

Testing Advertising via New Media: An Exploratory Study of Advertising Practitioner attitudes

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Kathleen's undergraduate work was undertaken at the University of Coventry, UK. This was followed by a successful career in the London advertising industry spanning a ten year period. She then joined the UK University sector where she completed her PhD in Services Advertising. She then moved out to New Zealand for four years and was a Senior Researcher at Auckland University of Technology, where she is now a Visiting Research Fellow. Kathleen has been awarded Chartered Marketer Status from the Chartered Institute of Marketing, She is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK and a Committee member of the Australian and New Zealand Advertising Academics Association.

Abstract

New media, as a free and universal communication tool, has had an impact on the power of the general public to comment on a variety of issues. As the public can comment favourably or unfavourably on advertisements, such as on Youtube, the advertising industry must start using weblogs to research reaction to their advertising campaigns. This exploratory study examines the responses of some advertising industry practitioners, both advertisers and agencies, on the impact of new media, specifically weblogs, and the use of new media as a source of research on advertising campaigns.

Introduction

New media is referred to as communication that is non traditional, technology driven, whereby communication messages can be disseminated from text messaging through to viral emails or weblogs. This allows the general public to respond through computer-mediated communication (CMC), which exponentially grows the impact of response. Platforms that the general public use as a response mechanism can include web communities, viral email, MySpace, bebo, flickr, Slashdot, Youtube, Facebook, and Weblogs. These new media are exponentially powerful due to the proliferation of information technology, enabling continuous electronic updates and rapid communication with multiple individuals simultaneously. While advertisers have used the web to provide information to potential customers and distribute advertisements, the general public has also been able to discuss and comment on advertising campaigns, particularly if they are the subject of public controversy. The objective of this exploratory paper is to discover the industry's views on the use of weblogs and how they have reacted to weblogs as a form of research on advertising campaigns.

Background

New Media and the General Public

Marketing theory suggests that consumers have always had power over manufacturers in terms of their demand for goods or services (Kotler et al. 2006). They can ignore, resist, adapt and control their own choices and that this choice alone is a form of empowerment (Denegri-Knott, Zwick and Shroeder 2006). This power has increased with the introduction of new media. New media allows the general public to respond through computer-mediated communication (CMC), which exponentially grows the impact of response. Platforms that the general public use as a response mechanism can include web communities, viral email, MySpace, bebo, flickr, Slashdot, Youtube, Facebook, and Weblogs. These new media are exponentially powerful due to the proliferation of information technology, enabling continuous electronic updates and rapid communication with multiple individuals simultaneously (Harrison et al 2006).

In applying consumer power in the online environment, Denegri-Knott (2006) proposes four strategies: control over the relationship, information, aggregation and participation. It is possible to apply these four strategies in terms of controversial advertising. The first, control over the relationship, allows consumers to control whether they engage with advertisers in terms of their advertising material. If they find an advertiser's campaign offensive they can block communication from that company through spam filters or firewalls, unsubscribe from email lists and choose not to visit a particular website. Alternatively, if they enjoyed a particular controversial advertising campaign they can download it for personal consumption, send it to friends via email and talk about it on their blogs. Using the second strategy, the availability of information results in consumers being much better informed about advertisers' activities that include advertising campaigns and the view of others' on these campaigns. Some consumers may seek interaction, or aggregation, rather than information. New media enables them to join other like-minded consumers online to discuss specific advertising campaigns either in a positive or negative manner. In other aggregation, anti-brand communities seek to expose product faults or unethical advertiser activity. The final consumer power strategy is participation, where consumers actually create content. They may suggest product development ideas or edit other member's posts.

New Media and Advertisers' Responses

Advertisers also appear empowered by new media, which offers alternative response platforms and opportunities for dialogue with the general public. The positive flow-on effects from controversial advertising and the buzz that surrounds an advertising ban can be leveraged by the advertiser (Waller 2005). While a regulatory body may uphold a complaint from the general public, the target audience is unlikely to feel the same way and as such a core of people who enjoy the controversial advertising and wish to consume it further, talk about it and send it to colleagues. The advertiser facilitates this process by providing material on the internet for distribution by interested parties via viral email and links to the website from blogs.

The power of publicity as a new media response is highlighted with statements made by advertisers including alcohol brand, Chivas who publicly stated that the 'outcry' about their advertisements boosted advertising publicity (Moon 2000). Windsor Smith made similar remarks, indicating that they were 'pleased' with the publicity generated from complaints about their advertising, claiming that the free publicity was valued at around \$4 million. Marketing experts say those who complain are simply playing into the hands of marketers. Controversial advertisements are designed to generate complaints with advertisers reaping the rewards via free publicity and consumer-initiated demand. However, the question to be asked is to what extent do advertisers and agencies listen to the public via the new media. To help answer this, a survey was undertaken to get industry people's views on testing advertising on new media.

Methodology

To explore this issue, an interview was undertaken with ten Australian advertising practitioners (including client, creative, media and account service staff). Each of the interviews lasted for thirty minutes where informants were also asked to; describe their monitoring of complaints and feedback regarding their advertising campaigns; discuss the impact of new media on their campaigns; discuss their use of new media as part of their campaigns, and comment on the impact that the general public feedback has on their campaigns. Interviews were conducted at the informant's place of business and all interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed. In the first step of the analysis, one author and their research assistant read each transcript individually and recorded the key categories of information.

Results

Do advertising agencies use new media to elicit feedback on their advertising campaigns?

Advertising practitioners agreed that advertisers do monitor general public complaints, comments and feedback from advertising campaigns, albeit this is typically a reactive rather than proactive process. All said it takes too long to search through looking for comments or complaints on the net, but agreed it would be good if there was something that could track any informal complaints and gauge feedback on their campaigns. Many obtained their information via the client who is likely to have an electronic feedback component on their website, through the regulatory body or trade media.

“Every page of (our website) has a feedback link which allows the public to contact us with feedback on a range of subjects including occasional comments from the general public on our advertising campaigns. Our corporate website also provides the general public with contact details for providing feedback, suggestions etc. Through its global network we pick up on some feedback / commentaries that appear in new media (viral email, Myspace, Youtube, Facebook, Blogs and Moblogs).”

“A lot of companies say they are not going to use new media because they are not ready or able to harness the conversations or control the feedback they might get about their campaign. The biggest thing to realise here is that like it or not, your consumers are talking about your products regardless of whether you are in new media” [Media 2].

Other advertisers were proactive in their monitoring of general public complaints used electronic monitoring of advertising websites such as Adrant, and Ads of the World, as well as broader new media sites such as You Tube. Some even sought to initiate comment by loading agency creative executions onto Myspace and Youtube.

“We have just started loading our ads onto Facebook and YouTube and our website so we will start monitoring any comments that way.”[Creative 3]

What are perceived to be the benefits of testing advertising campaigns online?

More direct, more honest and more timely feedback were perceived as the main benefits of testing advertising online. Informants observed a closer relationship between the general

public and advertisers as a result of new media. They suggest that interaction with the general public is heightened when the campaign uses some form of new media in the media mix, for example a website, or a blog or even posting adverts onto Youtube, then this ameliorates the closeness.

“When you use new media it brings the consumer [and general public] much closer. Through this new media you can often contact the advertiser directly and it is having a huge impact on the industry.” [Creative 2].

Furthermore, sometimes this feedback is not only between marketer and client, but between friends. It is a chance for advertisers to eavesdrop, to listen to conversations between audience members and to be privy to what audiences are saying about brands and advertisements. This suggests that it may be more honest, more independent feedback, as it is between friends, rather than between interviewer and participant.

“I find that it is more down to earth” [Creative 2].

“... target specific blogs have been a great source of feedback. Websites [that we set up] have been able to give us great credibility and increased exposure. New media provides independent feedback lets us know if we are on the right track” [Media Manager 1].

“...new media certainly allows greater feedback and citizen journalism” [Account Service1].

Another benefit of new media is that it enables advertisers to have a quick turnaround in terms of feedback, allows them to test the waters, and to can see the impact of their creative immediately through hits on websites or even if the execution ends up in their own email inbox. For example:

“Online media is a fantastic way of measuring your audience responses to a new piece of creative because we can immediately see if anything comes up in blogs, how many hits it gets on Youtube or if it somehow gets sent around the world as a piece of viral content and then ends back in your inbox!” [Media 2].

How valuable do advertising agencies perceive the online feedback to be?

Weighed against the benefits of online testing is the value of the feedback. Responses here related to who (and how many) were providing the feedback, whether it was positive or negative and also the potential for damage.

“You need to start looking at where the complaints are coming from and whether they actually matter. If they are not offending the target audience then who cares? For example, if parents are complaining, then you can bet that their kids are liking it!”
[Media 2].

“... we'd take it on board if it was from lots of people, but if it's just a few we know we are making good ads, because they are getting noticed. Then we laugh at the complaint” [Creative 2].

“It also depends on what emotions you are trying to provoke. Often if you are aiming for a positive response and all feedback is negative, you have to go back to the drawing board. But the general public's response is more important than the clients or the ad executive's. That's who is buying it [the advertised product or service]!”
[Creative 3]

“If the success of our campaign was reduced due to an increasing level of animosity towards our adverts, then a new plan would be developed, but then again, all publicity is good publicity right?” [Creative 1].

“If there is no risk of damage to the brand, the most complaints won't be actioned. There needs to be a potential for damage” [Account Service 2]

Conclusion

These results would suggest that advertising agencies are using new media to test their advertising ideas and to elicit feedback on campaigns currently on air. Advertising practitioners considered this form of feedback to be more direct, more honest and more timely than traditional advertising research, and its usefulness depended on who was responding, whether it was positive or negative and the potential damage to the campaign. While this is an exploratory study, which has a number of inherent limitations, such as the small number of respondents and it has focused on the internet and not all new media, the results do provide an indication of some industry attitudes. Further research could begin by interviewing more practitioners, widening the frame of reference of this study, testing specific cases, and even other new media such as mobile phones. It appears that advertising practitioners are using new media to assist in tracking advertising campaigns. However, whether they are sufficiently

skilled to discriminate between valid and reliable research and research that just happens to supports their own position is a matter for further research.

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