



Automated output, human input: The secrets of effective programmatic creative

OPINION

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Many marketers are using programmatic advertising to target with precision and context. Some use dynamic creative technology to deliver automated ads at scale, but most are not using programmatic to its full creative potential. Nicole Amodeo explains why effective dynamic creative demands human input.

We've all heard about the benefits of programmatic media buying. It's what lets us target the right consumers, with the right messages, at the right times. Well, when I say the 'right messages', I mean a standard campaign message pumped out to all unique consumers in a one-size-fits-all creative approach.

The truth is that while many brands have now got a handle on their targeting strategies, many are still missing valuable messaging opportunities by delivering the same ad to different consumers, again and again, and again.

Currently, most brands allocate 90% of their digital budgets to media, while just 10% goes into producing the creative. But that's counter-productive because the creative actually accounts for 70% of the impact and effectiveness of advertising.

The most startling statistic though, is that, even in 2018, only 1% of ads served to consumers are dynamic and tailored based on programmatic data. That's the biggest missed opportunity, because, as our research shows, adding an additional layer of personalisation can double the response rates for brands.

So, what to do? Those in the know are gaining a clear advantage by combining the benefits of dynamic creative technology with good old-fashioned human input.

The basics of dynamic creative

At its most basic, dynamic creative lets advertisers adapt and tailor ads for specific audiences, formats and contexts. It does this by allowing advertisers to create messages without building thousands of ads by hand. Instead, it uses ad templates containing various interchangeable creative elements. These might include imagery, copy, video assets and calls-to-action.

The media agency can then deliver tailored versions of the ads based on audience segments and relevant data signals such as time of day, weather, demographics, interests and e-commerce behaviours. For instance, if a car manufacturer offers a car configurator on its site, the advertiser could enhance its retargeting efforts by including the user's personally-designed car in their ad.

But while dynamic creative provides obvious benefits, brands need to understand that the delivery of the message cannot simply be left to automated systems to determine the what,

when and the where. That's where humans come in handy.

Why we can't always rely on technology

Imagine prepping your supermarket order online, before casually browsing Instagram, only to be followed by retargeting ads for toilet wipes as you scroll through fashion influencers and travel photographers. While the ad may be timely, pushing it at a time when the user is browsing for pleasure is hardly the most inspiring call to action in this context.

Consumers are also wary of ads that look like templates or excessive frequency. Everyone has had ads for 'that pair of shoes' or 'that designer jacket' following them around, even after they've bought it.

Technology can't distinguish between good and bad ad design, so we need creative minds and production specialists to design and develop bespoke templates that look premium and are built-for-purpose.

Moreover, machines still don't understand emotions and the context of the consumer experience. That's why it still pays to have a proper planning process and specialist skills to develop the creative and targeting strategies. Although the output is mostly automated, the input is very human.

The most successful dynamic systems will always be those designed with the context of the media environment and the consumer journey in mind (for instance, to ensure the consumer isn't retargeted after purchase). And by starting small, changing behaviours to ensure earlier and closer collaboration between teams, and considering this consumer decision journey, we can do more to harness the full potential of programmatic creativity.

Getting it right for Bose

At MediaCom, we help Bose use dynamic creative to produce and deliver tailored imagery and copy for a variety of different products, features, life stages, interests and always-on e-commerce signals.

What makes this project unique, however, is we brief our creative and programmatic teams together, in-house. This lets them use actual digital behaviour insights, like website activity and purchase data, to inform their messaging strategy and creative ideas from the off. Think of it kind of like a 21st-century update on the classic copywriter and art director double act (with more access to more accurate and timely data).

In 2017, we created a bespoke decision matrix to help us mix and match creative elements with our buying insights and targeting possibilities at scale, across the UK, France and Germany. We designed and developed a flexible, purpose-built template with an image sequence to provide a striking video-like effect. Dynamic creative then assembles the ads in real-time to showcase the most relevant product in the Bose range.

The copy and images are selected based on consumer interests, life stages, purchase behaviours, media environment and seasonal events. For instance, if we know a user likes hiking and outdoor pursuits, we might show them an ad for Bose's durable micro speaker attached to a backpack in the snow and rain. Likewise, if they are a frequent business traveller, we might show them an ad for Bose's noise-cancelling headphones, which they can use to relax on the plane.

The dynamic system gives us the agility to optimise creative and adjust certain elements on the fly, without having to rebuild or re-traffic new ads.

Bose is now using this programmatic creative system as a testing environment for product positioning and new content development. And so far, the results have been positive. During the initial campaign period, we saw a 30% media performance uplift and a 45% increase in sales revenue.

Using dynamic creative and an integrated programmatic media buying and creative team approach has built a stronger relationship with the client while the consumer consistently receives the most relevant message from Bose.

How to get the most out of dynamic creative

Brands looking to take advantage of everything dynamic content has to offer should:

Brief media, creative and technology together

It sounds very basic, but by doing this, all teams will align on consumer insights, data sources, targeting strategies and creative campaign concepts from the start. This will let the media targeting and ad variation decisions required for dynamic creative to be made more efficiently. Dynamic creative tech partners (internal or external), as well as ad operations, should be included as early as possible as well.

Start simple to test and learn

If you're experimenting with dynamic creative for the first time, it's a smart move to build a small decision tree or matrix of ad versions first to ensure the campaign is manageable and testable. Test a hypothesis such as "personalised creative performs better than standard ads" to see if adding tailored creative shifts the needle for your brand, and evolve the strategy and complexity from there.

Consider the entire consumer journey

Many advertisers get lost in the ad tech discussions, particularly around tagging and retargeting tactics. That's because consumer activity on site is likely the most accessible and valuable data. To get it right, brands should take a step back and look at media spend allocations and largest growth opportunities, as this could be higher in the funnel.

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