

The Next Generation of News Branding

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Why has local TV news avoided contemporary advertising tactics and stuck with creative campaigns born in the 80s and 90s? There are more than 500 TV news operations in the country and most of them brand with one of five traditional news campaigns: Breaking News, Investigation, Advocacy, Community, or Weather. These operations need to break the mold and look at tried and true tactics used by the multi-billion dollar industry of Madison Avenue.

More and more upscale markets like Denver, Chicago, San Francisco and Seattle are rejecting local news altogether. This typical ratings hemorrhage is slowly depleting profit margins all over the country. In Chicago, the local newscasts have lost 17 points in ratings over the last ten years. The audience didn't switch, they just stopped watching local news.

Each year the international advertising firm of Young and Rubicam conducts a branding loyalty survey for 20,000 brands across the globe. They test brand health, consumer perception and purchase loyalty on some of the best products around. It comes as no surprise that established brands like Coke and GE top the list, but if you follow the list down the page, you'll notice one sector is conspicuously missing - the service sector. Service industries include banks, phone companies, grocery stores, power companies,

restaurants, etc. Year after year, the survey finds that service industries have some of the worst brand loyalty. Plain and simple, their customers just don't feel a strong attachment to their products.

You can't build a strong brand unless your customers have a perception that your product is different from the other guys. Y&R's research shows that most service industry brands have less differentiation than brands of water or frozen foods, some of the most forgettable products you'll find in a store.

We see this all the time in local retail. I use the movie rental store that is closest to my house. If it moves to a different strip mall, I'm not going to drive the extra distance. I'll just pick the next closest movie renter. The same is true of most services we use regularly - grocery, dry cleaner, florist, hardware, even doctors. It is all about convenience and price. Brand typically has little to do with getting your business. The minute something easier or cheaper comes around, most of us will get rid of a service retailer like yesterday's news.

Unfortunately, TV News is a service industry as well. Any Nielsen ratings report will painfully acknowledge our inclusion in this lackluster sector. What's the number one reason people watch a TV news show? Lead in. Their product loyalty is so low that they couldn't be bothered to press the remote control buttons to switch the station. Every year, a big percentage of our audience just drifts away because they are getting their information from other sources, or simply don't care anymore. Most markets have seen remarkable news audience erosion and it's only going to get worse in years to come.

Research shows us that durable goods product brands tend to have stronger brand positions. For example, I love HP printers, Acura Cars, and Apple Computers. I will spend more money and go out of my way to buy these brands because I have real loyalty to them. I buy them because I have very strong perceptions about their quality and innovation. Price and availability have little to do with my purchase. This is the very essence of a well-branded product.

Typically most service brands present themselves as a good value and that they care for their customers. AT&T, Verizon, and Altell all sell their great customer service and coverage network. Y&R's research shows this is a losing battle, and cell phone company brand loyalty studies verify this. If any one of these companies gives us a lower price for more minutes, most of us will switch in a heartbeat.

So how can TV news brands break the service industry curse? Service brands that stand-out are seen as truly dynamic - fun and exciting. They do not sell product quality, value or thoroughness. They promise to transform the marketplace and to re-write the definition of the sector.

1) Look for ways to be dramatically differentiated.

Anything that smacks of typical will be dismissed. Unless you can show true revolution, don't base your brand on product features. Remember that most viewers have a disposable mindset about service industry products. Your product may seem revolutionary to the in-house staff, but to the viewer, most of those minute whopper doppler differences are just more blah, blah, blah. Don't buy your own

hype. In the cold light of day, is your product truly different? For most news operations, the honest answer is no.

2) Keep it simple.

If the world perceives most services as commodities, anything that smacks of complexity will just be ignored because it doesn't fit the mentality of the typical consumer. Even if Bob the dry cleaner puts big signs outside his business saying he has the best service in town, I'm probably not going to believe him.

Most stations could dramatically improve their brand by simplifying their position. We see this all the time in our branding workshops. TV stations use promos to explain the minutia of their weather radar and it just gets ignored. They justify barely perceptible technology differences and spout hyperbole that is transparent hype. This only serves to reinforce the viewer's perception that weather is the same at most stations.

Studies show that when product complexity gets overwhelming, consumers will simply default to established brands. So if you're the upstart in the TV market trying to gain a foothold, better keep your message viciously simple. Featuring anything complex feeds right into the hands of the established station. An upstart who starts a doppler war will usually lose if they go toe-to-toe on features with the market leader.

3) Don't just brand with features, brand with emotion.

If your product is not demonstratively different, your brand must be an emotional juggernaut. In other words, you must sell a feeling, not just a feature. Nike's advertising doesn't sell shoes, they sell tenacity. Apple doesn't sell computers, they sell youth and coolness. Lexus doesn't sell cars, they sell superiority and luxury. Take a look at last year's list of Forbes magazine's hottest brands. Each one of these brands is on a mission from God.

- 1) Apple
- 2) BlackBerry
- 3) Google
- 4) Amazon
- 5) Yahoo
- 6) E-bay
- 7) Red Bull
- 8) Starbucks
- 9) Pixar
- 10) Coach

None of these brands just sell products. They sell a revolution. These are companies that have a close and compelling relationship with their customers.

4) Realize that status quo news branding isn't cutting it any more.

For two generations TV News has sold standard fare like trust, breaking news, information, and accuracy. There is a new generation of TV marketer on the rise. They go beyond content and enroll new viewers with an emotional appeal that rings true in the belly. Viewers want to be a part of the news station because the news has a mission. It speaks to the emotional needs of the viewer and reinforces their deepest feelings.

5) Research, research, research.

Reinventing yourself is terribly difficult work and requires tenacity and courage. When I talk to cable industry managers, I am consistently impressed with how much they know about their target viewer. They don't just know about their viewing behavior, they know about their hopes, dreams, neuroses, and foibles. This allows the marketing to touch emotional cords that create a true personal bond with the product. Most local TV stations spend very little on research, so they tend to lack an in-depth knowledge of their audience. As revenue continues to shrink, this will likely get worse.

Most traditional TV research studies reveal HOW viewers use the product, not WHY they use it. Most local news branders still go with the "golden gut" method of branding. The branding campaign is based on what worked in the manager's last market, not a careful profile of the habits and emotional needs of their current audience. If you hope to make bold and effective changes, you must have solid audience data to back your decisions. Without it, you will lose your courage the first time a viewer calls to complain about how they related to the old branding campaign better.

Our company has been fortunate enough to work with a handful of stations around the country that have proven relationship branding can work on the local level. These stations took a hard look at their shrinking audiences and took some real risks to find the emotional drivers in their local markets. They changed the way they did research and stopped doing studies that relied on buzzwords rather than emotional connection. They identified the real motivators in their communities. As a result, they are recruiting new customers at a time when news audiences are eroding.

News marketers can no longer afford to ignore the basic tenets of advertising. Madison Avenue has clearly established execution strategies that move products off shelves that will work for us too. Just look at the success of those incredible niche strategies of cable television branding. We have entered a new era in news branding and reinventing ourselves is going to be an interesting ride.