

IS MARKETING READY FOR DIGITAL?

PRANESH MISRA 04/03/2019

"We rarely watch TV these days, we have shifted to the mobile phone", said a middle class school teacher during my recent consumer home visits at Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

I noticed a Samsung TV set in her living room, wondering why it was there, in that case? "Oh, we switch it on only when we have a group of visitors in our house. But that happens occasionally - maybe just once or twice a month. Oh, at times we play cartoon channel for my toddler".

It was the same story, home after home. Television set seemed to be turning into a white elephant.

So, what has replaced the TV?

"For news, we rely on #Facebook, as it is more authentic than the propaganda we get on TV. And for entertainment, there is #YouTube". Both these digital publishers have customized local language content for Cambodia. Cheap mobile data tariff (US \$2 per month for unlimited access to Facebook and YouTube) and inexpensive Chinese mobile sets have driven this exodus from TV to the small screen.

These days, one cannot help but notice the deep attachment between humans and their mobile phones. Shopkeepers, restaurant owners, taxi drivers, diners, friends, street vendors and their customers - everyone seem engrossed with their mobiles. People meet, visit each other, but spend bulk of that time interacting with their mobiles.

Mobiles are the new "windows to the world". And it has already beginning to replace the TV. Even in a developing market like Cambodia. No surprises, therefore, that digital would account for about half of global advertising spend next year. The question is, is the marketing community ready for this transformation?

Products go through their life cycles. So do media channels.

Before the advent of private TV channels in India in the 1990's, cinema was the dominant mode of entertainment. All advertising was created for cinema first, and then adapted to TV. The cinema ad format was typically a 100 feet reel, that lasted about 66 seconds.

Within less than a decade, TV upstaged Cinema as the primary medium. Marketing community soon discovered that ads adapted from cinema were no longer as effective, as there were intrinsic differences in the media consumption behavior. Cinema was a big screen at a distance, while TV was in the consumer's home. Cinema had scale effect, while TV was more intimate.

Advertising in Cinema medium did not interrupt: ads were shown either just before the start of the movie or during the intervals. TV technology provided greater flexibility for frequent ad breaks that could interrupt the program as often as the channel owner wanted to. If the ad break was too long, it created irritation and avoidance. And, longer ads attracted greater irritation value. As a result, TV ad length steadily kept coming down from 60 seconds to 30, 20, 15 and 10 seconds.

Ad creative folk during the cinema era were good at telling stories in 60 seconds. How can you communicate the same story in 10 seconds? New story-telling skills had to be learnt. Consumer interactions led to the realization that the "consumer gets it", you don't have to spell out each part of the story, scene by scene. Viewers were getting more "ad literate" and could fill in the blanks themselves. So, edits could be quicker and sharper. New tricks had to be learnt to create ad content for specially for TV medium, and it worked!

As we are moving from TV to digital, history is repeating itself. Consumers' digital experience is dramatically different from TV. Digital viewer have even shorter attention span. She is not sitting in one place. She has many more options to multi-task. Content consumption has become a purely personal experience, as it is mostly being accessed via the smartphone. And digital provides opportunity for immediate call to action, which can be tracked.

So, how do we get through to the consumer in this changed digital landscape? Newer tricks are being learnt, and many more are waiting to be discovered. The lazy way out of chopping a 15 second TV ad to a 5 second YouTube video may not work effectively in the future.

Digital viewers have their virtual remote that allows them to "Skip the ad in 3 seconds". When the ad is running, are they focusing on the content or just waiting to click the skip button the next second? How can we communicate effectively with her, if she is just interested in getting back to what she was doing? And, can we really tell our story in 3 seconds? How do we ensure that our brand name and message gets remembered, as the video length keep coming down?

How effective are endorsements by digital influencers? Do digital audiences consider them more credible than the celebrity sportsmen and actors?

Contextual advertising and programmatic buying are the new possibilities that have opened up. But, what is the best way to leverage the power of these handles?

Do dynamic banners work better than static ones? Or do they cause more irritation, particularly on the small smartphone screen?

Typically, digital media needs multitude of ad communication elements - highly customized for each micro-segment or search context. How do we develop research methods to identify the ones that really work? Our traditional TVC testing protocols may not suitable, so new ones are

being developed. This is just the start of this journey.

Marketing is seeking answers to these questions, so that they can efficiently and effectively navigate their brands in this digital ocean. Life is getting truly interesting for market research and consumer insights professionals, as we embrace this new digital world.

Folks at #Brandscapes have been exploring these questions, and have developed a deep understanding of digital communication and commerce. They are helping clients map their brand journeys in the new #omnichannel scenario. This is just the beginning of a new journey.

There is a whole lot more to do. A lot to unlearn, and re-learn. The future is exciting.