

Media planning has moved beyond Byron, Binet and bytes

OPINION

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Craft will become more important as a driver of growth, says Steve Gladdis

You could be forgiven for thinking that media planning is going to get easier.

Byron Sharp, Les Binet and Peter Field have popularised media best practice. The industry has amassed great institutional knowledge of marketing effectiveness.

The use of algorithms reading data signals – the “bytes” of the title of this piece – to make targeting decisions has become the norm. Google, Facebook and Amazon are awash with data available to every advertiser.

These factors have led to clear, well-understood principles and processes to help guide

media investments. Unfortunately, they are also available to everyone. That's you *and* your competitors.

These aspects of media planning are table-stakes. They're the price of entry, the means to get the basics right.

But if all we do is apply these principles, we'll see that the media plans from brands within a category will all look pretty much the same. Competitive advantage will be driven by the size of the budget and the creative work, rather than the media planning.

This is a wasted opportunity, especially in the low-growth economic environment we find ourselves marooned in. Surely any advertiser would want to drive a competitive advantage – not just parity – from their media budget?

This is where the craft of media planning comes in, as it always has done – to help ensure that no sales are left on the table, either in the short or long term.

But how is media planning going to change? As William Gibson famously said, the future is already here, it's just not evenly distributed yet.

So let's have a look at some aspects of media planning that are important now and examine how they might change in the future, along with some examples that point the way forward.

1. Cultural branding

A brand works partly as a mental shorthand to help navigate its category, but also because we are aware of what everyone else thinks of that brand. And the strongest brands feel a part of the zeitgeist.

Keith Weed, ex-marketing chief of Unilever, talked at this year's ISBA conference about the importance of brands "penetrating popular culture".

However, cultural branding is going to get harder. Popular culture is slowly fragmenting as TV content is distributed across a variety of walled gardens and viewed when convenient to the viewer, new music comes from a personalised Spotify Discover weekly playlist rather than *Top of the Pops* on BBC One and our cultural information comes from a million websites and influencers.

People's experience of culture is more personal than in the past.

As this fragmentation continues, distinctiveness and consistency are critical for brands that want to make a cultural impact.

It will be more important than ever for advertisers to find, build and consistently reinforce brand ideas that live beyond single campaigns, channels and executions, and that are flexible enough to work across different areas of the marketing mix.

At MediaCom, we're calling these "system ideas", as they need to work across different parts of the communications system.

Here's a great example of the type of idea that will be essential to brand-building going forward: Snickers' "You're not you when you're hungry" strapline is not just an advertising idea.

It's a highly flexible brand idea (born of a brilliant piece of account planning from BBDO) that has a point of view on the world (not just the product); that has been successfully executed in a series of ads over many years; but is malleable enough to be refreshed and renewed through different media partnerships – for example, turning TV channel Dave into out-of-character "Rupert" (until it sorted itself out with a Snickers).

A good planner must help offset the cultural fragmentation, finding or building properties to maintain a brand's place in the zeitgeist.

2. Personalisation at scale?

While more media is becoming addressable, the march towards unfettered personalisation in communications has been slowed by GDPR, Google and Apple's recent moves to curb data collection via their platforms, poor results from over-targeted campaigns and public resistance to being chased around the web by needy advertisers.

As more addressable options open up, it's the media planner's job to understand the impact of different degrees of "personal" communication and to ask questions of the technology.

Where is truly personalised messaging worth it (and welcomed) and what is the return to the client for deploying it? Where will "relevant" or "distinctive" communications do just as good a job, if not better, than personalised messages?

Where is the point at which personalisation stops paying back due to the costs involved – not least the erosion of consumer trust, the loss of a coherent brand story and cultural invisibility?

What are the meaningful differences between different audience cohorts and how should we use those insights to create communications that are more relevant?

Just because we will be able to target and personalise more of our communication doesn't mean we should. Experimentation will be key in this space to develop a clear point of view on what works and what is counter-productive.

3. Untapped contexts

In recent years, it has become easier to target people in specific cohorts; but, sometimes, in our quest for the "right person", it seems the industry has forgotten about "right time" and "right place". Given the volume of marketing messages people are exposed to every day, this is negligent in the extreme.

[A previous column in this *Campaign* series focused on context](#) as the future of media

planning. I agree that context will definitely be playing a more prominent role, not least because targeting the right individual will become trickier for the reasons outlined in the last section.

Planners should be looking for “untapped contexts” – those that haven’t yet been activated by a competitor – and looking to activate those media contexts in new and attention-grabbing ways.

Here’s an example on a brand exploiting an untapped context: last Christmas, Coca-Cola ran a promotion offering free Cokes to designated drivers (those choosing to go booze-free on nights out in order to ferry their friends to the pub and back).

The drinks brand targeted that audience using navigation platform Waze, which allowed it to reach drivers in their cars while they were on nights out in the run-up to Christmas and direct them to participating pubs using branded Coke pins on the platform’s maps.

We will discover untapped contexts through a better understanding of how human behaviour is changing. Behavioural data will help unearth new opportunities to deliver the right message at the right time, and emerging media platforms will offer new ways to activate those contexts.

4. Performance marketing

As shopping moves online and new subscription or app-based business models emerge, the need for performance marketing disciplines is expanding into more categories and clients.

Mars pet food can be bought on subscription. BMW runs Drive Now, its pay-as-you-go car rental service.

All media planners – not just the performance specialists – must adapt to the increasing importance of performance marketing, learning how to apply those techniques to the changing media marketplace.

Let's speculate how the performance discipline might impact FMCG brands even further in future. Grocery shopping is likely to become far more automated, with a digital housekeeper ensuring the kitchen cupboards and fridge are well-stocked.

Brand-switching will happen less frequently (or at least will be handled by an algorithm picking the best option).

In this world, we might see the supplier of your baked beans, muesli or kitchen roll vary dependent on the outcome of an auction, unseen to the shopper, where various companies bid to supply that product to your household (much in the same way they currently bid to buy a programmatic advertising impression).

In this scenario, there will be two parallel streams of marketing activity for FMCG grocery products.

One is the bot-to-bot model described above; the other will be consumer-facing and designed to drive conscious switching between brands.

This second area is where FMCG will become more like finance or utilities in its marketing.

In the current model, a grocery shopper might switch brands every time they go to a supermarket or do an online shop.

But once programmatic consumption really kicks in and more grocery shopping happens automatically with little human intervention, switching isn't likely to happen very often.

If people are happy with a brand, it's likely that they will stick with it for a while – perhaps for weeks or months (or until the bot-to-bot approach drives a switch).

But there will still be a role for trying to persuade consumers to switch their brand of pasta sauce or butter or shampoo – getting them to override the auto-shop/bot-to-bot process

and try something different. Perhaps because they fancy a change, perhaps because they're dissatisfied with the product, perhaps because there's something new and improved, or perhaps because the switch comes with an incentive?

FMCG marketers will be able to track the repeat purchases this leads to and the "lifetime value" of acquiring a new customer based on how long they're likely to stick with that brand before the algorithm or the human makes a change.

Hence they'll know what cost-per-acquisition they can afford to recruit a customer and can optimise their campaigns accordingly, just as a traditional performance-driven advertiser would.

It's about "people first, better results", as we say at MediaCom.

An exciting future

As a planner, I find all of this is very exciting. There will be big opportunities – more addressable media, new data sources to use in our planning, more knowledge of what works and what doesn't, and the potential to combine machine learning with the cognitive leaps that only a human can make.

But we have some big challenges to face on our clients' behalf: the continuing fragmentation of culture, restrictions in the use of data for targeting, the rise of programmatic consumption and consumer distrust of advertising, to name but four.

Black boxes and rules of thumb will not meet these challenges. No single data source will provide the answers.

We'll need curiosity, rigour, creativity, experimentation and cross-pollination of different types of data.

Which is why, as we move forward in time, the craft of media planning will become even more critical as a driver of growth.

[*The article was first published by Campaign as part of its 'The Future of Media Planning' series*](#)

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