

Codeword: Partnership

Some time ago, I was invited to a conference to speak on trends in marketing. It was in preparing for that engagement that I came across a quote from an advertising icon which read, “The future of advertising is that advertising doesn’t exist.” Powerful words, but to paraphrase the great Mark Twain, the reports of advertising’s demise are greatly exaggerated.

Instead, the art has morphed and changed, evolving with technology and the way we live, work, play and consume media. And although the vast majority of discussion in our field is focused on the digital revolution, there is more to life than today’s small screen.

Television is alive and well for advertisers who innovate and collaborate.

DVRs may have made appointment television a thing of the past, but strategic use of the medium is alive and well. No matter that the web is our number-one entertainment choice, or that we spend more time tweeting, texting and facebooking than watching television. No other medium has equal power to engage and inspire than television; we just have to be smarter about how we use it.

Survey results from numerous sources acknowledge that the effectiveness of traditional television advertising has declined over the last few years. And while some stalwarts may choose to disagree, declining ad revenues tell a bigger story.

Couple that information with the recent Gallup & Robinson findings that ad recall is 11 percent lower than average when consumer confidence is low, and you’ve got a pretty daunting picture.

So what does this mean for brand marketers? Does television lack the staying power to help build brand preference and recall over the long term? Do we siphon more of our budgets from traditional media to feed the great online monster? I’d argue that our call to action is less about a medium switch and more about a change of method and mindset.

Building marketing partnerships is a time-tested strategy to achieve a broad array of objectives — from opening new channels of distribution (like Benjamin Moore selling paint through Pottery Barn) to engaging new audiences (bringing the kinder, gentler Martha Stewart’s craft supplies to Walmart shoppers) to increasing brand favorability or credibility (offering Newman’s Own products at McDonald’s).

Regardless of the goal, when multiple brands bring their assets to the table and approach an issue or opportunity as partners, everyone wins. So why not approach media the same way? Building collaborative relationships based on mutual audience relevance and complementary business goals can deliver success to all parties.

RELEVANCE AND PARTNERSHIP

The key components — relevance and partnership — are the secret ingredients. The objective is to capture and interest the audience through compelling content — not just for 30 seconds, but also over a period of time — resulting in greater brand loyalty.

Consider the Food Network’s recent hit, *The Chef Jeff Project*. Chef Jeff Henderson is an accomplished chef with a notable résumé including Caesar’s Palace and Bellagio, in addition to his Posh Urban Cuisine.

He’s also a former felon who turned his life around in prison when he discovered his passion

for food, learned to cook, and dedicated himself to a better future for himself and his family, and later, for other young people at risk.

The savvy programming folks at the Food Network saw the inherent value in his story and created *The Chef Jeff Project* as a six-part “culinary and life skills boot camp,” designed to help six at-risk young adults turn their lives around and build a better future.

In each episode, Chef Jeff mentors the crew by training them in culinary fundamentals while holding them to standards that reinforce important life skills such as overcoming adversity and maintaining a strong work ethic.

Those who successfully completed Jeff’s rigorous program were awarded full scholarships to The International Culinary Schools at The Art Institutes. As the weeks progressed, the candidates visited the school, prepared signature dishes for a panel of judges, met with admissions representatives and all were ultimately awarded scholarships to The Art Institutes location of their choice.

But the integration did not end there. In an effort to engage viewers who may have been inspired by the show, The International Culinary Schools at The Art Institutes and the Food Network teamed up to offer the *Chef Jeff Project Scholarship Contest*.

The competition was a co-branded, online essay contest, hosted on Foodnetwork.com, offering the winner a \$20,000 scholarship awarded by the Food Network to The International Culinary Schools at The Art Institutes. The Food Network heavily promoted the competition both on-air and online. The contest further engaged viewers by allowing a consumer to win the exact same prize as the on-air contestants.

This partnership was a win for the Food Network, since it not only provided a life-changing competition “prize” via the scholarship, but also heightened the emotional investment of the show’s participants and engagement of the viewers by raising the stakes, resulting in critically acclaimed, top-rated programming.

For The International Culinary Schools at The Art Institutes, the partnership helped increase brand awareness and reinforced its positioning as a leading culinary educator, resulting in increased inquiries and applications to its schools, but also created a positive brand halo for having provided the opportunity for these young adults to improve their lives. The results were exceptional. In an era of reduced ad recall, nearly three-fourths of the audience remembered The International Culinary Schools at The Art Institutes, and brand favorability ratings increased over 10 percent.

Another great example is the partnership built between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s *Energy Star* program and the Documentary Channel. With Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth” as a catalyst, Americans were looking for answers about fighting global warming, and for solutions to rising energy costs. While *Energy Star* had those answers, as a voluntary government program it lacked the budget to create a full-scale advertising campaign.

Meanwhile, its media partner, the Documentary Channel, was interested in offering a cohesive, solutions-oriented piece on the issue. The results: a meaningful partnership which created a feature-length documentary highlighting individuals, businesses and institutions fighting global warming with *Energy Star* which received play on the Documentary Channel, online, and at film festivals across the United States.

The alliance was structured to leverage credible content from *Energy Star*, and the brand was entitled to the creative assets, which were cut into 30-second PSA and two-minute brand spots. In its first seven months, this innovative partnership out-delivered the impressions generated by the Gore-sponsored “We” PSA campaign, and has been requested by more than 50 film festivals to date.

Any good partnership requires a deep and thorough understanding of each party’s strengths and weaknesses, and a vision for how they complement each other to create a stronger whole. Ultimately, true partnership success is defined by longer term, sustainable relationships that deliver mutual benefits.

So, in a sense, a traditional concept of advertising may not exist for much longer. But that shouldn’t come as any surprise. This has been coming since the early 2000’s discussion of bringing customer-centric planning to the digital revolution.

As with other challenges facing our world, the brand marketers who emerge victorious from this metamorphosis will be those who are flexible and innovative enough to join forces to achieve their goals. ■



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