

The barriers might be in your briefs

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To unlock growth through media, you first need to understand what's restricting your brand's performance. As Bhavana Smith, Chief Client Officer at MediaCom USA, explains, this sometimes means challenging the brief...

When clients provide us with briefs, our inclination is to take them at face value. Drive awareness? Sure! Increase conversion? Absolutely! But, to provide real value, we know we need to be more rigorous, by probing and asking questions that uncover growth opportunities.

Put another way, that means digging deeper to fully understand a client's barriers to growth

(and the specific things preventing their consumers from either entering or moving through the funnel) and then putting together a plan, across paid, owned and earned, designed to address those barriers.

A brand might ask us to help it boost awareness or drive visits to its website, for instance, but that might not lead to sales if other things are putting consumers off buying. Instead, to make consumers walk the final yards down the purchase funnel, we might need to rethink the client's content or develop a fresh messaging and distribution platform. But we won't know the right answers unless we challenge the brief first.

The raw truth is that an agency that challenges the instructions coming from its clients is much more likely to develop a solution that leads to growth, ROI and all the important measures that they care about. Sometimes, the solution may not be paid media, which is why it pays to understand how all comms channels work together (which is what we mean when we talk about Systems Thinking).

Brand successes

We recently worked with a sportswear brand to launch a new running shoe. The brand marketing team recognised that consideration was low among core runners, but when we looked in depth, we realised it wasn't because of a lack of awareness, but rather, because of the lack of appropriate recommendations.

That's because opinions among runners are massively influenced by salespeople at running stores, who are deeply loyal to traditional running brands, like Asics and Saucony. Understanding this detail enabled us to identify the key blockage the brand needed to overcome.

Similarly, a few years ago we worked for a confectionary brand that told us their biggest barrier to purchase was a lack of relevance. But by digging deeper into the research, we found that the problem was more about lack of awareness.

Once we had identified the right barrier, we were able to map out a successful solution,

enhancing digital activity, working with creative partners to drive relevant content and adding the right social channels and platforms to the plan.

These examples demonstrate how the objectives set by clients in their initial briefs are sometimes suboptimal and why agencies need to push back. If clients want to be famous and well known, that's fine, but they need to understand that being famous doesn't necessarily mean being liked, considered or purchased.

Earlier in my career, I worked on a campaign for a well-known contraceptive pill. Awareness and consideration were sky high among the relevant audience but the women who needed the product were understandably wary about asking for it by name in a pharmacy.

Our research helped us understand why consumers were not buying, which helped us direct our creative messaging to women reading specific content about contraceptives. They were already aware of our product and engaged, but we needed to help them overcome the barrier to purchase. To do this, we developed specific messages for digital that allowed women to print off a "request card" they could hand to their pharmacist without having to say a word (thus, allowing them to maintain their privacy from nosy customers).

Challenging briefs

To achieve the very best results, it's vital to challenge briefs and ask clients where their goals came from and why they matter to their business. As media professionals, before we even consider a brief, it's our job to assess a client's whole system of communications and tie that closely to the way consumers actually buy or, more importantly, don't buy a particular product or service.

Even the biggest media budgets can be wasted if they attempt to change the wrong consumer behaviours or ignore the real reasons people don't consider a brand.

The initial brief should be the starting point for a constructive conversation, not the moment to go into action. Agencies and brands need to agree on a two-way process for finessing the

brief and goal as well as detailed research to confirm that it's really going to deliver growth.

Media can be a tool for growth, but it has to be targeted at the right business challenges. The best way to ensure that happens is to make sure the real barriers are correctly identified at the start of the process.

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