

Journal of

INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

IMC



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**Cause Commerce: The Case for Aligning
Corporate and Customer Interests**

Rob Densen

**Marketing's Neo-Renaissance: An Opportunity for
Tomorrow's Multi-Channel Integrated Marketer**

William Mislowski

**Democracy Online: Can IMC Stimulate
Disenfranchised Voters?**

Adam Froman

**Measuring the Return on Your
Communications Investment**

Kacie Jung

Brian Robinson

Context Planning: The Door to Media's Future

Kendra Hatcher

The Multicultural Paradigm

J.P. James

Applying Ecology to Maximize Customer Value

William L. Shulby

Dave J. Nash

Context Planning: THE DOOR TO MEDIA'S FUTURE

Kendra Hatcher

No longer focused on reach and frequency, media agencies are placing greater importance on how consumers interact with brands. This has led to the emergence of "context planning," which is playing a role in the evolution of media agencies from traditional buyers of media space into communication architects.

Adapt or Die

Media agencies are faced with a great challenge to "adapt or die" (Elms, 1994) and to evolve into what many have dubbed "The Agency of Future." Today, too many media agencies focus on message delivery and rely on traditional mass media to reach consumers. Successful media plans are based on reach (how many consumers had the potential to see or hear the message) and frequency goals (how many times could the consumer potentially see or hear the message). Only recently have media agencies begun to value media engagement, which places emphasis on the role the media environment plays in connecting consumers with brand messages. Tomorrow's media agency will place greater importance on consumers and the creative ideas that break through, and change consumers' perceptions and behaviors.

Now Is the Time

Breaking through the media clutter is more important now than ever. Within the last 20 years, the industry has experienced an explosion of media that stimulates and

overwhelms consumers and advertisers alike. From 1985 to 2000, the U.S. media landscape has exploded from three national television networks to seven national networks and 54 cable networks. There were 10,000 more print options and 5,000 more radio stations. In 2001, consumers were being hit with an estimated 3,000 daily exposures ranging from TV, out-of-home and other types of messages (Starcom MediaVest Group, 2001).

In addition, non-traditional ways to communicate with consumers, like cars "wrapped" with advertising messages, advertising messages embedded within video games and advertising shown in theaters before movies, have been adopted. The term "media" has expanded to include all means in which consumers interact with brands, referred to as "contacts." This contact explosion forces media practitioners to have an in-depth understanding of how consumers interact with media and the environment in which the message is placed.

During this same period, the unbundling of media services from advertising agencies has given the discipline

autonomy and a stronger, louder voice. However, the separation has distanced media even further from the consumer and creative strategies created by agency account planners and creative directors respectively. In response, creative agencies have begun hiring media specialists to keep them informed of the continuously evolving media landscape and to ensure their future role in communication planning (Darby, 2003). Both media and creative agencies alike are acknowledging the increased necessity of the other's discipline to engage consumers, and the role media will play in the communication process.

Cultural Change

Historically, media agencies have not been known for their unbounded creativity. The advertising community only first recognized the notion of "creative media" in 1999 when the first Media Lions were awarded at the International Advertising Festival in Cannes (*Advertising Age Special Report*, 1999). For media agencies to evolve and become more valued as communication partners, media professionals need to become more active participants in the entire communication planning process and augment their current talent, tools and pro. The contact strategy, driven by consumer insight instead of data and facts, must have a more direct influence on the brand and creative strategies, rather than be a "consequence of" the creative brief (Elms, 1994). This shift will not be easy.

Answering the Call: Context Planning

Many media agencies have answered the call to step up their game strategically and creatively. Most of the large, global media agencies have created units or disciplines dedicated to uncovering consumer insights and generating non-traditional media solutions. Starcom MediaVest (SMG), *Advertising Age's* 2004 Media Agency of the Year, has

developed consumer context planning that works hand-in-hand with its strategic planning and investment teams. Originally conceived in 1989 by current SMG chief executive officer Jack Klues, consumer context planning became a reality in the agency's successful \$2.9 billion pitch for the General Motors (GM) media-planning assignment in 2000. Consumer context planners, as they are called, "provide the essential link between the consumer's experience with the advertisers' brand and the various ways the consumer chooses to receive commercial messages about them" (Klues, 2004).

Another global media agency, Universal McCann has a team of strategists called "communication architects," and experimented with employing its own full-time agency creative director to work with the media planners and buyers. Zenith Optimedia (Zenith Optimedia, 2004) and Initiative Media (Initiative Media, 2004) have incorporated "channel planning;" and Mindshare (Mindshare, 2004) generates ideas for its clients in its WOW Factory (Universal McCann, 2004). Media professionals see the viability of context planning, channel planning or communication architecture to help advertisers navigate the current and future state of media in the United States. When properly executed and integrated into communication planning, it allows for more effective media and messaging strategies.

Like an account planner, the role of the context planner is to represent the subject of interest from the consumer's perspective, and to have a "strong allegiance" to the brand. Account planning's end deliverable is to determine, "what the brand should say about itself and why." Whereas, context planning focuses on the optimal environment for delivering such messages, answering "what is the most engaging way to connect with consumers, and how will it be achieved" (O'Brien, 2004).

SMG's consumer context planners ground the media plans in consumer insight, help diversify the contact mix,

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inspire creative media solutions and maintain the integrity of the both the brand and campaign idea in the media plans. They can create synergy between the message and the medium by providing the framework for the media plan and an in-depth understanding of the creative side (Franklin, 2004).

Specifically they are responsible for identifying fertile media space that directs the development of the media, and in many instances the communications plan. Too often the media strategy focuses solely on vehicle selection: “Should we buy TV, radio or digital media?” Context planning injects a consumer strategy into the media planning and buying process that sets the course for media engagement. Although not a prerequisite for context planners, those with account planning backgrounds are able to leverage their experience in consumer insight and creative development, which includes branding and messaging strategies. Similar to how account planning was used to advance the strategic capabilities of advertising agencies, media agencies can expand and re-position their skill set with context planning.

For example, advertising agency Chiat/Day used account planning to help create breakthrough campaigns and gained notoriety for their strategic prowess. Within nine years of the account planning-inspired Apple Macintosh “1984” campaign (Newman, 1998), Chiat/Day went from a \$50 million to a \$650 million agency. They had an 80 percent new business success rate, which was driven strategically rather than by a traditional creative pitch (Campaign, 1989). Because context planning must be quantifiable and actionable, it has the potential to have even more of an impact than account planning did when it first emerged.

A Case for Context Planning

The Coca-Cola Company

David Raines, the vice president of integrated communications at The Coca-Cola Company, embraced the concept of having one of SMG’s first context planners on his account two years ago. He believes that context planning is beginning to fill a void by helping his team look at the “media world through the eyes of the consumer, moving

beyond reach and frequency” (Gough, 2004). Due to the “complexity of today’s communication spectrum,” Raines regularly explores new “connection” approaches. Context planning is being used by The Coca-Cola Company to better understand how people consume media and their passions. “It all starts with people — the relationship people have with our brands, media and their passions is what is important. They are continuously filtering through messages, and only those connections that really matter to people will get through. Most, even if they are good, will get pushed aside because people simply do not have enough time to deal with every message. By producing a richer insight, we can potentially make more relevant connections. That is why it is important to understand media context, helping us attach this [can of Coke] to people in a meaningful way. Otherwise, it [the medium and the message] is irrelevant, just another bit of noise” (Raines, 2004).

An example that Raines cites as a context-planning success is last year’s Diet Coke “Do What Feels Good” weekend movie festival. The business challenge was to drive greater awareness and to build leadership for Diet Coke despite the category’s top competitor, Diet Pepsi, spending three times as much in media as Diet Coke. The SMG team uncovered that the Diet Coke consumer experiences a sense of nostalgia when movies of their youth, like *Grease* and *The Breakfast Club*, become new classics. The reliving of these “feel good” stories helps them feel younger and more vibrant — the same feeling that drinking a Diet Coke elicits.

By understanding the relationship consumers have with movies, the planning team was able to create an exclusive media target property and brand experience, “The Diet Coke/ TNT Feel Good Weekend Movie Festival” in conjunction with the TNT cable network. SMG handpicked eight “classic” cult films from Turner’s extensive library based upon their intimate knowledge of the Diet Coke target consumer. For eight weeks, viewers of the “Feel Good” festival were invited to register via DietCoke.com for an opportunity to win a chance to perform cherished scenes and songs from their favorite classic films. The winners’ performances were televised during three-minute vignette intermissions while

the filmed played on TNT.

The “Feel Good” Weekend Movie Festival is an example of the power of aligning the creative message and the TV medium. The “Feel Good” creative message was strengthened with its association with one of the consumers’ core passions, in addition to bringing to life what resonates with consumers emotionally when it comes to the Diet Coke brand. During the festival’s eight-week run, key communication values and performance measures known to drive Diet Coke volume increased by 10 percent. Additionally, the focused approach allowed Diet Coke to better leverage its limited budget while delivering an engaging and meaningful consumer experience. Diet Coke experienced a six percent net gain on key brand attributes when compared to Diet Pepsi (Watson, 2003).

For Raines and other progressive advertisers, current media standards of success-exposure and awareness-will become the starting point. “How many people did we reach?” will be replaced with “how did we make consumers feel?” allowing us to have the greatest impact on consumer perceptions, and ultimately to favorably change their behavior (Raines, 2004).

Instituting Context Planning

Overcoming the Barriers

For context planning to become a driving force in media planning and buying, it will require an overhaul of the current process. Like the creative process, media planning must begin with an in-depth understanding of “what people are interested in, and how they connect with the medium” before the plan architecture is developed (Raines, 2004). It will also involve the development of new relationships, skills and tools to enable media professionals to deliver these more robust plans.

“Siloed” thinking will be replaced with evolved partnerships with the creative agency, brand management and corporate integrated communication (public relations, direct, entertainment and sports marketing) teams. To become a more valued partner, many media professionals will need to undergo account-planning training to understand how to properly leverage consumer intelligence in their work. While not impossible, such an openness to explore new ways of

thinking and working could be a challenge to seasoned practitioners.

Currently, most media agencies and corporate research departments have created tools and models that focus primarily on the impact of TV advertising (e.g., marketing mix modeling). Context planning requires a more holistic understanding of all contacts, traditional mass media and non-traditional contacts — ways that consumers interact with brands. There are no syndicated sources or services available that provide a comparable quantitative assessment of these contacts. In fact, there are few media planning and investment tools that are commonly used and trusted that go beyond media awareness and usage.

The media industry will need to overcome their two greatest barriers to realizing the full potential of context planning — the lack of contextual data available and the lack of proven methodologies for measurement (Raines, 2004; Klues, 2004). Most of the data and tools currently used are numerically driven, but they are unable to provide qualitative contextual insight. Media agencies overly rely on Mediamark Research Inc.’s (MRI) data to provide demographic consumer information. This must be supplemented with other methods to provide deeper contextual insights. Therefore, much of the data needed by context planners must be collected with primary research. This can be costly, but it is necessary for context planning to be effective.

The Human Touch

GM, one the largest advertisers in the United States, has proven their commitment to context planning by heavily investing in primary research to understand the tri-lateral relationship between consumers, media and brands. GM Planworks, a division of SMG dedicated solely to media planning for GM, pioneered SMG’s consumer context planning discipline in 2000 under the tutelage of former account planning executive Jana O’Brien. Both SMG and GM believed that context planning could “unlock insights” regarding media behavior and take media research and planning to unprecedented heights (Klues, 2004). By conducting consumer-driven research, instead of relying

solely on industry standards such as MRI and Nielsen, O'Brien is leading GM Planworks to "humanize a previously inhuman discipline by creating excitement for media as a marketing tool" (O'Brien, 2004).

For example, when GM and Hummer's parent company, AM General, launched the H2 large luxury sports utility vehicle in 2002, GM Planworks anchored the communication strategy and tactics in insights gleaned from qualitative media research. The team conducted a Media Pathways study, one of SMG's primary research tools, to provide in-depth qualitative understanding of the linkage between the consumers' media habits, their affluent lifestyle and their connection to the new H2.

The study uncovered that the primary target's habitual use of media was as a financial and business survival tool. It was also uncovered that this target market had a propensity toward strong personalities. These insights led to the development of a frequency-oriented media plan that intercepted members of the primary target market during their daily routines. Tailored creative messages were placed in "survival media," such as CNN, *The Wall Street Journal* and *BusinessWeek*. More precisely, messaging was placed during *Larry King Live* and the *Bill O'Reilly Show*, shows with two of TV's most provocative personalities (Taylor, 2003).

The Next Frontier

Holistic Contact Planning

While many advertisers are using both traditional and non-traditional contacts, media agencies must often limit their investments to non-traditional contacts because of the lack of verifiable data to support their usage. Context planning, with its goal of thoroughly understanding the media environment, sets the foundation for a more holistic contact plan that would likely result in a more creative and engaging media plan. Contact planning, which is "connections" driven (what contact for which audience) is an obtainable goal for media agencies, if the proper measurement tools are implemented (Franklin, 2004).

One such tool being used by context planners at SMG that enables contact planning is a Market Contact Audit

(MCA). MCA measures how consumers interact with brands across a diverse group of traditional and non-traditional contacts. The objective is to determine how consumers perceive the contact's ability to create a relevant brand experience, or interaction, which has been proven to be directly correlated to market share. For example, the tool allows for marketers to use "brand-experience points" as a common currency to compare the influence of an assortment of brand contacts, like television ads, mentions of brands in song lyrics and word of mouth. Integration, the company that created the tool, has conducted over 700 studies globally and found that brand experience share consistently and significantly correlates to market share (Integration, 2002). Thus, context planners are using MCA to help develop and evaluate integrated marketing communication programs with the end goal of growing sales.

There is little doubt that media agencies can deliver upon contact planning assuming that the right tools are in place. The challenge will be on the client side in many organizations where different departments with multiple decision-makers own the budgets. Like integrated marketing communications, holistic contact planning requires an organizational structure that promotes integration among cross-functional teams.

Communication Planning

There are mixed opinions regarding whether media agencies can become the key drivers of communication planning. Communication planning tends to be perceived as a creative agency function as it focuses on message delivery — "what content for which audience" (Franklin, 2004). Agreeably, media professionals will have to become much more knowledgeable about the brand planning and creative processes, in addition to mastering contact planning, to lead communication planning. However, communication planning is far more than messaging and targeting strategies. It requires an understanding of how to tactically engage consumers in the marketplace. Jack Klues from SMG believes that media agencies can achieve this and that context planning is necessary to make it happen.

"I believe it is the 'Manifest Destiny' of the media agency

to act as tomorrow's communications architects and context planners are critical to our ability to realize it. Without the insightful leadership of the context planners, the client will not receive the proper leadership and objectivity they demand in creating truly integrated and solution-neutral plans" (Klues, 2004).

Arguably, the account planner at the creative agency could play a role in context planning if they could equally balance their time between brand planning, creative development and media-context planning. However, this would also be problematic for creative agencies without in-house media services, as the account planner would need to spend significant amount of time working with the media team. Media agencies benefit greatly from context planners whose sole responsibility is helping innovate the end product.

The Agency of the Future

What will matter most in the future will be leveraging consumer insight to create ideas that make long-lasting connections between consumers and brands. Context planning provides media agencies with the acuity outside of traditional media to bring these organizations a step closer to their future (Klues, 2004). When implemented properly, context planning can be an external champion of client-led integrated marketing communications initiatives, as well as provide strategic and creative support for program development.

By integrating the consumer into the media-planning process and focusing on developing creative media solutions, media agencies will undoubtedly improve their product, creating greater value for their clients. Focusing on consumers and ideas will also help differentiate their organizations and drive the shift from traditional media planning to holistic context and communication. Media practitioners will be forced to step outside of their comfort zones and become more intimately involved with consumer and cultural insight, brand-building and advertising. Media can be a creative force that connects consumers with brands by creating brand experiences that tap into their passions and dreams. Now is the time for media agencies to seize the possibilities.

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