

the communications planning perspective

what have you done for your target market recently?

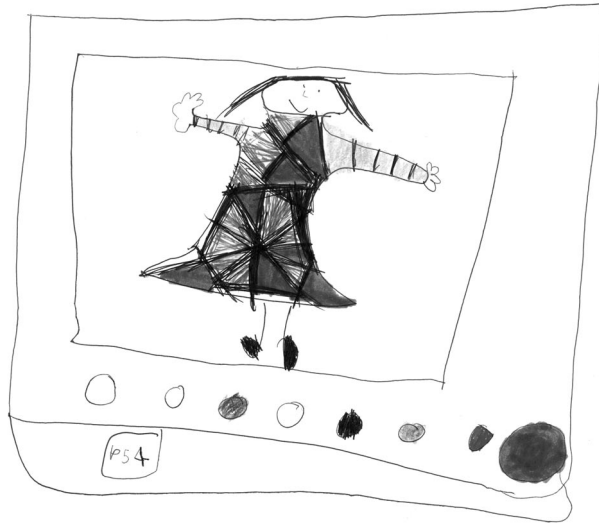
Sue Unerman



Ensuring usual channels aren't followed out of apathy and cultivating openness to innovation and change are essential in the integrated communications age – where talking to consumers at the right time and in the right place rather than any one medium is king

Television viewing's really changed hasn't it? When I was a child you pretty much watched what was on – whether you wanted to or not. Otherwise so many people just wouldn't have such fond memories of classic or sometimes just crap television – Quincy; High Chaparral; The Waltons (boy did I hate that family) and then all those classic black & white movies, Cary Grant comedies, Bette Davis melodramas.

When I watch my children watch TV the difference is really obvious. The idea that they would spend a rainy Sunday afternoon watching something that they didn't enjoy simply because the adults in the family had chosen to do so is a nonsense to them. They head straight for the kids section of the electronic programme guide (EPG) where there has been a very clear evolution from Barney, through Powerpuff girls to Toonami over the last few years. If some adult does manage to wrestle the remote control from them to watch some football (or yes a black & white classic movie), then they withdraw in disgust to watch a video in another room, or play on the computer or on their Gameboys. They have a clear portfolio of channels, and they're very clear about what is for them and what they watch with Mum or Dad (The Simpsons, for example). Equally they sometimes – as we all do – actually watch the TV. And sometimes they draw, read, or paint, or play a game with the TV on in the background.



Emily, age 6

portfolio viewing

Adults with EPGs have a portfolio of channels too – and sometimes it's a very personal choice. Not all ABC1s start with BBC1 and 2. Not all blokes dwell on the sports channels. There are channel surfers, and then there are channel avoiders. No-one can be bothered to read through 900 lists of programmes, so a mental shortlist is essential, and outside of new conversions the novelty of all those channels is irrelevant.

The pattern of hierarchy over the remote control is really interesting as well. Who's in charge within the household varies by time of day, day of week and time of year and of course sometimes by who's got the upper

hand over whom at that particular moment. Sometimes Mum's got the energy to send the children to play outside and take control – sometimes she hasn't. Sometimes she'll send out for family pizza and they'll all watch together. As TV viewing becomes a mixture of who's available to watch combined with specific appointment-to-view channels and who's got the remote, the dynamics of TV planning and buying become more and more interesting.

the changing nature of appointment-to-view

Appointment-to-view itself is undergoing evolution too. As more and more flexibility creeps into the schedules, actually the

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appointment becomes more and more confusing, and we've yet to see the full effects of this. If I can watch Friends on E4 early, and twice a week, or wait and see it on Channel 4 later – maybe I come to realise that I'm not that bothered if I don't see it at all. To stretch the point we've come a long way from clustering around the telly at Christmas to watch Morecambe and Wise there and then, with a chance to see again at some unknown date. Maybe more choice and more flexibility actually leads to less choice because when things are too confusing people shut down options themselves?

Certainly one thing is true moving forward. Communication experts need to be cleverer and more radical in order to get an edge. You also need to acknowledge and indeed embrace change – something not everyone wants to do.

I heard a statistic at a conference the other day which I liked very much. The speaker said that someone living in the 15th century in Britain probably absorbed as much new information in a year as your Sunday Times last Sunday contained in one issue. The speaker was of course making a point about the explosion of stimuli in the 20th and 21st centuries. But I think that there's a rider to this and that is that people probably haven't changed that much in terms of physiology in that time – six centuries is a gnat's whisker in evolutionary

terms. Maybe people can't absorb much more information in a year than is in one edition of the Sunday Times.

If that's true, just think of how many communications – whether as advertising messages or news stories – each of us is ignoring every day. It's one of the things that happens in a qualitative research group if you ask people how many ads they remember seeing today. They'll struggle to come up with one or two usually. Which is not to say that they haven't absorbed communications subconsciously in a way that will be triggered at point of sale, and is not to say that by far the majority of communications in a day are wastage – but it does represent a challenge for marketing and communications professionals.

beyond the 'age of image'

If the physical make-up of people hasn't changed very much I think that their attitude to advertising and communications has changed radically and is continuing to change very fast. John Grant's book After Image is a detailed analysis of the ending of the Age of Image. His argument is not that image is irrelevant any more – after all image is a vital component of all brands, and in some categories (perhaps fragrances for one) as or more important than the actual properties of the product. No-one's suggesting that the great British public is going to start buying the cheapest possible no-label everything – particularly in a day and age when own label itself is often a brand – there are people happily paying more for Heinz Baked Beans in Waitrose, just so long as they can buy their extra extra extra virgin olive oil hand-pressed by monks on the mountains of Mount Etna at the same time.

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The thought – and I think it's an important one – is rather that image on its own is not enough any more. If image is being used as a way to trick or patronise the consumer in some way, then time is running out. There's just so much more information freely available about companies, products and brands now. Spin is losing credence rapidly and brands that offer more than just flashy images will win out against those where style is all and substance is nothing. We want to believe in brands, in a day and age when choice is so huge we need to believe in brands. But that means that those brands mustn't let us down. And increasingly that includes giving us information that allows us some ownership of the brand.

This development happily coincides with the increase in interactive television, and with the possibility of more flexible use of commercial TV channels. If you can interest your consumer in a two minute TV advertorial in your brand, followed up with an invitation for further interaction, then you're starting a more interesting engagement than one that's just about a 30-second image spot. If you can direct all your communications focus about something that interests your consumer and is relevant to your brand then you're probably stealing a march over your competitors. Particularly if you can deliver the same integrated communication through-the-line.

emergence of a multimedia model

We've had some very established models about how to use TV (which doesn't mean that they're right, just that most people were happy with them). Now for the first time we're about to get the kind of research technology that we need to really establish

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the relationship between multimedia communications and product sales. But do we want it?

At MediaCom the integrated communication planning revolution is in place. We no longer think about planning advertising into TV, press or radio in isolation or indeed about planning advertising in isolation of display at point of sale, telesales systems or PR. Planners are no longer asking: why should we use 'secondary media'? They're looking at media neutral planning where every medium has to justify its role on the schedule against criteria such as consumer engagement and return on business investment. The age of integrated communications planning is upon us. Its about time that integrated communications planning research was in use too.

However when it comes to research tools for measuring how much media to use, each medium has its own joint methodology with the media owners. The phrase 'joint industry research' generally refers to each major medium as though it is an industry in itself. But – and this may be news for some people – there is only one communications industry – and its time that there was research that covers it all. Moreover research methodology is still based on evolution from years ago – and just look at all the changes that there have been. New technology to measure GRPs across different media

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already exists and furthermore, methods to understand how each medium impacts on awareness and sales.

the evaluation challenge

Recently the radio research body RAJAR rejected proposals for electronic measurements for radio, although it has indicated its backing for investigation of electronic systems for the future. At least they're commenting on it, even though to suggest as they have that current diary methodology is gold standard is a bit extreme in a world where technology is moving along so quickly. And for each medium to be independently investigating new technology seems time-wasting.

Add to this the fact that the Home Office has recently given approval to electronic radio tagging to replace bar codes on products in shops and Walmart has indicated that it will be asking its top 100 suppliers to tag all their shipments by 2005 to allow them to be traced through the supply chain. Tesco has announced plans to place tags into its entire supply chain by 2007. The Home Office is interested in cutting down crime, but if all media and all shopping can be tagged – which in theory anyway is possible – then just imagine the possibilities for enhanced communications planning and its impact on media planning and trading.

It's easy to imagine the pitfalls of this approach. There are of course many vested interests and in just talking about this to a few media owners I can already hear hackles rising. But there are also many many economies of scale that will result. And the upside of integrated research is very exciting both from a planning and buying perspective. The

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Institute of Practitioners in Advertising has announced plans for some cross-media measurement to be funded by IPA members and the plans are in their early stages as I write. However, there is a big difference in scope from paper diaries to electronic people monitors with chips. My worry is that – as so often – the whole issue will be looked at in an evolutionary way, when what we should do is not look at where to go from where we are now, but look at investment into truly joint industry research including media owners and starting with a blank sheet of paper.

media and creativity

There are too many barriers in thinking at the moment. At a recent judging event for industry awards I overheard a debate about media and creativity and where to draw the line between them. There is no line between media and creativity. There are effective communications strategies which engage with the consumer and that run through from advertising, media planning, PR, stunts, the tone of corporate communications and of customer services and even the product specifications themselves.

Sometimes in this industry it feels like there aren't many people left who have more than a decade's perspective on how things have changed. And those that do have

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that experience may have spent so many years talking loudly in restaurants that they have trouble getting perspective on last week, let alone on change since the 1980s. In some ways things have moved on a long way. And in some instances conversations about communications planning and buying are identical – I bet somewhere around town right now a media planner is having a row with the creative about second lengths for TV ads!

Planning and buying for the future – who knows. Maybe a team of econometricians will optimise bulk-bought airtime and space according to streams of effectiveness data from ad-measuring and sales-registering mobile phones, while engagement strategists will plan how to truly hook in the consumer through the line. And maybe TV buyers will continue to spend summer on the golf course and have an annual punch-up at Christmas. Time for change, I think, but the pace of that change is actually up to the industry itself.

This is not to suggest that this is going to be easy – although there is a way through it if you focus above all on the consumer. Essentially it's like any relationship – give attention and it will pay back. Fresh working practices to ensure that the usual channels aren't being followed out of apathy, and openness to innovation and change is essential. The bedrock of any schedule must not be any one medium, but talking to the consumer at the right time and in the right place.

There's no point expecting a lot from your target market if you haven't asked yourself – what have I done for them lately? ■

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