



Novelty should never eclipse the need for strategy.

Channel hopping

CHANNELS MAY GO IN AND OUT OF FASHION, BUT INTEGRATED MARKETING NEVER GOES OUT OF STYLE, WRITES ACXION DIGITAL'S **CHRISTOPHER MARRIOTT**.

It is easy enough to keep up with the watercooler conversation if you possess a relatively good attention span, some kind of recording device and a remote control. You never have to worry about missing the most popular shows, even if you are devoted to the old favourites, because it's simple to record one channel and watch another later.

For marketers under pressure to keep up with the latest developments while maximising return on spend, this channel surfing is not an option. As new marketing channels emerge we are often tempted to follow the trends adopted by our competitors to ensure we are not left behind. This is even truer when those channels enable marketers to extend their reach and lower their campaign costs. Such is the digital promise.

When boardrooms are buzzing with the need to set social media policy, roll out mobile marketing programmes or explore the capabilities of the newly implemented

digital platform, do we forget to keep marketing relevant and appropriate in our enthusiasm to ride that shiny new train? For as long as technology continues to evolve there will be a new development on the horizon to divert attention from existing channels of communication. But the ability to do things in a completely new way does not automatically create an obligation to do so, and novelty should never eclipse the need for strategy.

I am the last one to suggest that digital marketing should not become an integral part of your plan. While you should absolutely explore the possibilities of marketing via the web, email, SMS and social media, you should do so for reasons corresponding to your overall business strategy. Ask yourself the right questions before you hop into a new channel - the first one being *what do I hope to achieve?* If you are plunging head first into Facebook and Twitter to keep up with your key competition, I would advise you to rethink.

Rather than questioning what percentage of your dwindling budget you should allocate to social media spend, ask if social media is best for your business. If it is not the best arena for you, you would certainly not embrace it to the exclusion of more traditional marketing platforms that have served you well in the past.

Manage your channels

Successful multichannel marketing requires multichannel management. Traditional marketing channels will not necessarily be less effective simply because something new has come along. As has always been the case, any new methods should be carefully considered and introduced in conjunction with your current marketing efforts. Aim to integrate new marketing channels in a strategic way that complements your existing marketing plan and ensures that the cost of testing those channels is not the satisfaction of your loyal customers.

Various channels have both cost

differentials and differing appeal.

Determining the combination that works best for you and your customers takes experimentation. Be patient enough to do the necessary testing and remember that not all channels will be appropriate for your demographic. Some may be totally unsuitable for your product lines. For example, telemarketing for hearing aids would not be a sensible approach.

In addition, the way your customers prefer to interact with you may not be via your channel of choice. Though you may have the best email platform in the world, one that enables you to create, track and analyse results with a few keystrokes, bombarding a rarely used email account with offers is unlikely to produce any result beyond an opt-out. Similarly, the decision of how, when and where to market to your customers should be based on the elements that combine to create the optimal offer for them rather than the optimal offer for you.

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The proliferation of personal or mobile devices like smart phones continues to empower the consumer to control how and when they are marketed to. If we respect rather than abuse the means by which the customer allows us to market, we are more likely to avoid the need for future legislation to protect consumer rights. Consider the early days of email and the host of irrelevant marketing messages that gave rise to various spam laws around the world. A marketer's *next best offer* should always recognise the customer, regardless of the channel in which they appear, and take into consideration what that particular customer is most likely to need, want or buy rather than what is the most profitable product for you to sell them.

Those playing the numbers game often rely upon email blasts as a cheap form of mass communication; if 5,000 emails can be distributed rapidly for little overhead, receiving a response rate of around 10 percent, that's a concrete outcome to take to the boss. However, current trends indicate that open and click through rates are decreasing as the volume of email the average consumer receives increases...and that volume continues to climb. That ratio could easily be improved to a 20 percent response on a distribution of 2,500 emails, provided those 2,500 recipients are offered a product or service that is timely, relevant and appropriate to their requirements.

Tear down the siloes

A marketing channel achieves optimal results when information is returned, collated and analysed. It can be tempting for marketers, and businesses as a whole, to segment various channels, particularly for the purposes of tracking, reporting and analysis. It then becomes natural to consider strategic direction in an equally disjointed manner, implementing email strategy separately from SMS and direct mail.

But channel data need not only be used to refine the marketing campaigns within that particular channel; it can be used for the benefit of all. Every piece of information that you collect should be used to gain new insights, create better customer understanding and leverage greater opportunities across the board. The more rounded and complete your view of the

customer, the higher your marketing ROI.

Let us also consider the customer, who tends not to think in a siloed manner and regards every branded communication a form of advertising, whether it appears via TV, print, the Internet, direct mail or even email.

Even so, not every point of contact needs to be aimed at selling a product. Some will serve to foster goodwill, some will encourage positive consumer behaviour and still others will be executed for the sole purpose of gathering information. Regardless of the purpose of a piece of communication, consistency is key, and its importance should not be underestimated. Though marketers may understand the importance of aligning communications with the overall brand marketing strategy, many simply fail to do so out of expedience.

Integration can mean anything from a singularly conceived and disciplined marketing approach across all channels to just putting the same tagline on every communication. Individual channel marketers regard it as intelligent, timely support and extension of all other forms of marketing communication.

Step back and ask yourself the right questions before putting together a proposal that includes every available channel.


Real integration should involve considering, implementing and reinforcing a well-defined, overall marketing strategy with every message through multiple channels, be they traditional or digital. Furthermore, it means ensuring that all marketing messages make sense in context of one another, providing a seamless and enhanced customer experience. Whether you launch a campaign through one channel alone or through multiple channels in conjunction, have an action plan to cover, not only your platforms for delivery and response, but also how you intend to act on those responses. In any case, all channels should coordinate offers to prevent confusion or, even worse, extending a substantially better offer in one channel than in another. Running competing campaigns or broadcasting multiple messages through different channels serves only to make your organisation appear confused and disorganised.

Central to this are your data quality and maintenance. Though data management is

a critical component of any successful marketing solution, equally important are the necessary tools to consolidate that data from every potential data source. In addition, the knowledge of how best to apply that information is vital. Once consolidated, the data will provide a better picture, enabling you to understand which of your customers are the most, and least, valuable to your business. This knowledge will then allow you to create specific strategies designed to maintain the loyalty of your best and most profitable customers.

Take the big picture view

This is no less true of digital marketing channels. Whatever intelligence you are able to gather can be applied to further your customer relationships. One example of how your organisation might use social media intelligently is in the gathering of information, specifically customer feedback on the products and services you provide. Monitoring what your customers are saying about you provides you with a unique opportunity to rapidly incorporate constructive criticism or address negative commentary, via any channel that works, but you must act quickly. There is no greater PR than word of mouth, and consumers will trust each other far more than the slickest advertising or marketing campaigns. Digital channels enable far more responsive marketing than ever before, but negativity can be difficult to shake off in cyberspace, where it can be all too easily exposed by a search engine.

You will always achieve better marketing returns by taking a big picture view. Step back and ask yourself the right questions before putting together a proposal that includes every available channel. Ensure that those channels you do utilise are employed strategically and appropriately. When you approach your marketing with a plan, you won't need to rely on the luck of hitting the right buttons on your remote to be certain you are not missing out on something important; you will already know what's in the programme guide. 

Chris Marriott is the VP, Global Managing Director for Acxiom's digital agency, a top 20 interactive agency providing services and solutions for companies wanting to acquire and retain customers via email, mobile, web sites, search engines, social media, online advertising and other emerging digital marketing channels.