



Info glut changes rules for marketing

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By Kenneth Mays

As people are increasingly swamped with information, getting your message across and to the right people is becoming a more and more difficult task.

It's time to update an old marketing maxim. You know, the one that goes: "I know that half my advertising dollars are wasted; the trouble is, I don't know which half."

Chances are, you're wasting much more than half. Niall FitzGerald, chairman of Unilever, one of the world's largest advertisers, recently put the figure at 90 percent. Pointing to the explosion of new technology and new information channels, he concluded, "Simple, one-way mass communication has its best and biggest days behind it."

Richard Fizdale, chairman of ad agency giant Leo Burnett, seems to agree. "Television, once the greatest mass communication vehicle, is impotent," he wrote recently.

Not many years ago, ad agencies earned a 15 percent commission on their clients' media dollars, no questions asked. Today, plenty of questions are being asked. Ford and GM have scrapped the commission system for their agencies. Last fall, Procter & Gamble announced it would shift from commissions to a sales-based formula. A P&G spokesperson said this would "encourage more holistic marketing plans"—that is, plans that do not depend on traditional mass media.

Businesspeople and marketing professions can debate the implications of these changes, but as a consumer, you know why it's happening. You're inundated with marketing messages. They're in your mailbox and inbox, on your computer screen, and on "public" radio. Twenty years ago it was estimated that the average U.S. adult was exposed to 700 commercial messages each day. Today, the estimate is 3,000.

No wonder advertising doesn't work as well as it used to. The solution for many advertisers? Run more ads. Or take extraordinary creative risks. Portland ad agency Wieden & Kennedy, dropped \$75 million in billings last year when Nike slashed its ad budgets. Now they've come out with a controversial TV spot featuring maimed athletes, which *Newsweek* calls "a compelling example of what it takes to get people's attention in an age when multitasking is a way of life, and viewers are bombarded with enough ads every day to crash a hard drive."

Cutting through the clutter

This tough, new marketing environment is not just a problem for big, traditional advertisers. It affects small companies, technology start-ups, business-to-business marketers, restaurants, local retailers—everyone who has to get people's attention to make a sale. You may not have created the problem, but now you have to deal with it. So the two big questions are: What sort of market-

ing programs work in this new environment? And how do you plan them?

The type of programs that work take advantage of an interesting irony: Clutter is not only a problem for you, it's a problem for your prospects. They're confused by all the choices and baffled by conflicting promotional claims. Before you try to sell them a product, offer them some help with their information problem. If it's objective, valuable help, they'll appreciate you for it—and you'll have started a two-way relationship you can manage to your mutual benefit.

The Internet provides a convenient and cheap way to offer prospects useful information. Web users say researching purchase decisions is their second most common online activity, outranked only by email. But don't assume the web is the only way: depending on the product, people may prefer information in the mail, at a seminar, from a colleague, or an a product package.

As the big advertisers are finding out, consumers have less time for the usual ads in the first place. But, they will let in relevant information they feel they can trust. That's the insight behind the unconventional campaigns that offer competitive comparisons where the sponsor doesn't always win.

Discover and deliver your message

How do you plan an effective marketing effort in this new world of attention deficit consumers?

There are many talented people who create ads; write press releases; design logos, brochures, and packaging; and build websites. Their talents are not obsolete. In today's environment, we need people who can communicate clearly and with impact more than ever. However, their efforts will fail if you cannot integrate them into a new kind of plan. And the new marketing environment demands a more complete set of planning skills.

- Collect and interpret marketing data and consumer research to determine which consumers are most important to your company, and what your company does that is most important to these consumers.
- Know the strengths and weaknesses of various media, but don't be biased—either by tradition or by how the folks at your outside agency make money. If consumers prefer to get information about your product category from their mothers, then you must figure out how to deliver your message via mothers.
- Integrate your communications program with a relationship management program, and do it in a sequence that turns prospects into customers and customers into loyal patrons who rave about your

company to their friends (we call this process messages that move relationships). This requires a certain savvy about not only marketing communications but also databases and networks.

- Be able to identify and match specialist—whether marketing service firms or freelancers—to projects. Today these specialists are being asked to deliver accountability as well as creativity.

Distracted consumers now are demanding more from marketing messages. This trend will continue, demolishing many cherished marketing notions along the way. In order to avoid wasting 90 percent of your promotional budget, you'll need to educate yourself. A good place to start would be Seth Godin's excellent new book, *Permission Marketing* (you can get the first few chapters free at www.permission.com).

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