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Consumer Communication In The Multimedia Age

By

Emily Abrera
The first question we should realistically ask is, are we in it? If the multimedia bug has bit into Asia...what are the implications as far as consumer communications are concerned? “Multimedia” is the most captivating concept to emerge in recent years. The convergence of television, computer and telecommunications technologies (like an idea out of a futuristic comic book) that will give you access to interactive TV, VOD (Video on demand), games, movies you can choose to watch when you want to watch, video shopping, banking transactions, video conferencing---is mind-boggling, and on the outset, engaging. After all, technology has already taken us so far, the final link-up is an expected conclusion, although the prospect of all this happening conveniently in your own home, to save you the time and trouble of ever having to leave it, is a bit ironic perhaps, as many have already observed. But we’ll go to that later.

Let me tackle the topic as an advertising practitioner. Recently, Advertising Age commemorated the first 50 years of television commercials with a special souvenir edition featuring great TV campaigns of the past decades. While there were creative breakthroughs all throughout the period, the majority of visual or cinematic innovations happened in the final 10 years of the historical review.
Largely it is a function of technological advancements in production and post-production, as well as in animation technique, all made possible by computerization.

Compare these two commercials (*PLAY 2 SPOTS*)

The one for Alka-Seltzer is an old classic, certainly over ten years old. Over and above the charm and the humor, you must have noted the total absence of any technological frills. Perhaps the more innovative aspect of that commercial was that it was about shooting commercials; it took the audience behind the scenes, so to speak.

The second spot you watched was the launch spot for the new Always Coca-Cola campaign. Compared to the “older” commercial, this last one had 1,600 different scenes, or cuts, almost once per frame of film. It’s not the sort of editing that was possible 2 decades ago, and today it’s hard to remember what it was like editing actual film before digital technology made things so easy.

I do not know how much you “saw” in the Coke spot, or if it seemed a little too fast, but I guarantee you this generation of young consumers are perfectly at home with visual treats of this sort and “take out” a lot more than the older generation would.
The reason is that the average 12-25 year old today has been shaped by and identifies himself or herself through a far different media experience than their parents did. I remember when color TV was a relatively new phenomenon... my children don’t. I remember having to get up and turn a dial on our B&W TV set to change channels. My grandson can’t imagine why anyone would do that unless they lost the remote control!

This generational difference of perception is not limited to simply technique or mode and speed of delivery. The difference is in content, form, structure and also in the overall social context of experiencing television. Long before multimedia became a buzzword, our teen children were already exhibiting multimedia behavior: watching MTV with the radio on, and doing homework while chatting with a friend on the phone, (who is also plugged into the same station and channel.) When we look back on the 90’s, years from now, we will realize that those born in the late 70’s and 80’s were already wired long before technology actually served up the goods on Internet.

If this generation was born “cable-ready”, it is due to the speed with which technology has changed our lives. Whatever opinion we may have of MTV, and however desirable or undesirable we may think it is, MTV is today a fact of life.
“MTV has captured, commercialized and spread an essence of television culture and of electronic and computer culture in general, that has been experienced more purely by this generation than any other previous generation in history” (Quest Annual Conf. 1993)

VCR technology introduced interactivity, by making it possible for viewers to slow down, replay, zoom-in, fast-forward, and in effect choose the information they want, and way in which they wish to see it. Movie screen, TV screen and computer screen are fused by interactive technology.

Today, advertising practitioners like myself can no longer think of media in the traditional sense (television, radio and press) because the lines have blurred and specially for consumers in the next century, advertising as we practice it today will be much less effective, or at least its effect will be harder to measure.

What technology has engendered is an amazingly well-informed consumer with the ability to discern truth from hype. This consumer (and there is a critical mass of them already today) is a much more demanding consumer than we’ve ever had to deal with. Educated, globally aware, socially concerned, empowered and vocal, they are quick to express their opinions about what they see.
Just as an example, I’d like to show you a commercial Reebok run in the U.S. which had to be pulled out after viewers objected to the sporty nonchalance with which it portrayed the possible loss of human life.

(PLAY ONE SPOT)

In my own country, where the majority are Catholics and where fundamentalism is seeing a comeback, this commercial invited controversy.

(PLAY ONE SPOT)

Recently, in an article in a Hongkong publication, it was reported that Saatchi & Saatchi had run a foul of Asian sensitivities with a promo commercial featuring Saatchi ads spilling out of a patient’s head after a doctor drilled a hole in it. Intended as a pan-regional TV buy, it was withdrawn after 6 days, instead of the intended 2 months.

What does this tell us? That the consumer is changing, and that advertisers and agencies, too, must adjust in the ways they communicate, and must be more sensitive to content and to context.

With satellite technology, suddenly a host of possibilities and implications has unfolded.
In response to rising cost and increasing clutter, “new media” have come into play, although what advertising will take on them is yet to be seen.

VOD, or video-on-demand has been on trial in the U.S. and the U.K. since last November. VOD involves TV viewers choosing programs from a huge digital database, and may present new advertising opportunities. Certainly given the cost of this new technology, advertising will be needed to help subsidize the expense for the consumer. Another upcoming medium is NVOD or near-video-on-demand. This gives viewers the choice of a large number of channels offering continuously repeated programming. As an advertising medium, it is seen as having one key advantage over VOD. Because it will be transmitted live, viewers will not not be able to “zip” through the ads. On the other hand, VOD will be a more ideal environment for lengthy, detailed interactive commercials that certain individuals seek out.

But for all that’s been said about video on demand, it hasn’t quite taken off yet. Last December, Time Warner unveiled its much-touted Full Service Network trial in Orlando, Florida. While the demonstration was flawless and the quality and richness of the system impressive, the cost was simply unrealistic. With Interactive TV still “on hiatus”, therefore, what’s become the red-hot new medium is the Web.
The Worldwide Web unlike other interactive technologies, is building consumer demand from the bottom up and is rapidly emerging as a media that provides marketers a test bed for a relatively low-cost broad-based (some what) way do get their feet wet in interactive communication. This technology is not without its problems, though. There is much frustration over slow download times caused by bandwidth constraints. And there are other glitches: more demanding consumers are unforgiving when it comes to promises not delivered.

Last Christmas, multimedia home PC’s enjoyed lively sales in the U.S., but the excitement quickly abated as consumers discovered that not all multimedia hardware and software were compatible.

CD-ROM publishers likewise were hit. Some estimates placed post-Christmas returns as high as 40%. Walt Disney took a beating from irate consumers when their Multi media Lion-King CD-ROM failed to deliver.

While advertising practitioners may be enchanted with new media and the prospect of creating new relationships with more defined groups of consumers, the notion of conducting a dialog with people is a double-edged sword. Just as vocal consumerists can quickly get an offensive TV ad off the air, the grumbling of a dissatisfied user can quickly be magnified on Internet and then get picked up by more popular media.
New communications technologies serve to amplify the consumer response mechanism, and erode the goodwill and positive image built for a brand in the more traditional “passive” media.

Other Internet news over the last few months confirms that the network is not particularly secure, nor is it always a civilized or family-rated place.

There is the issue of censorship of pornography and other manner of controversial content. While in many ways, the Internet has created a new sort of democracy overly liberal as it is, the more passive media on the opposite end seem to be receiving a dose of increased regulation.

In Taiwan two weeks ago, the Gov’t Info Office banned alcohol and tobacco advertising beamed in by satellite.

As trade barriers fall and Asia gets richer, international marketers are pushing for entry, only to be met by censure from political and religious groups concerned about preserving local customs and morals.

In Malaysia, restrictions on liquor and cigarette advertising are only part of a broad campaign to safeguard its people from corrosive aspects of Western culture. “VHSC” (violence, horror, sex and counter culture) are strictly excised from broadcast material.
And yet, despite cigarette and liquor advertising restrictions, “surrogate” or trademark advertising is allowed, ironically. How consumers will eventually come to terms with such communications is yet to be seen.

In Japan, browsers on WorldWide Web can already choose from news photo stories culled daily from the output of Japan’s largest wire service, Kyodo News. Publishers and ad agencies are exploring digital formats that can deliver news directly to homes. Exactly how these “inkless papers” will be able to accommodate advertising and whether at all readers will want to stop at the ads unless there’s an incentive, is also an interesting point to consider. It is unlikely that users will welcome a stream of informercials that get in the way of the news.

Even now, cruisers in cyberspace are already exploring the amount of boring and uninspired “junk mail” they get on the Web.

It’s like Television in the late 40’s. Great promise, but the medium is still defining itself. Is Internet better used as electronic catalogues for consumers or are they better used as on-line resources for technicians? Or are they more like advertiser-sponsored sections of a magazine, offering consumers news and information, surrounded by pitches for sponsor’s products? Will new media replace the traditional passive ones?
The future is about re-assessing consumers. As they become harder to reach and as conventional media becomes harder to control in terms of targetting prospective buyers, advertisers will continue to devise ways of communicating effectively and efficiently.

Just as television never quite replaced radio, multi-media will eventually settle into a comfortable position as a good medium for the likes of financial and retail services, and luxury items...but I doubt if the hard data offered by informercials can ever really compete with the audacity, the sheer entertainment and the power of really good creative TV ads.