

# **Time for You to Grow Up, Digital**

by Michael Atkin

It's now more than twenty years since digital media began its insurgency, revolutionizing not only marketing to consumers and businesses, but transforming the operations, the economics and the expectations of all previously existing media. An ocean of ink has been spilled trying to explain this explosive phenomenon, but I think it comes down to a simple set of promises made by digital media from the very beginning: 1) a promise to the consumer to make information, experiences and things available when and where they are wanted; 2) a promise to the marketer to connect with the consumer at the most relevant times and places; 3) a promise of concrete behavioral and intentional data signals to connect the consumer and the marketer deeply and interactively. These new promises were perceived, even if hazily, by a group of perceptive and creative pioneers in the new medium; and their persistence and passionate advocacy, and the concurrent invention of new technological hardware, software and processes, built the digital media ecosystem that we take for granted today.

## **A Painful Transition**

Like every medium before it—whether TV, radio, print, direct marketing or OOH—digital media are going through a transition, evolving sometimes painfully into a more mature form for better, less awkward human interaction. And along with its own transition, digital is also forcing transitions on the traditional media, creating new opportunities and problems, and a new economic reality for media owners. If you've ever raised a teenager, you can relate to this transition: a continuous

eruption of new discoveries, surprising new insights, and always the unexpected. But also the indulgence of foolish actions. We put up with behavior that would never be overlooked in a mature person. In digital, just like in every medium that came before it, this takes the form of vestigial practices. For example, we still distribute highly interruptive and irrelevant commercial messages, although consumers are increasingly taking matters more in their own hands with the rise of ad blocking. We permit unconscionable repetition of an identical creative message to the same target. We allow individual media to create and present their own data report cards, with few or no agreed standards or the industry-accepted auditing and data transparency that is considered the minimum price of entry for the traditional media. And, most egregious, the unparalleled new opportunities provided by the underlying technologies for misplaced messages and plain old fraud. Advertisers and agencies can have great discussions on how to value the digital impression in relation to other media options or combinations or sequences, but let's start with humans at least, and get the bots and the leakage of client money resources they represent out of the equation.

## **Unique Challenges of Digital**

The promise and potential of digital media have never been stronger. But advertisers and agencies face unique challenges in bringing them to effective fruition—challenges created by the technical complexity of the media themselves, and learning intricate processes in order to manage them effectively for the benefit of the business. For example, every advertiser and agency knows that they must develop full digital expertise. They must know what kind of content will play a role and who will develop it (in some cases a license agreement is required to use content from another source). They must know about

frequency capping, particularly on cross-platform campaigns. They must know how the consistency of message works on each device (and in combination with traditional media). They must know how certain devices are growing faster than others and how they are being used by their target audiences. They must know how to measure in real time and how to avoid incompatible sites and digital fraud; and they must be aware of relevant viewability measures. They must know how to use data analytics and the realistic attribution of all touch points. They must know how to use and respond to social media. They must understand programmatic buying (including digital video). Digital technology is now accessible to almost everyone and it's transforming relationships with customers. And its value must be judged accordingly.

The real benefits of using digital media are realized in its tight integration into a comprehensive media strategy. A strategy that responds to the complete consumer selling and satisfaction process. (Whether you visualize the strategy as a funnel, a circle, or a wheel of fortune is less relevant than that it best leverages a brand's marketing spending towards the generation of revenue.) The difficulty we need to solve for digital media in this regard is that, unlike traditional forms, which can generally be placed in silos alongside the selling process, a digital medium can change roles. It can be **Dispositional**—creating awareness and preference that predisposes the audience to consider and chose the brand, or **Conversational**—making emotional and human connections, or **Transactional**—moving to concrete action; providing direct access to solving the audience's needs.

To make the best use of these media, they need to be placed in a new strategic framework that defines which roles they will play, how they will integrate with all the other media and, most

crucially, how they will be measured in terms of fulfilling the marketer's communication and business objectives. This is not something our industry is well equipped for at present. Those professionals who built their careers on traditional media need further guidance with digital media. And those who more recently have become the digital experts need to more fully understand the most relevant components of traditional media. And the evangelism, cheerleading and siloing of digital, so useful at the start of the medium's rise, now have to give way to more hard-headed and fully integrated strategic media thinking. And real, consistent, correct and audited data has to replace the individual media report card.

## Take 8 Steps Forward

I offer 8 initial steps to bring about the next transition for digital:

1. Identify fraud. It's a war. Resolve to prioritize and fully fund the expertise and technologies to counter the bots.
2. Create an unassailable body of public research on the correct measurement and reporting for digital audiences and digital media effects and effectiveness.
3. Create unified industry standards and transparent reporting of objective digital media audience delivery data. Subject all reported data and processes to periodic audit.
4. Put the thinking and resources in *now* to solve the all platform audience and message identification problems definitively, for true control of frequency and optimal message delivery.
5. Reexamine your selling and satisfaction business model and apply a new strategic framework to assign

- Dispositional, Conversational and Transactional roles for digital media, specific to your brand.
6. Put the measurement plan first. Identify media KPIs that link only to your specific selling model and brand business goals.
  7. Create appropriate structures, internally and with external agency resources, that foster the integration of digital and traditional media in a unified media money management strategy that is attuned to business objectives. Create specific and meaningful incentives that reward integrated media work.
  8. Find the right people. Locate people who will think objectively and creatively across all media options, digital and traditional, existing and emerging, who are willing to learn, and who will ideate and execute integrated media strategies dedicated solely to brand business results.

Some of these steps can be implemented directly by an individual client, acting in concert with their agencies. Several may require expert outside counsel. And some will only be achieved through joint industry-wide pressure and action.

In a nutshell, the most difficult aspects of the next transformation are technology and people. If the past is any guide, the technology will be there when we need it. But using it will require extraordinary people with curiosity, vision, creativity and the propensity to work in a team on the client's behalf. Finding the right people resources for a client's digital initiatives, whether internal or external, will be the game-winning move in a mature digital ecosystem.

*January, 2017*