



BY STEVE MOYNIHAN
steve@moynihimedia.biz

The Great Outdoors

Rethinking the value of a 'traditional' medium, thanks to new metrics

Opportunity is watching you nearly everywhere. Up here. Over there. Look a little higher. No, it's not the money you could be saving with Geico. And it's not social networking, although it seems that every brand is clamoring for a fan page on Facebook. In fact, it has nothing to do with digital media, which has captivated most marketers.

Some might even view this opportunity as somewhat of a "throwback," an old-fashioned tactic, overshadowed by newer, flashier media. It's outdoor advertising. Not in its new, digital out-of-home forms. We're talking "traditional" types of outdoor here, including billboards, posters and transit.

To paraphrase the Ford commercial: "Why Outdoor, Why Now?" For one, there's a new measurement system in place that resolves past accountability issues and allows for side-by-side comparisons to other local media (more on that later). But there are also strategic reasons that outdoor deserves a fresh look from marketers and agencies as part of their communications strategies.

Most brands, to a varying degree, map their customer contact strategy back to the purchase funnel. Briefly, the funnel helps explain how to take prospects from interest in the brand (top of the funnel) to some sort of action, such as purchase or perception change (bottom of the funnel). For many brands, it's a numbers game. They need to constantly fill the top of the funnel with new prospects to achieve sales goals. With its ability to reach high numbers of prospects and "always on" messaging, filling the funnel is one of outdoor's key strengths.

Brand exposure close to the purchase decision has a profound impact on sales. This is one reason billions of dollars are spent on below-the-line, in-store promotional activity. Outdoor advertising easily reaches the in-transit consumer, giving your brand an opportunity to have the final word with a prospect. This ability to reach the mobile consumer closer to the point of transaction is particularly relevant in today's on-the-go society, where a traditional TV-heavy approach may not connect with your prime prospects.

There's a misperception that outdoor is not a "targeted" medium. Nothing could be further from the truth! Using robust audience data and sophisticated mapping analytics, marketers can pinpoint where their best prospects live, work and play. By layering on traffic patterns, you can be quite precise with when and where you want to reach these prospects.

As I mentioned earlier, a lack of effective audience measure-

ment has impeded outdoor's ability to be evaluated on a level strategic playing field. Recently, the Traffic Audit Bureau released a new audience measurement system called "Eyes On" ratings. Perhaps the greatest benefit of this system is that it will finally allow outdoor to be incorporated into a given brand's overall media mix.

Still not sure if outdoor should be a part of your media strategy? Ask yourself the following questions, and if you answer yes to a few, you should seriously consider including it in your plan.

- Does your brand have a local market strategy? Are there key markets that are driving sales or others with recognized opportunity for growth? If so, outdoor can help provide efficient and effective market coverage with the added benefit of always being "on."

- Are you currently using other local media (TV, radio, newspapers)? Adding outdoor to the mix can broaden your in-market reach, connecting with light users of other media.

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- Is creating interest in/awareness of the brand important to your overall communication strategy? This type of top-of-the-funnel activity is a perfect fit for outdoor.

- Are you a retail brand trying to influence behavior closer to the point of purchase? Use outdoor to intercept and impact the in-transit consumer.

One trend in the media agency business has been the consolidation of outdoor-related activities into specialized shops or business units. The key benefit for marketers is that these units provide greater marketplace intelligence and buying "clout." The downside is that decisions on how to deploy outdoor assets are often disconnected from overall media strategy, resulting in a weaker media plan for the brand. It's time to make more strategic use of outdoor so it's not just an "add-on."

You just might be surprised at who's watching.

Steve Moynihan is president of Moynihan/Media, Inc., an Austin, Texas-based ad sales and planning consultancy.

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