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2007: The Year Traditional Agencies 'Got' Search

by Chris Copeland, Friday, Dec 28, 2007 1:00 PM ET

WHAT BETTER WAY TO END a prosperous year for search than with a little controversy? A recent Search Insider column by Gord Hotchkiss declaring that media agencies don't "get" search struck a cord with search specialists and marketers alike, creating an interesting divide between SEMs with larger advertisers in the space who are benefiting from smart, integrated campaigns and those who are unable to tap that market. Whether or not agencies get search is a popular topic for those who don't reside in agencies. As the oldest-running search agency within a holding company, I have decided that for the holidays I would like to provide my Canadian colleague at Search Insider with an invitation to get away from all the snow and cold that seems to be the December Chicago/Utah search conference circuit and sit with me by the fire and discuss not only how agencies do get search, but that 2007 was the year of change and agencies grasping search.

December got even more interesting when I read a piece in DM News by Dave Pasternack, who took a week off from preaching that bid tools were the last salvation of society to question Dell's decision to globally consolidate all of their media under a major holding company.

Hotchkiss contends that big agencies will never "get" search because they are slow

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to act, only want to get it because they have to, and are less interested in search than other media because the dollars aren't as big as what they make in TV. Much the same concept Pasternack speaks of when questioning why a marketer would choose a vendor for something as crucial as search as part of a bigger marketing decision.

But the biggest misrepresentation derived from both writers was this bit from Hotchkiss, "Agencies persuade...But you can't persuade someone in search."

Upon reading this, I immediately Googled "Park City, Utah hospital." I then rang the ER and asked if a colleague of mine had been checked in for delusions from altitude sickness. I was relieved to learn no one had been.

You see, persuasion is at the heart of everything that we do in search -- from where we place an ad on a page (Hotchkiss' golden triangle study) to how we message. The experience we drive to every step of the process is about understanding behavior and how to better optimize for the purpose of connecting consumer intent with advertiser content.

That is what advertisers of all shapes and sizes do, so to suggest that only search stand alones can handle this minimizes search's service value far too much.

Likewise, Pasternack's suggestion that when companies make seismic shifts in how they handle their overall media they are discrediting the value and importance of search optimization, is almost disrespectful to the intelligence of the CMOs and the marketing teams working for them. At some companies, search is now a top-three channel of all media and is a significant consideration.

Both writers are missing the fact that not only do agencies get it, but never before has integration been more real or valuable for advertisers. Any time my analytics team does work for a client, not only can they look across search channels, but

online and even offline channels. Planning search buys based on historical insights of correlation to TV buying or understanding how more radio can impact search query volume is a big deal and highly valuable for a client. This is a level of depth that you can rarely find outside the agency realm and is crucial for success these days, going far beyond a "pretty dashboard" to real and actionable learnings.

Beyond integration and persuasion, there are three factors that seem to be missing in Hotchkiss' appreciation for why big agencies are not descendants of the steam supporters of olden times. First off, big media holding companies are creations of only the last two decades. So, while you can argue that ad agencies have been around for much longer, their bread and butter is creative and TV. And if you argue that they are slow to act, the overarching ownership groups in these cases get the picture to be bigger than just moving pictures bought in 30-second spots.

The second factor on why change has happened is this little company called Google. My guess is their name came up more during winter Search Insider Summit than WPP or IPG. If agencies don't change, Google is a force of nature that has the potential to rip at the core of what agencies can do. Already we are seeing Google pitch "creative ideas" to clients while spending a great deal of time wooing clients to spend as much as they can in all areas of Google. The difference is that a structure exists for large agencies to engage and work with Google on a client's behalf that is much stronger than down the stream.

Finally, and this is always the biggest input for change, clients expect it. While some can question the value of a global media RFP that includes search, they also should recognize the massive investments made in this area. Whether it is acquisitions like WPP's of 24/7 Real Media or the search-specific investments made by OMD, Isobar/Carat and IPG over the years, these guys play to win and have made the right monetary investments. On top of this, these agencies happen to employ some of

the finest minds in the digital space. Individuals like Sean Finnegan, Sarah Fay and my own boss, Rob Norman, have been consistently recognized not just as leaders, but visionaries in the media revolution. These seasoned media experts do not see search as a secondary citizen but rather an agent for change and leading indicator of consumer behavior.

Look, I understand why guys like Hotchkiss and Pasternack have to make these arguments. If you are not a part of a larger media agency, or are not trying to be acquired by an agency, then the model surely must be flawed. The fact is, if you aspire to work with Fortune 500 companies -- and traditional agencies and holding companies work with 80% to 90% of them -- and you acknowledge they get it, then your target pool just went from the Pacific to the size of my three-year-old's inflatable pool.

Shakespeare once wrote "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." I've seen great performances in dinner theater before, but we all know the neon lights are brightest down on Broadway, which conveniently enough is right around the corner from Madison Ave. There's absolutely no reason why those in agencies and those in stand-alone SEMs can't both play starring roles in productions of all sizes, but to suggest that ad agencies don't and won't get it is a view best buried in the snow.

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