

BEING REASONABLE

BY MARC BABEJ

Breaking Through the Clutter Myth

CLUTTER IS THE GREAT MEDIA BOOGEYMAN OF OUR TIME. With so many advertisers vying for the attention of consumers in so many places, how can any particular message get noticed?

As advertising expert John Hopkins Adams puts it: “There is no hour of waking life in which we are not besought, incited, or commanded to buy something of somebody.” Sound familiar?

Well, there’s a catch: Hopkins made this remark in 1909. Even in the relatively uncluttered infancy of advertising, it was the same refrain: How to get a hearing amidst all the hubbub. When an issue has remained unresolved for a century, it’s worth taking a closer look.

Conventional wisdom pins the blame on a glut of advertising, and offers three recommendations: First, get noticed amidst the glut by adding to it — “adjusting” spending levels to market conditions. Second, use innovative media ideas. And third, make breakthrough creative. If these measures are effective, then they are readily imitated by other marketers, and therefore are destined to add to the clutter.

These prescriptions don’t work because they are designed to fix the wrong problem. The real cause of clutter is not a glut of ads, but rather a glut of ads for products consumers aren’t even considering — either because they don’t need or want that kind of product, or because the product is undifferentiated.

Consumers have been frustrated with this glut of irrelevance for a long time — and can now do something about it. In the past, the best they could do was to tune out, literally or at least metaphorically. Today, they can opt out: listening to commercial-free radio, blocking pop-ups on their browser — and, most ominously, fast-forwarding on their digital video recorders (DVRs).

The real solution to breaking through the clutter lies in boosting relevance, according to a simple formula: Motivate consumers who are in the market for

a certain product category, with a product they have reason to choose over the competition.

Targeting people who are in the market for a certain product.


Media’s best tool against clutter is behavioral targeting. In behavioral terms, for someone who just bought a car, a car ad impression is a) wasted from the perspective of the marketer, and b) clutter in the eyes of that consumer. Masters of behavioral targeting such as Amazon.com, on the other hand, show the way to an uncluttered future. Their behaviorally targeted “ads” for other products that might interest a user are the opposite of clutter: Timely, relevant recommendations.

Products that offer a reason to choose.

Let’s face it: Most products in most categories are undifferentiated, me-too propositions. As a result, the role of most advertising boils down to manipulating consumers into paying a premium for a commodity. And when a product is nothing more than clutter, the ad for it will likely be clutter, too.

With so many advertisers vying for the attention of consumers, how can any particular message get noticed? Marketers can avoid the clutter trap either by selling a commodity for what it is, or by bringing a differentiated product to market.

GM has finally gotten into straits dire enough to see the light. If most GM models are commodities, then why not sell across the board at commodity prices? Since GM launched the “employee discount for everyonem,” its ads are being noticed and showrooms are filling up.

The best way to avoid being clutter, of course, is not to produce a me-too product in the first place. When Apple introduced a sleek 5GB MP3 player called iPod, people took notice. Consumers might have been exposed to ads for such iPod competitors as iRiver and Rio. But if they see these competitors at all, it’s in reference to the iPod. Consumers are smart when it comes to spending their time and money. So the only lasting way to break through clutter is to engage them in places and at times when they’re inclined to spend, and by offering them products they have a reason to buy. 

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