

Beyond Integration

How to make the whole brand greater than its parts

Here's a thought: The branding game has changed so much that the concept of brand integration is no longer a useful way to approach branding, at least with regard to media selection. In today's new-media landscape, brand integration is just a far too-simple, old-school concept.

It's time to rethink things.

I'm not suggesting we abandon integration principles. I'm suggesting we replace the concept of brand integration with a more contemporary concept I call "brand holism."

It's true that the emergence of new media has provided more opportunities to deliver a brand message in new and interesting places. On the surface, this is a good thing. (It's hard to argue that consistency and ubiquity are bad things.) But all we're doing with new media is adding boxes to the same old-media flow chart. We can do better.

We have the opportunity to do much more for our brands. We can be smarter about the opportunities inherent in each medium and their ability to add dimension to brands and intensify the relationships with consumers. It's no longer good enough to simply align the different parts of the media mix around one objective; we should ask the parts to work toward different objectives that support the whole. We should not be looking to make everything match. We should be looking at how the different parts complement one another and create a greater whole.

Yes, it is still important to be single-minded, but single-minded doesn't mean we have to be narrow-minded. Today we have the ability to think wide and deep at the same time. As traditional media planning gives way to connections planning, we can see that there are many things we can do for our brands to make them more "whole"; things that were difficult or impossible to do just a short time ago. For example, today we can:

Narrowcast messages to targets that could not be reached effectively before. Thanks in large part to the Internet, we can now create more complex communication strategies and narrowcast them to multiple target audiences at once.

Create engaging media experiences that help form brand expectations. If it's true that the medium is the message, then it follows that the media experience is the brand. We should use new-media opportunities in ways that convey or contribute to the overall brand experience and define who we are through actions rather than just words.

Connect users and develop communities that will create and propagate brand advocates. We are all hardwired to want to connect with people and belong to something. Today, we can easily connect with our most passionate fans and give them elevated access to the brand via privileged information, special offers, VIP status, etc. Through these communities, we can turn users into loyalists and loyalists into advocates.

Foster real-time conversations with consumers. We can use social media to establish mutually respectful and transparent two-way dialog with our customers. The rewards will be deeper consumer insights that could lead to more relevant products and services, enhanced credibility and greater satisfaction among consumers.

Provide new and interesting context that heightens brand relevancy and deepens brand meaning. We can use new-media opportunities such as branded content to help brands become more culturally relevant and flush with cultural capital. Consumers can come to know our brands not only by the messages we send, but by the places we've been.

The point of brand holism is to no longer look at media as simply a way to deliver messages. We should use media in a complementary way that delivers greater value to the brand and to the consumer. In other words, use media to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts. That's the kind of ROI I'd like to see.

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