

Media by design

Media planners should embrace design thinking principles to go beyond numerate processes and uncover deep, meaningful insights and breakthrough ideas

By Kendra King, *Initiative Worldwide*

Driven by their penchant for media math, media agencies were once quite comfortable being left to speak their own language of half-lives, gross rating points and cost per thousands. Only occasionally did they dare to visit the world of exploration and imagination governed by the advertising agency brethren. However, with the elevated role of media and technology in the lives of consumers, media agencies have evolved to meet the needs of marketers by strengthening their strategic capabilities, progressing beyond traditional media planning to offer communications planning and offering strong performance analytics capabilities. And as part of this evolution, some media agencies have elevated the role of creativity and innovation in their processes, products and talent recruitment.

Progressive media agencies want to be 'whole-brained', embracing both the art and science of marketing. They believe this approach will increase their value with marketers and secure their position as business consultants and creative problem solvers, both of which are directly tied to the bottom line. This transforms media from a marketing expense to a marketing asset that can be directly linked to sales. Although 'art and science' is not a new concept, it can be argued that no agency has successfully balanced the two on a large scale. Since media agencies have already been entrusted by their clients to manage and analyse large amounts of data, coupled with their focus on creative talent recruitment, they are in a good position to execute.

Design strategist Tom Hardy, former

global head of design at IBM and current design instructor at Savannah College of Art and Design in the US, believes that creative problem-solving is only possible by using data, both qualitative and quantitative, to properly frame business challenges, understand the consumer wants and desires, and create effective solutions. This 'art and science' approach that Hardy outlines is at the core for what is commonly known as 'design thinking', made popular by firms like IDEO and Frog Design. Design thinking is a new approach for most media agencies and could be a way to easily bring these two worlds together. It is a practical approach focused on solving problems and discovering opportunities from various perspectives.

Still, there will be naysayers that question whether a media agency can successfully leverage design thinking. For them, the image of graphic designers or fashion designers creating masterpieces conflicts with their perceptions of the old-school media stepchild. But as Fast Company's Mark Dziersk revealed, the emphasis should not be

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placed on the act of designing (the verb), but instead on the noun - design thinking. The question evolves from 'why should media agencies embrace design thinking?' to 'why not?'

Media agency leaders who have offhandedly flirted with the notion of firing everyone who doesn't fit with their new vision for media should embrace design thinking as a way to mentally transform their employees. Transformation, says Dziersk, can be achieved through stimulating, hands-on, experiential training (and a bit of brainwashing) based on three easy steps: defining the challenge at hand; creating and considering many options; and learning from prototypes to refine selected options.

Borrowing from three principles of design thinking: The Art of Reframing, Visual Synthesis and Idea Iteration, we can create an imaginative new road map for media practitioners to learn and adopt.

THE ART OF REFRAMING

Designers refer to reframing as the ability to see problems from multiple perspectives, resulting in a revolutionary idea. Apple, the master reframer, is one of the most innovative companies in the world. It doesn't create products; it invents categories. From the Macintosh that redefined personal computing, and the iPod that changed how music was consumed and bought, to the launch of the iPhone that powered mobile computing, an entirely new phone category. Apple zigs when everyone else zags.

As the keepers of the competitive scorecards, miners of performance data and syndicated sources, media agencies can learn to reframe by first transforming their vast

data sources into usable information. Then, with a clear perspective of the media, consumer and competitive landscape, they can use various creative exercises, such as those that encourage random, non-linear thinking, the use of analogies and making comparisons from unrelated categories. With this new line of thinking (and the data to back it up), media agencies can challenge client briefs, providing fresh insight into what the actual task at hand is - moving beyond traditional media objectives, like achieving awareness through a combination of reach and frequency calculations.

VISUAL SYNTHESIS

In *Exposing the Magic of Design*, Jon Kolko, principal designer at Frog Design, describes the design profession as 'a way of organising complexity or finding clarity in an overwhelming amount of data'. This is achieved through a process of synthesis that seeks to organise, reduce and clarify. In the advertising agency world, this step is owned

by account planners; however, in many media agencies, synthesis does not occur, or it is not given the proper amount of effort and time to be fruitful.

Kolko emphasises the need to 'externalise' or visualise data to aid in synthesis, which can be done simply with an affinity map using 'a big wall, a marker and lots of Post-it notes'. By injecting visual synthesis into the communication planning process, media strategists are inspired to uncover meaningful insights and breakthrough ideas.

At Initiative, we use our affinity mapping sessions to help our analysts and strategists make sense of performance, syndicated and primary data to inspire creative solutions. All participants are given a stack of Post-it notes and asked to write down everything they know about the consumer. Then as a group, we segment the Post-it notes into category after category until a clear pattern emerges that becomes the foundation of our consumer understanding.

By visualising the data, it helps stimulate new thoughts that would not have been

apparent in a spreadsheet format. We have also created proprietary tools, such as the Insight Generator™ and Insight Image Maps™ that help our strategists create 'mental models' that simplify the complexities of consumer behaviour and the relationship consumers have with media.

IDEA ITERATION

Idea iteration borrows from iterative design by encouraging a series of formal and informal creativity sessions with participation from a cross-disciplinary team that can analyse ideas from multiple perspectives. 'Iterative design' is a cyclical process that involves creating a prototype of the solution followed by testing, analysis and refinement in the effort to improve the idea before a mass launch, according to Kolko. Integrated teams of engineers, programmers, social scientists and marketers are hand-selected based upon their experience, recognising that no two projects are the same. While most creative types don't envision such diversity of thought

