

2017 is gearing up to be chaotic and transformative for brands and agencies

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SUE UNERMAN, CSO AT MEDIACOM 05 JAN 2017

MediaCom's chief strategy officer is not making any predictions for 2017. Instead, here are her suggestions.

2017 marks thirty years since the original publication of the book that made chaos theory popular.

Chaos theory is a branch of mathematics that explains how huge change can come about unexpectedly from the accumulation of tiny changes.

The most famous example is the butterfly effect. This shows how a tiny change, caused by the flapping of a butterfly's wings weeks earlier, may lead (when added to millions of other tiny changes in the atmosphere) to the formation of a hurricane.

This effect can explain much of what seemed so unpredictable in 2016. Did those pundits who were shocked by the events of the year really listen to what was truly going on? Did they just hear what they wanted to?

As the results were so close did tiny differences accumulate in how numbers were rounded up for polls lead to outcomes that have taken many by surprise.

Chaos theory explains why we should be wary of predictions for 2017, and this blog will not make any 2017 predictions. Here are two suggestions for 2017 instead.

First suggestion. We had better listen with real empathy to the users of our brands and products in 2017.

Use of data is on everyone's list for this year. But if that data is in any way contaminated, or fused, then it must be used with great caution. The differences when one panel is fused with another may be tiny, but those tiny differences can cause a hurricane when you least expect it.

Listening with empathy to consumer voices as well as interrogating the data is therefore essential.

Correlation without causation is not enough. You may know that there's a correlation between the number of firemen sent to a fire and the amount of damage done. Does this prove that firemen cause damage?

Salon.com writes that some critics of ObamaCare say that it's led to more Emergency Room visits and that this means the law has failed. Really? It doesn't take an expert to come up with other interpretations in either instance.

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Data is crucial to media delivering the right message, at the right time, to the right consumer. But if we don't understand what those consumers need and how they are really feeling then brands will not truly reap the benefits of investing in the data management in the first place.

Spurious correlations abound in marketing and if you can avoid them you're winning. Questioning every plausible explanation is not just healthy, it's crucial for good decisions. Second suggestion. More change is coming and it will be transformative. The butterfly wings have been accumulating so no-one will be able to continue with unchallenged, unexamined heritage practices and succeed in 2017.

For example no-one can continue to get away with serving content made for one medium everywhere and expect success. In one overheard conversation last year a media exponent was talking about the fact that the creative agency had developed seven AV executions for a brand relaunch.

He explained: "For the creative agency this was a revolution, but our media strategy will burn through those seven executions in one week on Facebook. I actually need 700".

As AI becomes better this creates the need for a transformation in comms. Better AI drives higher consumer expectations. People are quicker to condemn Google for getting the time of a journey slightly wrong now than they are to wonder at the fact that it can accurately predict that your journey is about to take place at all.

Increasing consumer expectations means that people will expect relevancy. And to buy or use a brand, when and how they want to. Ecommerce is still a minority choice for most products. The upside is therefore huge. Brands need to be considering what is possible, not what has been normal.

2017, keep chaos theory in mind. Listen with empathy and be ready for transformative change.

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