

Looking for the Silver Bullet

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Marketing often plays the whipping boy for unhappy corporate management. The challenge of quantifying the return on ad spending has always been a source of irritation but now the diminishing efficiency and rising costs of traditional media are increasingly unacceptable. Given the perception of advertising as an expense rather than an investment, many companies feel like hostages, forced into TV buys for a smaller audience, in a more cluttered environment, at a higher price.

When a new marketplace of more powerful, better-informed customers makes old ways less useful, we have to strike out in new directions. This is the toughest thing for a human being: we are hard-wired to follow the routes that have led to past successes.

As the calls for accountability become more urgent, the pressure on big agencies to deliver alternatives is forcing them to get serious about genuine integrated marketing. Clearly, it is no longer acceptable simply to add direct mail, or promotions, or even online ads, while maintaining the bulk of the budget in traditional 30-second spots.

Those many different kinds of agencies acquired to prove holding companies' commitment to integration now have to actually serve up innovative creative for new media. The big agencies have to fight their most basic instincts to protect TV budgets and figure out how to become, at least, media neutral, if not champions of new media. Everyone needs to reassess a much bigger marketing communications portfolio — not just the Internet and search advertising, but repurposed direct mail that has

morphed into relationship marketing, CRM, one-to-one marketing, experience marketing, and all that talk about customer touch points.

Despite lots of success stories about these marketing programs, and the great attraction of their accountability, there is a pervasive sense that marketing has failed to answer the critical question: “What replaces the :30 TV commercial?” There is a tacit sense that these new approaches, even in the aggregate and when optimized within the appropriate marketing mix, will continue to be fragmented and analytically intensive, needing lots of care and feeding.

When consultants promised that their CRM systems would overcome this kind of fragmentation and labor, corporations eagerly invested

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serious time and money for turn-key solutions for capturing and managing customer knowledge. Unfortunately, situating the solution in IT groups, without building-in marketing insights to translate customer information into customer knowledge, the systems became implementation nightmares. Even when companies have managed to put CRM systems to work, the attachment to old ways of dealing with customers undermines their efforts. CRM was supposed to feed relationship marketing, but few asked whether customers or prospects wanted a “relationship” or whether they would believe they had one with a company that made it next-to-impossible to get in touch with a human being.

The one thing these new marketing initiatives cannot be is the silver bullet TV campaign that delivers the “big idea” to masses of people, leading to skyrocketing sales and instant brand awareness.

For all the economic, organizational and cultural reasons big agencies have to struggle break away from the old models, this innate need to do

what has worked before is the biggest reason they can't come up with breakthrough answers. It's like expecting buggy makers to invent the Model T.

We have to start building a new base of experience about what works, for whom, when and how. Clients are asking, "What kind of advertising can work on cell phones?" "How can we get our message into social networks like MySpace?" "Will people watch movies on 2"

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screens?" These questions are all aimed at finding new vehicles to deliver the same old messages. But they are the wrong questions. Instead, we need to stop trying to bamboozle people into listening to companies and brands talk about themselves and, instead, listen to the people who might be interested. The only way to keep them from tuning out is to make it about them. Advertisers on MTV have known this about their target for a quarter-century. Now, it's true of almost everyone.

For most marketers, the Holy Grail of "relevant" messaging and one-to-one marketing conjures up a terrifying vision of dozens of different messages and consultants buried under mountains of data and analysis. The good news is that the Internet, which is so much to blame for giving customers unprecedented power, is also the solution for managing more relevant, targeted, interactive communication. Yes, it's more work, but only those who make the Web the center of all customer contact will discover its efficiencies and be poised to seize new opportunities. And only marketers not wedded to old solutions will develop the messages and offerings that will attract, motivate and satisfy customers well into the 21st century.