

Media planning is not just a numbers game

Industry sage and media strategist, Gordon Muller, challenged media planning paradigms yesterday, 16 March, when he accused media planners of focusing too much on the mechanics of planning and playing a numbers game, rather than on the marketplace out there and qualitative campaigns which understood the "soul" of the medium being utilised.



By Louise Marsland 16 Mar 2006

He was speaking at the Southern African Marketing Research Council (SAMRA) convention in the north west province yesterday, 16 March 2006.

Muller, who says you may call him a media strategist, channel strategist or media planner, but would prefer to be known as a media poet, says that in the last decade, media agencies and media owners have been in some kind of 'zero based arms race', but ultimately have failed to differentiate and to deliver on efficacy of advertising: retreating into the business of information provision, not solution provision.

"Let's talk about the reality of life as a planner in the new era - I also appeal to research gurus out there, who are creators of advertising industry knowledge - there are a few [of us] who hold out for the poetry of media planning: not sample sizes or groundbreaking research."

Muller ventured some poetic thoughts on media planning, warning that some of his thoughts on advertising should contain a health warning.

"I can't find anything published in the last five years that indicates that advertising is becoming more effective to clients, although I did find half a dozen books on the death of the advertising industry. I long for the days when I thought only 50% of our advertising was wasted - now I find that 100% doesn't matter..."

He referred to the pioneers of communication technology (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) and said it's still all about getting a signal out of noise.

Found out

In media planning terms, noise comes in many variables, says Muller. For example, TV commercials run in extended commercial breaks which are less than optimal environments as the consumer cannot cope with very many streams of info on any given day, research indicates. So what does this mean to advertising in all this clutter?

"What has happened, guys, is that we have been found out!" says Muller. "How come we know nothing about how our ads perform in a cluttered ad environment, but know everything about how big and small the spots are? Where do you want your campaign to win? In the computer or in the marketplace?"

Muller touched on consumer retention in this context, saying that consumers' ability to replay back info in the short term was limited to a few messages a day.

"Nothing has changed in 50 years... we still don't know how to extract signal from noise."

He blames the commission system. "As a company, I make money by getting my clients to spend more: the bigger the solution, the bigger the income. However, as a media planner, I do my job by achieving measured objectives on the smallest possible budget. The smaller the solution, the better the job... These two objectives are mutually

exclusive.

"Media planners have a vested interest in the solution... If I make the audience bigger, on the old solution, I look clever and I make more money as the bigger the audience, the bigger the budget, and the more money I make!"

Muller says he doesn't mean to belittle the power of stats, but there are serious issues.

Soul

"At the end of the day, if I look at readers per copy with magazines or newspapers, for example... we all know that no one actually believes these figures... but we use them as we have a vested interest in these bigger audience. We don't investigate them. We don't look at what makes your medium bigger, what is its soul?"

"What are our clients asking for? Simply: for campaigns that work in the marketplace, not on our computers.

"We have, rightly or wrongly, got to the conclusion that advertising and media efficacy is about how many people we can reach: counting heads. But the paradigm has moved away to penetrating heads. Great creativity saves clients money and produces great creative advertising. We would make a bigger impact with a qualitative solution not quantitative."

What is missing, Muller says, is the thoroughness of understanding and observation. "I'm not questioning the data, I'm questioning the people who request the data."

What worries Muller is that media planners have become totally mechanical in their approach to media planning

"We are on the cusp of a new era in advertising, we've come to terms with ROI - now we need to go back and see what the new paradigm is. We want the motivation, the why, rather than the how many."

ABOUT LOUISE MARS LAND

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