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Attention, Online Video Reps: Your Medium Is NOT The Message -- The Message Is

by Alan Schulman, Monday, Mar 5, 2007 12:30 PM ET

WHY IS IT THAT, WHEN it comes to online video, the last thing buyers and sellers seem to want to factor into their performance dialogue is the role of the creative. My guess is, it's because they're completely removed from it. So typically, it comes down to, "We've got a video window, you can fill it, here's how efficiently it will reach your target and here's the 9 things we can tell you about playback." I guess, as a seller, if you don't have any control over the message and you're simply selling video inventory, that should suffice -- your medium *is* the sales message. And if you're an agency buyer, well, you're rarely sure whether you've even got creative, at what lengths, and how many executions you have to avoid frequency burnout so, "sounds good - let me look into it and I'll get back to you."

Being completely removed from the creative process has to be frustrating for both parties concerned, yet, as with most media relationships, the conversation keeps going, CPMs are negotiated, lunches are had, metrics, optimization, and targeting is discussed, and hopefully success criteria are defined -- too often, without any consideration for whether the creative is any good. Is it compelling? What was the recall? "Can we optimize the video message? Are you kidding? Optimize the video? You mean re-shoot or re-cut the commercial? Wait -- it's moot, they already tested the creative for TV in animatic form and it scored really well, so we're cool. We already measured the message... let's just focus on the medium, OK?"

Not OK. The online medium is *not* the message. The online message is the message!



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From a creative standpoint, the online video environment, whether for information or entertainment, contextual commercial or content distributor, is a very different medium to create for -- not just deploy in. Yet, like the radio sponsorship formats that suddenly became the model for TV ads in the mid-'50s, most online video sellers are content to carry on accepting :30 TV spots and cut down :15 TV spots to fill video pre- and post-roll inventory that have nothing to do with the content the viewer just clicked on. So what, they say. "Most TV spots have no contextual relationship to the TV programming whose breaks they run in either -- so what have we done differently?" Not much, except that, once again, we've effectively extracted creative performance from media performance --not to mention physically unbundling the agencies that measure them as well. So where are we... oh yeah, measuring engagement!

As we await commercial ratings to finally arrive in television, we need to be careful not to get so carried away with online video CPMs, user-generated video content opportunities, platform performance and playback unit efficiencies that we forget to factor in what effect the actual creative message itself has on overall performance. Remember, the two buildings may be mutually exclusive -- and from the sound of the AAAA's media barons, they wish to keep it that way. But the two metrics are not. With all due respect to Marshall McLuhan, let's remember that the online medium is NOT the online message --and to only consider the performance of one without factoring in the other flies in the face of our desire to believably replace impressions with an engagement metric.

My advice? If you're an agency media person, grab your creative partners by the hand and try to get on the same page -- because for now, it doesn't look like you'll ever be in the same building. If you're an agency creative person, say hello to your friendly neighborhood interactive media planner -- you just might find what we have, and that together, the two of us can help define real engagement for both the medium AND the message.

Alan Schulman is Executive Creative Director of imc², where he is responsible for the creative strategy and execution of digital marketing campaigns. Imc² works with some of the most well-known companies and brands, including Procter & Gamble, The Coca-Cola Company, Johnson & Johnson and Nestl .

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