

Chief Marketer

The Happy Marriage of Direct and Digital

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We hear a crescendo of outcries from media and advertising pundits telling us the sky is falling. At the 2007 and 2008 American Association of Advertising Agencies' (4As) annual convention, a litany of agency leaders mourned the loss of the status quo. Between the economic headwind and the client's new found ability to explore marketing directly in low-cost digital media, big agencies were seeing their love affair with big media and big money crumble.

What do you do when the reach and awareness of mass advertising is no longer the Holy Grail? Where do you turn when CMO's no longer settle for vague assurances of the ability to measure success? How do you respond when spending is trimmed to weather the storm?

All marketing and agency executives can turn this economic headwind into a tailwind, *if* they embrace the principles of total customer engagement and break down the silos between marketing disciplines.

Day by day, the old rules of classifying marketing into separate disciplines like digital, direct, advertising or promotion are disappearing. Consumers don't think in terms of media when they're actually experiencing it. They think in terms of what they want to do and what they want to get out of their media experience. If they're craving entertainment, they want to be entertained. If they're seeking knowledge, they want information. If they feel like sharing, discovering or expressing themselves, they want marketers to help make that possible.

To be successful in this new era, you need to focus not on the media, but on the modes consumers are in when they receive our messages. The key is to understand what a consumer wants and craft messages to help deliver that experience.

Imagine a world where consumers actually *look* for marketer's messages and content and no longer feel forced to endure continuous interruptions (that we hope have some positive impact upon their future behavior). Learning *how* and *when* people enter into different modes and aligning with them is the difference between being ignored and being invited to the party.

Marketers must build a compelling message to attract the consumer. We need to be magnets not megaphones. Then, once the consumer is engaged, we need to build long term, valuable relationships with our brand. This is total engagement.

With its great accountability, the Internet is manna from heaven for direct marketers. As CRM and database marketing become more aligned with online marketing, there seems to be a convergence between DM and digital marketing.

Of course, the truth in today's marketplace is that direct marketing *is* digital marketing. It's undeniable that the Web's role is more critical than ever in stimulating action as well as creating the interaction that develops brand believers. A Direct Marketing Association study suggests that 33% of people respond to a direct mail piece by going online. That's an impressive number when you consider there are still many companies who haven't embraced the notion of making a landing page their primary response mechanism.

The Web is unequivocally the most measurable marketing vehicle available. There are few initiatives in which brands don't demand accountability. The industry is filled with savvy digital marketers who develop beyond visual appeal. Now, successful digital initiatives take an obvious results-based approach, including a heavy dose of research and insights, user experience, content strategy and sophisticated measurement.

The reality is that the marriage of direct and digital is only the beginning. For total engagement, branding must join the union, as marketers apply technology to their efforts to win hearts while using the principles of direct to acquire customers. Soon, there will be no difference between "brand" and "direct." The great right brain creative thinkers and left brain analytical minds will come together to build compelling campaigns that drive engagement and fuel results.

Rick Milenthal is CEO of Engauge. Engauge chairman Stan Rapp will deliver a keynote at DMA09 in San Diego on Wednesday, Oct. 21 titled "The iDirect Revolution," featuring panelists from Ford, Dominos Pizza, Cisco Systems and Chick-fil-A.