Premier Thoughts: The CSUB Business Blog

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Online Advertising May Need a Different Kind of KISS

There are a lot of conversations these days about online advertising and what a powerful tool this is in increasing online sales. A recent article cited compelling statistics outlining a 15 percent increase in online sales this holiday season.¹ In fact, online sales garnered the largest share of the season’s total sales. The research firm calculating these statistics suggested this increase was a result of the impressive marketing by retailers. However, the truth is that few people involved in online advertising appear to fully understand the medium. Business people, advertisers, and marketers are all trying to understand why and how they should best use the plethora of new media tied to online advertising and how -or if- to apply the same rules used in traditional advertising.

Traditional advertising stresses the importance of the K.I.S.S. (keep it simple stupid) rule. Current creators of online advertising are still examining the application of these traditional rules to this new medium. Despite the lack of clarity, online advertising is still the fastest growing medium in history.² For advertisers, this presents a whole new world of potential customers out there, just waiting to be engaged and persuaded. But for advertising’s historically television-oriented creatives, just learning to use the new medium effectively is a challenge, especially with the medium’s ever-changing and ever-evolving technological landscape. What is interesting is that this is exactly the same challenge that took place when TV was first introduced 50 years ago. Without question, we are experiencing a new creative revolution.

So why might this creative revolution need different KISS rules than traditional advertising? It is because online advertising is not a mass medium in the traditional sense, and it may never offer mass-media efficiency. Some marketers may decide it is too complex, too cumbersome, or not worth the time and effort. A recent study determined that the factors that make traditional advertising work, such as persistent branding, strong calls to action, and use of human faces, make for better recall, brand awareness, and purchase intent. However, are these “traditional” aspects that work well in traditional advertising, really the sort of creativity needed in online advertising?

Possibly not! Good creative is effective advertising and good online advertising needs a different kind of creativity. Much of what is currently used in online advertising seems like merely an extension of the traditional forms—resulting in bad direct marketing in ad form, or TV-ad-thinking in a box outline. So what kind of new creativity driven by new rules might be
effective in online advertising? The new rules and new creativity should revolve around five key aspects:

1. Utilize Elements of Interactivity
   The goal here is to get the consumer engaged with online advertising. The online environment allows consumers to be more active in their usage of the medium. The ad should entice the reader away from the content they are reading. Advertisers can and should be using their creative not just for branding or direct response, but in innovative ways that solicit input—luring consumers into some form of interactivity. Companies can encourage consumers to become more conversational. So far, it seems like a lot of online advertising is still a one-way form of communication, like print and broadcast.

2. Incorporate Methods of Utility
   Advertisers must find creative solutions to give readers something they need. Give tips that enhance knowledge about the product area, invite consumers to contribute their own thoughts, and offer other, related online resources tied to the product brand. Advertisers must remember that they are not entertaining a passive couch-surfer. Online advertising interrupts active users, often searching for information or entertainment. This means it is harder to capture those consumers’ attention. But if you can hook into consumers’ specific interests and passions, it will prove more valuable to the products and company in the end. Online advertising must create messages that are less like traditional advertising and more like educational informational content—that has some form of utility for the consumer.

3. Consider Differences in Audience “Captivity”
   The captivity of the advertising to the audience is determined not by the ad medium, but by the ad format. Pop-up ads or pre-roll ads are captive formats that force users to pay attention to the ads by not allowing them to proceed until the ad display is on top of the content. At one end of the spectrum of user control in online advertising is no user control. At the other end of the spectrum is a fast-paced format with high user control. Therefore, the online medium possesses the dual characteristics of a captive medium and a self-paced medium. With effective computer programming, the level of captivity in online ads can be higher than that of traditional media. At the same time, the non-linear design of web page content facilitates self-paced consumption by linking users to different content pages with the ease of a mouse click.

4. Evaluate Context as well as Content
   Current online advertising research suggests context as a factor in determining the degree to which an ad is perceived as an interruption, rather than additional information. The concept of context is specified as time delay, editorial page type, and visibility of ads. The goal here, then, is to shift the introduction of any new content in ways that enhances consumer perceptions that the online advertising is providing welcome additional information. The informational content must be presented in a manner that is well integrated into whatever the consumer is paying attention to at a specific point in time.

5. Couple Creativity with Unbiased Courage
Marketers should have the courage to link comments, blogs, or tweets about their brands. This demonstrates that the company believes so strongly in its product or service, that it is comfortable including links to product reviews at independent sites or objective professional reviews.

While companies struggle to understand why and how they can best make use of these five new advertising rules, online advertising continues to evolve. Every day, CEOs, CMOs, and CFOs all want to understand how online promotional factors affect their businesses—and how they should plan the advertising of their brands to behave as a result. Unfortunately, many of the people they naturally turn to for help and advice are their marketers and advertisers—and they are often equally unsure of how to apply the traditional advertising rules. Many advertisers only know how to apply traditional advertising rules and forms of creativity. They think of online advertising as just another, or supplementary, channel. The only way to learn what works in this new medium is to explore new kinds of creativity—rather than simply applying the traditional rules. Constant experimentation is the best way to learn how to gain a real business advantage. What advertisers may find is that rather than abandoning the KISS rule altogether, they simply need a new kind of KISS.

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