

Editorial

Media neutral planning and evaluation: The chicken and egg of integrated communication

The current phrase to let slip when two or more communications specialists are gathered together is 'media neutral planning' (MNP). Some will nod sagely as if this holy grail has long been in their possession. They will complain that the only thing preventing its widespread acceptance in their organisation is the perennial difficulty in encouraging different departments to work more closely together. Others will shake their heads in smug sympathy as if the poor misguided user of the phrase has not been allowed entry to the secret society that understands the 'real world'. They will mutter about the inevitable leadership role of above-the-line advertising and the so-called supporting nature of other communications channels. Either way, mention 'MNP' and you are guaranteed interest, if not agreement.

The first barrier, of course, is agreeing what MNP actually is. Like so many communications concepts, there seem to be as many interpretations as there are interpreters. For instance, are the terms 'media neutral planning' and 'integrated marketing' interchangeable, or is the former simply a prerequisite of the latter? In other words, is it possible to achieve marketing integration without MNP? There is a core of agreement around the need to make best use of limited communications budgets and resources by integrating them to best effect, but there is a long way to go before a shared

understanding of the relationship between MNP, integrated marketing and, just as important, integrated evaluation, is achieved.

It is hardly groundbreaking to point out that two or more communications channels, say advertising and PR, delivering identical or complementary messages at the same time, tend to result in a more effective campaign and the fabled 'halo effect'. More bang for the buck. What is perhaps a new development — and at the heart of any definition of MNP — is the belief that a number of agencies and consultants as well as in-house teams can be briefed together on any given marketing and communications objective, work together on the most effective solution, regardless of their own specialisms, and deliver a genuinely integrated communications programme as a result. Agencies and clients alike (both corporate and voluntary) say this is what they truly want and some are genuinely working towards achieving it. For example, Professor Angus Jenkinson, who runs the Centre for Integrated Marketing at Luton Business School, has brought together a group of client and agency representatives from a range of sectors to develop both the theory and practical implications of MNP.¹ The truth is that although a number of organisations — from IBM to the NSPCC — are striving towards a form of MNP, many are encountering the same challenges:

- How do you change years of ‘silo’-based working practices within organisations, where despite stated intentions of ‘breaking down barriers’ sales and marketing departments, or fundraising and communications departments, find it hard to integrate truly their planning and execution. Consistency of branding, even synergistic programmes of activity are fine, but full integration requires too much letting go of control of one’s own perceived awareness, brand share or income targets.
- How do you convince a number of different agencies to progress from what has passed for integration in the past? This has tended to mean that the agency with the biggest share of the budget (usually advertising, sometimes direct marketing) ‘leads’ the process. In other words, the advertising is created first, then other communications streams — direct marketing, PR, online, internal etc — fall into line behind advertising’s ‘big idea’. This is simply old hat. The most effective — and cost-effective — approach has to be to brief all agencies and in-house teams together, with the same brief, and to develop a communications solution best suited to the brief, rather than look at the budget and decide whether advertising is possible, leaving slim pickings for everyone else once the advertisements have been developed.

Clearly this requires a leap of faith from agencies who need to be certain that they will ultimately benefit from this arrangement, or at least that they will not lose out as a result, particularly if one large agency believes it could actually provide all the required services itself. Payment of a group of agencies by the results of a collective solution is already being considered by some companies. Why not

charities? If the end result of a collaborative communications effort is to hit agreed targets, surely all those involved in the process deserve recognition, regardless of which communications stream spent the largest share? But is anyone brave enough to commit to this approach?

Of course, if such an approach is to be fair and transparent there must be a shared approach to one measurement of success. Evaluation is the key to successful integration, but here is the chicken and egg story. How can you measure the success of an integrated programme of communication without integrated evaluation? Yet how can you agree sensible objectives for a programme of communication without a full picture of the effectiveness of your current communications activities? It is, of course, an iterative process, and you have to start from where you are, but even this most basic need has been subject to a failure to integrate streams of evaluation.

All planning, and therefore all evaluation, must have its roots in an organisation’s fundamental objectives, which in turn must be reflected in the brand. An organisation’s brand is perceived as a broad set of experiences by its audiences, through every single contact with that organisation. Whether speaking on the telephone to a member of staff, attending a volunteer meeting, seeing an advertisement, reading an article in the newspaper or receiving a piece of direct mail, it is the totality of the communication which forms the audience’s brand picture. That being the case, failure to integrate every aspect of an organisation’s communication, internal and external, and every aspect of its evaluation, will quickly lead to dissipation of brand strength and a stream of missed opportunities.

As Jenkinson and Sain write:

‘Integrated marketing is built not just on planning but also on evaluation and

learning. Undoubtedly the marketing community needs to develop new tools for the evaluation of integrated marketing communications. For example, how do you evaluate an extensive mixed media campaign that runs over twelve months and includes internal as well as external actions? Clearly there are opportunities to evaluate each of the elements independently on a range of criteria. However our research shows... that all too often the criteria employed are both too tactical and too narrow.²

Rather like assuming that it is reasonable for above-the-line spend to dominate the planning of a communications programme, so it has been assumed too often that top line spontaneous and prompted awareness figures along with some key advertising message delivery and brand relevance figures give you most of what you need. Fundraisers have paid some attention to this but always returned, understandably, to their response rates and ROI figures. But recent developments mean that, even without the new tools to which Jenkinson and Sain² refer, it is perfectly possible to integrate the evaluation of all communications channels to create a total understanding of the success of the integrated communication.

One of the newest of the evaluation disciplines is *media evaluation*. For years the attempt to put the detailed evaluation of press and broadcast coverage on the same footing as other forms of evaluation has been an uphill struggle for want of a genuinely quantitative measurement. Now, however, such evaluation is widespread and, until very recently, was finally beginning to replace the outmoded, inaccurate and frankly lazy use of advertising value equivalent (AVE) to measure the success of media relations activity. Economic circumstances have led to something of a return to old ways as

CEOs and finance directors seek the simplest measurements of bang for buck. This is disappointing because media evaluation has much to offer. In its pamphlet 'The Power of the Media and How to Measure It', the Association of Media Evaluation Companies describes media evaluation as 'The systemic appraisal of a company's reputation, products or services, or those of its competitors, as measured by their presence in the media', and identifies other descriptors of the process as 'media measurement, media content analysis, publicity tracking and media resonance'.³

It is a form of market research designed to work in conjunction with other forms of evaluation, translating qualitative information into quantitative form — the lack of such a measure having long been the bane of the PR professional's life. Through use of a standard measurement of favourability it is possible to track the positive/negative profile of an organisation throughout the year and match this directly to campaigns, launches, promotions or a general brand profile. Key message delivery can be measured and compared directly against the message delivery from advertising and direct marketing. Media or even publication-specific breakdowns can be given, along with a geographical breakdown of both favourability and message delivery.

Those now familiar with the method can easily match apparent fluctuations in awareness, sales or income during periods when above-the-line channels are not in use, to peak or trough periods of media coverage, favourability and message delivery. A better understanding of the ability to trail or sustain advertising messages through effective media message delivery can stretch the value of advertising spend significantly. Moreover, if the communications programme has been planned in a genuinely media neutral way,

with fully integrated execution, the effect is increased.

The value of such an evaluation goes still further. A deeper analysis of the results of media evaluation allows quite sophisticated audience targeting. For example, it may be that your organisation has been particularly successful in delivering key messages to publications read by 18–35-year-olds, particularly in London and the South East, but less successful in delivering messages to women aged 55+, particularly in Scotland and Northern Ireland. If your donor demographics tell you that your core audience is among women aged 55+ in Scotland and Northern Ireland, you clearly have important work to do with relevant media seen by that audience. Similarly, the information can be used the other way, to explain why an increase in support has been achieved in a certain geographical or age group with no apparent extra direct marketing or advertising effort relating to that group. Clearly, the financial benefit of identifying direct relationships between readers/listeners/viewers, list selection for direct mailings, target audiences for campaigning activities and likely viewers of above-the-line advertising is extremely valuable, but rarely followed to its conclusion.

A second, fast-developing evaluation discipline is that of *internal audience evaluation*. As organisations become more familiar with the importance of internal marketing programmes and the need to support all internal audiences as ambassadors for the brand — knowingly or otherwise — so the need to measure the understanding of these audiences on key issues has become more important. Employee surveys have been a staple feature of the corporate world for some time and are becoming more common in the voluntary sector. Their importance as measurements of staff or volunteers'

understanding of the organisation's purpose, branding and key messages, however, is now being recognised. The NSPCC's recent survey, *It's Your Say*, specifically asked whether staff understood and agreed with the key purpose and messages of the FULL STOP campaign and appeal.⁴ Future surveys will explore this further.

In the end, common sense demands that integrated evaluation must take its place alongside MNP and integrated marketing in the pantheon of 21st century marketing and communication with the following principles as a permanent reference point.

- An organisation's purpose and brand must be all-pervasive in communications and marketing planning.
- To achieve this, planning must be media neutral, which we interpret as meaning the lack of an assumed or automatic hierarchy of importance among communications streams.
- Execution must be fully integrated across all internal and external communications channels to achieve maximum impact.
- Evaluation must also be media neutral in its scope and fully integrated in its interpretation if the total impact of any communications or marketing activity is to be understood in the round and properly inform future thinking.
- Both planning and evaluation must start from the acceptance of the need 'to organise the business in processes to deliver value and communication to customers, not into silos to service managers or functions to service hierarchical decision-making'.¹

The challenge, therefore, is not so much to achieve intellectual acceptance of these, perhaps self-evident, principles. Rather, the challenge is in driving organisations

and their agencies towards a leap of faith, which will allow them to set aside narrow, discipline-specific objectives and embrace truly integrated thinking to the greater benefit of the organisation and its audiences.

REFERENCES

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John Grounds
Director of Communications
NSPCC
London