Media Planning
Concepts and Experiences

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Overview

Section I

Concepts

1. Scientific Principles of Media Planning
   Erwin Ephron

2. Media Planning Approaches
   Yujiao Cheung

3. Advertising Media
   Haiyong Li

4. Activating Accelerating Media Accountability
   Andre Nair and Vikram Sakhija

5. Size is Not as Important as it is Made Out to Be
   Interview with Viveat Susan Pinto

6. Media Planning in an Increasingly Sentient and Complicated World
   Joan Marques

Section II

Models

7. The Recency Model for Media Planning
   Erwin Ephron and Melissa Heath

8. Media Neutral Planning: Just Today's Buzz Word or a Genuine New World Order
   Tina Kaye
   Young-Bean Song

10. Strategic Media Planning
    V Partha Sarathy

11. New Directions in Media Strategy
    Francisco J Perez-Latre

SECTION III

EXPERIENCES

12. The Evolution in Media Planning
    Joan Marques

13. Media Specialists – Global Experiences
    D Gayatri

14. A Case for the Specialists
    Rina Chandran

15. Political Media Buying: A Brief Guide
    Tobie Berkovitz

16. Media Planning for Television
    Shalini Govindan

17. On the Economics of Media Diversity
    C P Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh

18. Forecasting Reach, Frequency & GRPs on the Internet
    John Chandler-Pepelnjak

• Bibliography
• Glossary
• Index
New Directions in Media Strategy

Francisco J Perez-Latre

The need to foster a closer working relationship between account planners and media planners, and create a true strategic center to craft a meaningful communication strategy is the need of the day. The skills needed to attain a thorough knowledge of media and consumer markets are related to creative problem solving. Efforts have been made to explore new trends in media strategy, media scheduling, media negotiation and buying, and media audience. The article also quotes the insights of Krugmann’s Three-hit theory, Ephron’s Recency theory, etc., on various issues in media planning.

The Field

Media planning consists of a series of decisions made to answer the question, “What are the best means of delivering advertising to prospective purchasers of my brand or service?” (Sissors and Bumba, 1996, 5). Media planning today can be viewed as “The process of designing a course of action that shows how advertising time and space will be used to contribute to the achievement of advertising and marketing objectives, (Barban, Cristol and Kopec, 1993, 2).
Therefore, media planning concerns itself with the number of prospects that should be reached, their demographic and psychographic profiles and the adequate media and vehicles to place ads.

Frequency is another key question in the field. Planners try to decide on how many times should prospects see an ad in order to make the commercial communication effective. Tactically, frequency translates into different levels of advertising pressure at different times. Such scheduling tactics are called continuity, pulsing, flighting, blinkering and bursting. Advertising pressure in terms of expenditure has to take into consideration budget allocation for different media and the specific months for the message to appear. As a matter of fact, different seasons along the year present different levels of media audiences and product consumption that have to be considered when planning is conceived.

Media landscape is now defined by media fragmentation and clutter. In this situation, deciding which media is best for an advertising campaign has become an increasingly difficult task. Advertising agencies, media buying services and advertisers have to make their choice of media and vehicles (specific programs in TV and radio, titles for dailies and magazines). Such a decision has geographic boundaries that influence the kind of media markets that have to be analyzed: local, regional, national, multinational or global markets.

Media decision-making is also further complicated because traditional media like newspapers, magazines, television, cinema, outdoor, radio and the Internet have to be strategically thought in conjunction with nontraditional media like public relations, direct marketing, sales promotion and sponsoring.

New technologies and practices will highlight interaction among consumers. In this integrated media world, media is evolving into message delivery systems. Furthermore, deep audience analysis has to be added to mere media scheduling. This puts the media function in relationship with the account planning paradigm.

Specializations

Media Strategy. In media planning there is a media strategy that works as an instrument in coordination with the overall marketing strategy orchestra. It comes from a situation analysis of the brand; its strengths and weaknesses. It takes into account the competitor’s share of voice, their media choices and the patterns of media choice in the product or service category. It has long been thought that advertisers lend media their prestige placing some messages in their pages or in their advertising time. Media planning serves to build brands (New, 1999). The media choice is also a consequence of careful consideration of the creative message to be delivered. Some media are better than others to communicate certain ideas. This also needs to be considered when choosing among different types of media.

Media Scheduling. Media Strategy leads to a media schedule where the different ads are set in certain time slots and repeated a number of times over the campaign duration, following some of the above mentioned scheduling tactics.

Media Negotiation and Buying. Media departments have the responsibility to buy media space and time, get volume discounts if possible and negotiate with media the possible deals. That requires negotiation skills in media departments and media buying services. The media companies’ consolidation and concentration on buying power on the hands of agency coalitions or media buying services allow more relevant deals for media time and space. Costs set in advertising rates by media have to be considered at this point. It is also part of the media function to make sure that the media plan was aired by broadcast media or distributed in print exactly as it was planned by advertisers and agencies.

Media Market Analysis. Media planning works to deliver advertising messages in a specific media landscape. The media specialist needs to be very knowledgeable in the particular situation of local, national, multinational and global media markets and the diverse influence that each of the media exerts in a particular location have and their respective abilities. Different media qualities have to be judged and some wisdom is needed on every vehicle used. The media specialist needs to be able to understand audience figures and put them in a historical perspective to make the necessary decisions regarding every vehicle.

Media Audience Analysis. The consumer needs also to be studied in this regard. Certainly, different product and service prospects have different media behaviors. As Bogart (1996) said media and messages have to be matched with markets and motivations. The wealth of demographic data available makes this task easier. In
the media landscape we have very different patterns of media use and consumption regarding age, sex, occupation, income or geography. As advertising messages are so closely linked to those variables a thorough understanding of how they influence media choice and consumption is also needed.

Key Topics

Advertising Exposure, Frequency and Repetition

As Gensch (1970: 220) explained, "the concepts of exposure and perception are really quite different. An exposure is simply an opportunity to perceive. Perception means that some cognitive action has been taken by the individual". Therefore, exposure to an advertising message is a hypothesis that can be considered scientific only with a degree of effort. Nuttall (1962: 24) found out that of the British housewives classified as viewers of a program only about 30% were solely viewing during the commercial, with the remaining engaged in some other activity, not necessarily even in the same room. Such are real viewing conditions for commercials.

Frequency is the number of times a message needs to be repeated in order to deserve the public's attention. This concept was already present in the very beginning of advertising research and teaching (Dill Scott: 1904, Zielske: 1959 and Krugman: 1972, among others). Historically speaking, there have been roughly two main ways of looking at this topic. The first school of thought considers that the basic psychology behind an ad is the psychology of repetition. Advertising, therefore, becomes similar to education, where ideas are repeated to be remembered more easily. The second school of thought maintains that a bright ad is perceived as brilliant the first time it is shown. Just like in the news, repetition of the ad causes it to lose its flavor and originality. The best answer to this research question may be found somewhere in between. Certainly, too much repetition could become a problem for a brand: an excess of opportunities to see could kill good creativity (Gullen, 1996: 13).

The debate on effective frequency was reopened in the '90s. From the ground breaking work of such authors as Krugman (1972), Naples (1979), McDonald (1979), Bogart (1995) and Jones (1995), a number of authors have explored the topic. Krugman's "three-hit theory" had a profound impact on media planning practice. According to that theory, advertising is understood when the audience faces it three times. But today's exposure is a different reality from that of the early 70's. Exposure is now really a working hypothesis. Advertising message reception is difficult. There is increasing media fragmentation and clutter and advertising is evaded by zapping. When Krugman built his theory the media landscape was less competitive. In the final analysis, it seems that he was not thinking in media planning terms, but in psychological terms. Audience message learning has to cover three stages: curiosity, acknowledgement and decision. Covering such stages might require the message to be aired more than three times.

Recently Ephron (1997: 37) has developed the recency planning theory. Considering that advertising is effective short-term, underlines the "newsworthiness" of advertising and reaches the conclusion that one impact could be enough. In his opinion, advertising effects are mainly felt in brand choice. Therefore, the goal would be to make the advertising contact as close to the buying experience as possible. The goal is not audience learning but brand recall. As advertising loses its effect as time goes by, the public should be reached when they are about to buy. Jones (1995) sums up this decreasing curve of advertising effects calling it Short-term Advertising Effects (STAS).

It seems that thinking about whether an absolutely effective frequency really exists could be a mistake. Bogart (1995: 32) considers that the key question is not the number of times a message is repeated but whether it is relevant and meaningful for audiences. Repetition is dependent on a number of variables: the persuasive quality of a message, the public's familiarity with the brand, the brand's history and reputation, the advertising budget and the competitors' actions, among others. Well-known brand ads are better recalled than lesser known brands. It seems therefore an error to believe that there is an optimum degree of frequency regardless of those aspects.

Even though a relationship between advertising weight (advertising overall expenditures and its repetition) and message recall does exist, it is not a scientific and direct one, because messages have different creativity levels and the brands' knowledge by the consumer is diverse. It is worthwhile to repeat a good ad, but repeating a bad ad can really be harmful.
Questions Related to Audience Media Research

Information about behavior and free decision-making processes is still relatively scarce. Besides, media research is often the subject of serious questioning and critical scrutiny. After all, we are analyzing advertising audiences that are potential, and not actually real. Knowledge is based on what people say in surveys about their media use or on the limited number of people who compose the meter panel. Current quantitative measures are similar to those “verbal narcotics”, described long ago by Priemer (1989).

Conclusions from audience research are largely based in the capacity of people to remember what they watched, listened or read. Such a foundation is fragile. A significant amount of audience research is nurtured by audience declaration surveys. Thus, behavior with media is not properly analyzed. We look to what people say about their media behavior, which is probably, at least to some extent, somewhat different from their real media behavior.

Quantitative Variables: Audience-related and Cost-related

The dominant culture in media planning considers communication as a process in which audiences can be easily reduced into tight quantitative blocks, expressed in terms like rating, share, GRPs, impressions, impact and the like. Behind that is a notion of human behavior as easily defined in terms of a stimulus response type of relationship, which is distant from principle that communication is a dialogue. Persons have a unique ability for empathy and they like to discover meaning in the things they do and see.

Advertising researchers need to understand those learning and perception processes that allow audiences to act as gatekeepers, widening the scope of their personal experiences. Bogart (1996: 311-314) writes about inspiration, not computation: “because the mass media are so largely supported by advertising, they cannot help being shaped by the kinds of judgments and assumptions that advertisers make. As long as many of these assumptions rest (as I have tried to demonstrate they do) on the crude mechanistic notion of communication as a series of events, advertising decision-makers will be mainly concerned with numbers rather than with meaning. And the search for numbers – for big, demonstrable, measurable numbers – inevitably must be reflected in the attitudes of those who operate the mass media for profit (...) Communication is a process not a thing. It involves people, not material objects. It embodies, in even its most trivial aspects, the total outlook, expectations, and values of the protagonists”.

As a matter of fact, needs, emotions, interests and lifestyles do not seem to be easily reduced into simple impressions or impacts. The concern seems to be reaching gross audience numbers, rather than the meanings and consequences of messages to the audiences and the media. The key to success lies with quality and not quantity. In media planning we tend to be protected by the hypothetical security of numbers used to describe audiences. However, in such an approach content evaluation is carefully avoided.

The analysis of media environments has a logical consequence: contents need be judged. Aside from this, the need to consider message environments is crucial because creative elements interact with media contents to serve or damage advertising messages. Thus, in the process they also affect both advertisers and consumers. The emphasis in quantitative audience research has diverted attention from more relevant issues like the different intensities of watching, listening or reading experiences. The analysis has been reduced to figures that apparently bring with them more potential exposure.

Media research has allowed us to improve knowledge of audiences, circulation, use and “consumption” of media and their publics. The problem is not statistical analysis, in itself but the way in which its conclusions are thought of and understood. Data on audiences seem to be interpreted as a goal in themselves, when in reality they are just valuable information. Planning decisions should study figures according to quality parameters. Audience and market knowledge improves with a deeper and more historical analysis of data. The goal is to discover data that pay attention to reality before coming to a correct decision. Attention is crucial in making decisions because these are matters of vision.

Data should also come from different sources, not just one, as the limitations that any source has in its analysis should be taken into consideration. Teachers and planners should therefore not transfer their responsibility in evaluating which medium or vehicles are better. A responsible decision cannot be taken if mere audience counts are the key consideration.
In media planning, advertising costs need to be estimated. Advertising rates are not able to distinguish a brilliant ad from a poor ad. However, advertising costs influence all the other variables because every advertising action is limited by its budget. It seems convenient to reach the highest possible audience or, at least, the more adequate audience in the less expensive way. Such a need gave rise to the Cost Per Thousand (CPT) or Cost Per Rating Point (CPRP), which allows to value relative prices of media audiences, evaluating its size in relation to the established advertising rates.

**Message Delivery Systems and Qualitative Decision-making**

When planners move from mere observation to analyzing deep communication effects they learn to appreciate creative work better. This is relevant because creative work is at the very core of persuasive communication activities. On the other hand, planners also have to discover new insights about the audience. Bechelloni (1998) thinks that we need to “prefigure audiences” to know the extent of how they understand meaning, not just as easily predictable subjects. Planners should realize that everyone has their own culture and history, along with their own will and ability to choose. As Tilley (2000: 197) has put it, “if we are to improve both the interest and the involvement of consumers in commercial communication, then we need to ensure that whatever we create is of greater relevance to them. To achieve this we need to add to our understanding of the ways in which consumers choose and use their media. We need to put more effort, time and resources into building greater understanding of the attitudes, needs and beliefs of consumers and how they relate to the media they consume. We need to examine more closely the mood and mindset that different consumers experience with different media at different moments. Only armed with a better understanding of this relationship can we hope to break through the wall of indifference to commercial messages that exists amongst consumers. These more qualitative elements are inextricably linked to what consumers see, hear and experience all the time. Their trust, enjoyment, interests and desires are influenced, challenged, reinforced and satisfied on a day-to-day basis by the media around them. And if we are to make the most of the new media environment for commercial communication, then we need to understand and exploit this understanding more fully”.

Any selection requires prudence and a deep knowledge of reality, specifically, of media and audience landscapes. Exposure to ads is just potential. And there is also an enormous fragmentation of media and messages. In such a situation we need planning for uncertainty (Drucker: 1995). Planning for uncertainty is an approach that questions itself about past events that are crucial in analyzing the future. Real innovations are often the consequences of changes that occurred in the past. That is why history is crucial for a media understanding based on quality.

Katz (1995) is an example of the classic paradigm. She thinks that a comprehensive understanding of the advantages and disadvantages that each type of media offers is necessary before deciding which media is best suited to achieve the goals of a given media plan. In her approach, the topics that need to be understood are reach, frequency, exposition’s duration to media, audience implication, degree of clutter, ability to reach the target and cost. But some of Katz’s objectives cannot be reached by classic quantitative measures. A good example of this is audience implication.

Qualitative research takes a different path. Its objective is to form ideas about the attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and behavior of consumers. When these ideas are analyzed and explained creatively, qualitative research findings are deeper and go beyond the surface (Slater: 1998). Qualitative researchers are more concerned with processes that with products or results. They are more interested in unearthing meanings.

Emphasis will be on content selection, elaborating on judgments about the adequacy of media in relation to the messages being transmitted. This research concern is far from new. Gensch (1970: 216) pointed out long ago that qualitative factors do influence media selection: “selection of the most effective television shows, radio programs, magazines, newspapers and other media vehicles to convey a message to a target population has always been more involved than simply selecting the set of media vehicles with the lowest cost-per-thousand. Other factors to be considered include the editorial climate of the vehicle, its prestige, the visual/and or audio qualities in relation to the requirements of the product message, interactions among vehicles, and the social environment in which the audience reads or views the vehicle”.

This therefore does not become a sole media planning task. Rather the media planner becomes an actual content distributor or message deliverer. Therefore
practitioners are set to plan commercial communication using message content as the basis. This in turn better serves advertisers and audiences’ interests. Any quality consideration implies a selection, an evaluation. The act of selecting is an act of deciding which option is better than the rest. Quality can be measured, but the kind of measure is different from exclusively quantitative measures. In increasingly competitive times, some criteria are needed, not just an ability to count. Some patterns to identify quality might be the following:

- History and duration of media over time. In media, as elsewhere, a great brand (the kind of brand a media plan would like to select) cannot be built without a long time span (New, 2000). The foundation year of some great American “umbrella” media brands support this claim: Times Mirror (1881); Dow Jones (1882); Knight-Ridder (1892); Gannett (1906); Time Inc. (1923); Walt Disney (1923); CBS (1926); Twentieth Century Fox (1933); ABC (1941).
- At the same time, capacity for innovation.
- Uniqueness.
- Ability to meet audience needs.
- Ability to meet advertiser’s goals.
- Industry acknowledgement.
- Time dedication by the audience to the vehicle, which allows planners to weigh the intensity and quality of a media experience.
- Social and environmental responsibility, which considers the effects and consequences of communication actions.

Media Planning and IMC: Traditional and Nontraditional Media. Advertising Media Management

The planning judgment is now a judgment on integrated commercial communication. Classic variables such as ratings, shares, GRPs or CPT suffer a crisis of sorts with new media that do not follow conventional patterns. Advertising message environments and their contents are undergoing a transformation period. New information and entertainment technologies like personal computers, video, the Internet, e-mail and digital television are expanding rapidly. That expansion is not likely to be thwarted or slowed down.

These technologies do not necessarily lead to better media quality, but most new developments are characterized by an eagerness to distance media from mass parameters. These innovations have a relevant consequence. Audiences are addressed in ways that are more similar to interpersonal dialogue. Far from simply persuading, they want to convince. Instead of orders, they provide arguments. Beyond imparting simple information, they aspire to communicate. In the final analysis, they want to change the classic broadcaster-message-receiver model. In the so-called “mass communication” framework, a highly deterministic approach was desired in order to control the masses. These masses would have easily predictable behaviors and thus they would be relatively easy to control.

From this transmission paradigm, a participation paradigm seems to be under way. The new framework is based on what could be defined as postmodern dialogue with audiences. Communication brings with it dialogue, mutual understanding and mutual dependence (Grunig; 1992). A bi-directional and symmetrical dialogue takes into consideration the audiences’ initiative. In the wider field of marketing it seems to be a growing consensus. Exchange has already been viewed as crucial for marketing studies for some time now (Bagozzi; 1975). Exchange and dialogue are now key.

Conventional media introduce programs which establish direct relationships with readers, viewers and listeners. These media forms are therefore affected in their contents. The crucial aspects that must be taken into consideration are the quality of the process and the communication elements that go farther: sensitivity to the environment, minorities, and ethical and social responsibility. Planners and their teachers should therefore go beyond simply looking at mere short-term efficiency and results. Instead of sheer communication effectiveness within supposedly mass communication media, communication excellence is sought.

In a world where competition for leisure time and audience interests has increased exponentially, the very notion of mass communication is now something placed in question. This kind of a crisis has effects which necessarily should influence the teaching of traditional media planning measures which are concerned
merely with audience size, reach and frequency. Judging media just by the old system seems to be obsolete. In the new digital, consumer centered paradigm, frequency and reach have been relegated into a minor role. Thus, the decision is largely a decision on integrated communications, which takes into account the different variables of marketing and the plethora of communication tools at the disposal of persons, brands, firms, and institutions.

Creative Media Planning

The skills needed to attain a thorough knowledge of media and consumer markets are thus related to creative problem solving. As Morrison (2000: 13) puts it, “a creative problem solver is defined as a solutions-oriented strategist who is able to turn data into ideas”, not a mere software manipulator.

Moreover, nontraditional media have allowed people to break “conventions of medium” (Morgan, 1999: 94-97). People expect product categories to express themselves in particular kinds of media: the real breakthrough may not be the strategic idea or the creative thought, but the choice of a different medium or set of media as an expression of creativity and strategy. The power of communication to the consumer might come in the interaction between innovative message and unconventional medium.

Future Research Agenda: Media Planning More Consumer Focused

The need for change and renewal in media planning research seems to be apparent. The well-known University of Texas report, for example, states: “given the tumultuous changes reverberating through the advertising media environment, undergraduate education in this area is in need of examination and change. In the past, media planning classes have been limited to providing students with a basic understanding of the different terms, such as reach, frequency and GRPs, a regurgitative knowledge of rudimentary strategies and a check list inventory of the most salient media characteristics. The number of media alternatives, new research findings concerning the importance of abstract concepts such as exposure aperture and effective frequency, as well as the increasing demand for accountability, have created the need for a new level of expertise: the media specialist” (Morrison, 2000: 12).

A good approach is the Audience Analysis course proposed by Scott at the University of Illinois (2001). When advertising studies started, she explains, they developed following agency structure lines. As there was a media department, there should be a media planning course. But that is not enough. Consistently with the findings of this report, Scott thinks that the new course should focus on selection and evaluation of media vehicles. Such a subject, “analyzes the markets served by various advertising media and factors considering the selection and evaluation of media” (Scott, 2001: 7). The traditional media planning course is reshaped to “add focus on the consumer (...) focusing on audience analysis rather than on media scheduling” (Scott, 2001: 7). A framework for selection and evaluation, consumer centered in approach, is needed to overcome the inherent weaknesses of one-way, top-down traditional media planning measures, based on the sender, not the receiver.

A similar approach is defended by Tilley, a British practitioner (2000: 195-196): “As a result of the dramatic expansion of media choice, the consumer-media relationship – the way in which consumers choose and use the media and their attitudes to it – has also changed (...) the portfolio of media that an individual experiences – their ‘Personal Media Network’ – is far greater (...). At the same time, the time available to actively consume media, whether that is reading, listening to radio or watching TV, has fallen (...). As a result, consumers, now armed with an increasing array of technology and information, actively edit their own media environment”. Tilley makes the case for a closer relationship between account planning and media planning: “what we need to do is foster a closer working relationship between account planners and media planners and create a true strategic centre (...) both look at different sides of the strategic development process and yet pursue a single outcome – a meaningful communication strategy” (2000: 197-198).

Teaching Manuals

Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of media university-level textbooks some are tactically oriented, and some others strategically oriented. Tactically oriented textbooks tend to focus on teaching basic quantitative variables as Surmanek (1993, 1996) and Katz (1995) do in the US and Davis (1990) in the United Kingdom. According to the research developments documented in this report, the new
approaches tend to elaborate more in the relationship between media planning and overall marketing strategy, with emphasis on consumer orientation and integrated marketing communications. Priemer (1989) wrote a thorough and deep critique to the dominant quantitative paradigm, pointing out its inherent weaknesses in an environment of empowered and brand savvy consumers, media clutter and media fragmentation.

Since the pioneering work of Schultz (1994), Integrated Marketing Communication theory had a significant impact on media planning textbooks. Such a line of thought has been replicated in Europe by British authors like Smith (1994) and Yeshin (1998).


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