

A Lutheran View of Advertising Orthodoxy

by

Timothy R.D. Grayson

Advertising is a sophisticated, flourishing art form that grew from a root predating our own sophistication by a millennium or more. It has over the past century, however, stratified into several castes, primarily among which are Brand, Direct, and Promotion. For many reasons that separation has seemed right, and, more importantly, it appears to have worked. Variation produced growth and value; competition among them elevated the state of the art. More and more though, the distinction seems unwarranted – unproductive even. Something is not right, and some have begun to declare it. Theses have been nailed to the door and it may be time for the faithful to address the need for change.

I. Advertising context

Brand advertising typically lives in broadcast media, designed to create consumer understanding, awareness, and drive longer-term market favour. It is measurable only in a soft, indirect way because the communication is one-way and can not be reasonably tied to sales in most instances. Direct, on the other hand, uses more prosaic forms of

media including mail, online, and other clear connections with the audience in addition to broadcast media. Its prowess is producing and measuring response against the many communication variables put before an audience. Direct seeks to inform, convince, and impel (immediate) action. Promotion is the pop of the champagne cork, bursting forth to generate attention and bubbles of excitement. It typically goes flat in a short while and thus is often a lead-in for the other two.

Brand and Direct could be considered the originating, settled variations of the advertising “religion”: the catholic and the orthodox. They justifiably grew distinct when at some point it became clear that those ads typified by “Brand” media could not successfully call-to-action as could those we would call “Direct,” given the latter’s proximity to audience and purchase point. The initial realization was probably made in a few sectors in which the products’ very nature (e.g. food, liquor, tobacco, and, in the ultimate Direct manifestation, cataloguing) inhibited an immediate call for response. Their respective successes led to followers, methods, and codification: a natural response and reasonable evolution. But eventually, what began knowingly as the best-alternative in the circumstance *tipped* so that the *distinction* “effect” became the *distinctive* “cause.”

The context of the times – including technological capabilities, communication media and channels, and sophistication of both consumer *and* industry – provides much of the answer for this dichotomy. Not only are some categories inhospitable to a call-to-action, falling back on top-of-mind awareness at the buying decision point, but response mechanics have been cumbersome and ineffective. The prospect has to be *so compelled* by the content, and the message so portable, that (s)he will transport interest to a convenient time and place. Upon doing so, the response process itself is often a time-

consuming, invasive selling interaction – at the wrong point in the purchase cycle. Even the mere posting of a response channel (800-number or URL) in the Brand context can be inefficient, as *the “Brand” media has also inhibited transport*. In short, the contextually-determined chasm between message and response has made Brand largely ineffective for reliable call-to-action. Thus contextual constraints justified the alternate path for Brand thought.

So Brand focuses on the image and perception of the product and its provider. Imagery-based methods expanded until eventually inverting to focus on consumer “self-imagery.” That is, Brands sought target markets that would identify themselves within the frame of the brand itself. About this time, in the early 1980s, a thought-rationalization argument that would cement constraints and justify Brand orthodoxy was unleashed. Trout/Ries’ *Positioning: the battle for your mind* was by all accounts a revolutionary rethinking of brand marketing “how.” Within the context of the day – no cellular phones, IBM-XT at the leading edge – it *implicitly* assumed universal principals (later “immutable” laws) and conditions that became accepted wisdom. While revolutionizing the practical “how,” the Trout/Ries gospel wrote the Brand “why” dogma.

Meanwhile, using a simple device within a broad media message, Les Wunderman’s experiment with Columbia House proved that a response-capable call-to-action in broadcast media increased response *and* sales. Direct marketing could and did provide customizable targeting, fluid offers, and consumer incentive to perform commitment-supporting action. Unfortunately, despite these real benefits, the method

did not fit the Brand [ritual/catechism/method...] and was left to continue its own separate development.

The significance of “positioning” can not be understated in this evolution. Despite subsequent fads and trends, shifted favour to other tactics, and changing conditions in the industry, a generation of marketers perpetuates the Trout/Ries’ broad framework largely without question.

II. Context shift

Times change; context shifts. In this case technology has narrowed the message-response gap, knowledge has shifted power to the consumer, and market cynicism undermines credibility of commercial communications. While some principals or laws persist, others are inoperative.

In the market, today’s consumer has been conditioned to expect and demand instant, authentic, and relevant engagement. The Internet explosion brought a world of on-demand, instant *information* to the masses. The ability to research and verify claims or find alternatives suggests that marketing communication must be delivered in some other form than a singular, preprogrammed message. A lecture doesn’t work as well as a discussion or argument in this environment. Now, with instant fulfillment of wants such as product samples and cross-channel integration convenience (e.g., Web tied to TV tied to mobile phone), being more important to the consumer, marketers who have yet to address message iteration, timing, and rhythm are falling behind.

As so many studies point out, today’s consumer wants and takes control. In the communications paradigm, this is a high-leverage power shift. Aided by technology (e.g.

TiVo, pop-up blockers), legislation (e.g., PIPEDA, Do-Not-Call, etc.), and the media (e.g., micro-niche specialty channels and periodicals) these consumers dictate the terms, (time, content, and acceptance) of commercial communication. Even within scientifically-designed, hospitable appeals for response made with empirically desirable offers, these consumers are taking control in an insidious way: They refuse to respond at all or fabricate information – to avoid being databased. Old model advertisers are being practically and virtually held outside formidable gates to paradise. Pushing harder will not work: it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle . . .

Further troubling those still following the traditional theology: through hard-won experience we realize that today’s consumers defy aggregation into the substantial, dense, and homogenous “segments” of yesteryear. The world offers too many options and the zeitgeist impels us to express our individuality by finding commonality in deeper but much narrower sets of qualities. Thus, markets are splintering and will continue to destabilize – probably with increasing velocity and fluidity. The fluidity results from the more transient, fashion-driven identities we all clothe ourselves in *and* the attention deficit disorder we as a society have taken on. All of which further polarizes individual response to commercial communications.

But there is good in all these rain clouds. Most significantly, there are many more response options and services to allow for engagement with the potential buyer. Communication technology especially has developed well beyond that which was available even when *Positioning* and its supplemental newer testaments were written. The simplicity and pervasiveness of response mechanisms – from mobile voice to SMS, from WiFi hotspots and WAP-enabled PDAs to low-cost IVR – makes every medium a

valid response mechanism. And, if the Internet B2C-focused experiment of the late 1990s proved nothing else, it's that the elegance of consumer interaction can reach artistically inviting levels. Given that consumer technology acceptance is geometrically faster now than a half-century ago, advertising industry inertia and ritual are the likely causes for resistance to new media and response mechanisms.

The industry's first response to this evolving condition was Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and consumer-focused marketing as pioneered by Peppers and Rogers in *The One to One Future*. But these are still an anemic attempt to be more direct, responsive, and meaningful to each singular audience. In this respect they are very good half-answers to the conditions of *yesterday*. These measures are not, however, a bridge for integrating the broad "push" of the Brand *message* with the "pull" of Direct and Promotion-generated consumer response. Such a bridge, *imbued with* the personalized engagement that CRM can sustain when deployed artistically, is the next step: a progressive *dialog* between seller and buyer. A staged or stepped process from unknown through first date and onward to a marriage.

III. Summary

From my vantage point, advertising and marketing is at the beginning of a conceptual shift unlike any since Trout/Ries brought "positioning" into the marketing lexicon. The hyperbole comes from the observation that the many steps along the way, including CRM and one-to-one, have been made largely outside the advertising centre of gravity. The dominance of advertising MarComm – to the consumer – and its persistent

reliance on and propagation of a bankrupt framework is, frankly, both confusing and counter-productive in the market place. It is time to change.

Smart marketers – those that would leapfrog ahead in this advantageous period of fluidity and uncertainty – will use the opportunity wisely.

XXX