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Commentary

Painting Ourselves Into A Corner

by Jeff Einstein, Wednesday, Jul 30, 2008 5:00 AM ET

We've been so intent for the past decade on creating a seamless user experience that we've forgotten a simple yet inconvenient truth: that someone somewhere has to pay for it.

Now that the 800-pound video gorilla is permanently ensconced as the dominant online feature, someone has to feed it. But with what? The digital pantry, with its complete and utter aversion to intrusion and interruption, is all but empty. We've equipped and trained an entire generation of consumers to eschew and avoid the one foodstuff sufficient to feed the online video beast: brand advertising. And therein is the conundrum.

Our trillion-dollar investment in the seamless user experience has all but obliterated any tolerance for the very first function of effective brand advertising: *intrusion*. Intrusion and interruption are anathema to the digital lifestyle - online and off. Like media bulimics we binge then purge over and over again, slowly but surely starving ourselves to death, all in the expedient and convenient name of the user experience.

Brand advertising must intrude and interrupt - by design. Effective advertising must compel viewers to react: Watch the ad, change the channel, or turn the page. Effective brand advertising compels viewers to decide: yes or no, up or down, stay or go. By contrast, brand advertising online inspires or demands no action whatsoever. The vast bulk of brand advertising online just waits around passively for someone - anyone - to say "yes".

The above is what happens when MBAs in procurement - those with no regard whatsoever for the history of media and advertising - control advertising and marketing budgets. This is what happens when those who control advertising and marketing budgets so wrongly conclude that the Internet will somehow change television more than television will change the Internet.

This is what happens the very moment that those who know little or nothing about advertising conclude that the ads are somehow there to support the programs when the exact opposite is true: The



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programs are there to support the ads. This is what happens when advertisers stop asking, "What are all these programs doing between my ads?"

The demand for a seamless user environment pits agencies against themselves and alters their DNA. Once the designers, purveyors and stewards of the brand experience, agencies have been charged in recent years with creating the same seamless user experience that now reduces their historical imperative to an exercise in DROI, Diminished Return on Investment.

Per-unit performance decreases as bandwidth increases while media planning and buying emerge as the dominant agency functions in an age of functionally limitless bandwidth. The result is brand ubiquity without meaning (the precise opposite of performance), despite any heady claims to the contrary - and a perpetual erosion of the media ecology.

So now that we've painted ourselves into such a tight little corner, what can we do about it? Inconvenient as it may sound, it might behoove us to pause for a moment, just long enough to reflect back a couple of generations, back to a time when advertisers actually controlled their brand environments, back to a time when no one questioned the fact that the programs were there to support the ads because the advertisers *owned* the programs.

We called it the Golden Age of Television not only because of the great writers and larger-than-life personalities who migrated from radio into it but because of the same reverence for the word that they brought with them gave life and meaning to the iconic brands that populated and informed our lifestyles. Advertisers knew way back then, long before the Internet, that it was far preferable to own branding environments than to rent them.

Contrast the above against today's cynics' market where few care at all about the word and where most actually believe that the ads they produce are there to support the programs. "We live in the Bizarro World of advertising," says Jaffer Ali, CEO of Vidsense (www.vidsense.com/demo.asp), the Web's largest online video advertising network.

"The current pre-roll model for online video is typically backwards. Not only does it *increase* attrition rates, it compels the brand message to support the video clip when it should be the other way around: The video clip should support the brand message."

Vidsense corrects the problem and recreates the Golden Age of Television by ceding control of the branding environments themselves back to advertisers. Thumbnail images culled from a library of more than 80,000 licensed film and video clips appear across a network of partner sites.

When a viewer clicks on a featured thumbnail, a new window opens, transporting both viewer and content to an advertiser's website where an imbedded Vidsense player resides. The result is a powerful, high-quality impression delivered safe and secure *inside* the advertiser's own online brand environment. "We call it retro-evolutionary," says Ali. "A step *back* to the future."



Jeff Einstein is a true digital media pioneer, and a partner in The New EPA



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