment. A brand may understand very well who its peeps are, and watch where they wander in the digital world, then match those things up, but not understand at all how all that emotion projects itself into the category decision-making journey.

Is a Dishwasher a Computer?

Just ask yourself this: do you buy a dishwasher in the same way you buy a computer? Okay, price matters, value, brand trust, things like that. All true. And then there is the rational stuff. It's obvious the details of these products are very different. You may want a dishwasher to be quiet, and want a computer to be able to get really loud. But there is more, much more. A dishwasher evokes an entirely different set of emotional responses than does a personal computer –the word "personal" being the first clue in the emotional landscape at work beneath the surface.

This matters. A lot. Because unless a brand connects the emotional and rational that are in play in the category decision process to the digital platforms consumers use, it does not have a strategic plan for digital involvement. It has a sophisticated approach to targeting.

Facebook, Marketing's Default Position

The clarity of this problem is no surprise to all the brands that are on Facebook by default, because everyone else is. In brand back rooms however –and you know who you are– the question of what it's actually doing is shared in soft whispers. Brands now have "social media specialists" and chiefs of "internet insights" who are trying hard to figure this out. Not just for Facebook, of course, but for all the major digital platforms out there.

So, the moral of this story is: if you are a brand conducting yet another digital platform study, stop and ask the hard questions about how the study will actually illuminate what you should be doing out there in the marketplace, and what really matters to the consumers in your category as they engage with your category in the digital space.

Because you already know who you are talking to and how to reach them, and not being especially fond of perfectly-worded useless questions, we advocate for an end to that sort of data. If you can't get Yoda-worthy insights, grab that remote and change the channel. Then powerful you will have become.

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