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Commentary

Up Next: Attention-Based Media

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An impression shouldn't be called an impression if it doesn't make one.

To date, digital media companies have generally competed with traditional media on the basis of reach.

And in mimicking that model, digital media has underplayed the very magic that makes the digital world special: consumer engagement.

Consumer engagement is the sum of an equation that includes an attentive (and receptive) audience and an attention-grabbing (entertaining, useful, empathetic, etc.) brand experience.

Engagement is the result of a partnership between an audience and a brand.

Digital media is the middleware.

But media's most central role in that supply chain is delivering people's attention. Reach is a means to the end goal of attention. (If you pay to reach a billion people and no one pays attention - what have you bought?)

Which begs the question: Why are media companies primarily evaluated on how many people they reach rather than how much attention they deliver?

To put it another way, especially for brand advertisers - and especially in digital media: why is ATTENTION not the basic currency of media?

Attention can be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively.

In the simplest empirical view, attention is time. It is the amount of consumer time spent with a media company per month, per session, per page, per brand.

For mass brands, quantity matters. Making a meaningful contribution to a brand with more than \$1 billion in annual sales obviously requires the attention of many, many consumers.

But attention also has qualitative values.

In their book, "The Attention Economy," Thomas Davenport and John Beck plot attention on a chart with quadrants for Front of Mind, Back of Mind, Voluntary and Captive. Their theory points out that the quality of attention--from most essential/task driven to most relaxed/enjoyment driven--has a significant effect on cognitive receptivity. (They even re-publish Dr. Maslow's famous "Pyramid of Needs" from basic survival to self-actualization as the "Attention Hierarchy" and it works quite well.)

Heavily footnoted Harvard-published studies aside, you can appreciate this on an intuitive level. You are probably more likely to internalize a conversation with a friend when you are playing a casual game together (relaxed mindstate) rather than when you are in the midst of checking the

performance of your stock portfolio (abject terror mindset). On the spectrum of different mindstates, the relaxed consumer tends to be the receptive consumer.

This qualitative nuance is especially pertinent for digital media.

Unlike television where entertainment is the predominant purpose of the medium (and relaxation is the audience correlative), digital media span a broad swath of human activity ranging from managing Web mail inboxes or cruising social networks to debating politics or filing your tax returns.

For brand advertisers, the qualitative side of attention then begs the question--what type of media environments offer the best quality of attention?

If we plotted digital media on the same map mentioned above, we would have clusters of "Utility" based properties (mail/messenger, commerce, social networks) and "Experience" based properties (entertainment, games, virtual worlds).

So the invisible obvious to us was quite simple.

If media companies are valued by reach, but the desired result of that reach for brands is attention, new media companies should be predicated on both reach and attention.

And if consumer brand receptivity correlates most directly with a relaxed mindset, we should amass attention exclusively through entertaining experiences and enable brands to make their most creative, attention-grabbing contributions to those experiences.