

Digital Viewpoint: Unleash your geek

by Steven Hess

Ad folk aren't famed for their love of software but, as the growth in digital media expands, it will become central to the way we all target consumers.

Campaign readers might guffaw heartily at this, but one day, readers of this very magazine will actually understand and embrace advertising software as much as they understand and embrace print or television ads today. Yes, software.

The ad agency of the future won't be a traditional bricks-and-mortar business. Its assets won't go up and down in the lift every day.

Instead, it will be a software business, where creativity and problem-solving skills will be enhanced by intelligent software agents.

Our business will be the "middle-ware" that connects brands to consumers, with the right message, at the right time, in the right place. This connectivity will be sensitive and dynamic, changing and evolving. There will never be a finished product, only the rules that govern a framework to deliver constantly adapting and evolving content. Creativity will be unbound.

Today, in spite of the protestations of the media neutral brigade, advertising is still dominated by format. Come the ad software revolution, creativity will be unlocked from debates about 30- versus 60-second ad executions and insert versus letter.

The process will be liberated to be truly creative. As a result, our industry will evolve into an ever-more effective, intelligent and responsive business.

Gone, too, will be the debate over whether or not a campaign has engaged its target audience. We won't guess, we will know. In this future world, brands will get closer to their audiences, using sensitive data mining and collection to develop greater insight which, in turn, will serve truly relevant, and engaging content.

This content will enable consumers to discover, explore and enjoy brands. We will understand how consumers feel, we'll know their preferences, understand their physical responses and adapt our content appropriately.

In case any TV media planners actually stayed with me beyond the word "software", here's the good news: traditional mass-media advertising will not become redundant. It will be - is already, in fact - redefined, moving from an end-point in communications toward a facilitative role, becoming a smaller part of a bigger journey, and integrating TV into a richer, more engaging online world.

It's no secret that this will lead to more focused broadcast advertising, because it will no longer have to meet the broad range of objectives commonly heaped on it today.

This strategic shift will affect the economics of commercial production and the business model on which this industry is based because we shall have to "do more" with the same budgets.

There is much to fear in this brave new software-led world, not just for ad agencies, but even for so-called new media companies. Note the demise of AOL, see how Yahoo! is now scrambling for survival, observe the emergence of Microsoft Advertising and the continued dominance of Google. But beyond frightening change, we will discover new, and as yet unknown, communication opportunities. While search taps into established and known consumer needs, it is mass-media advertising that uncovers unknown and unmet needs. This is where we will see the most innovation over the next few years.

So, how do we ready ourselves to take full advantage?

Today, most digital platforms have one thing in common: they are interactive. But we have been slow to understand and capitalise on how that affects a consumer's relationship with a brand. In an experiment by S Shyam Sundar in the advanced media lab at Pennsylvania State University, participants were exposed to three versions of a political candidate's website.

One was a low-interactivity version featuring one page and no links whatsoever. A medium-interactivity site offered a link to access additional information and a high-interactivity site featured an additional function allowing users to send an e-mail direct to the candidate.

It's no surprise that easy interactivity increases the response. What might be more enlightening is the finding that greater interactivity actually gave visitors a more positive impression of the candidate. Just look at the way that Barack Obama has swept to political power with his intelligent use of digital. How else could he have mobilised and collected the enthusiasm and contributions of millions?

Before you argue that this is just some academic exercise of no relevance to what you do, we have observed similar results when we add interaction to broadcast advertising.

In studies in the past five years with the communications research agency 2CV, we found increased message understanding, enhanced brand knowledge, greater comprehension and increased appeal and consideration.

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Perhaps more importantly, because content designed to be interactive will make better use of the capabilities of new digital platforms.

It's not only content that has an obvious effect on the consumer. The platform does too. While this is not a new idea - Marshall McLuhan was talking about the effect of the medium in 1964 - its importance is heightened now that digital platforms can effectively deliver multiple types of media to one point, such as a PC, a mobile or TV.

In our research, we compared the effect of audio/visual content delivered via a TV and a PC. We discovered the PC platform brought about a more rational response, while the same content consumed via a TV stimulated a more emotional reaction.

As digital platforms become the norm, we expect to see this emphasis change. Today, however, it remains important to define how we develop the best interactive content and what platform will help to achieve its goal.

As the platforms (such as TV, the internet or mobile) and networks (such as Facebook or Twitter) that we use evolve, so must the way we think about the content we create.

Only by working with both online and offline, platform and network simultaneously, will brands be able to capture the consumer interest and loyalty their marketers desire.

This world will be data rich and processing intensive. The only way to make sense of it will be to use intelligent agents filtering this information to suggest the consumer's next move. By leading in the development and use of software, ad agencies will be able to unlock the potential of this new world. The time is coming, Campaign readers. Embrace the change.