Advanced Knowledge for Senior Marketers | December 2012

THE KNOWLEDGE

MEDIA SYNERGY – THE MISSING INGREDIENT

Professor Don E. Schultz.

SYNOPSIS

Media synergy is like the proverbial will-o-the-wisp. Everyone thinks it's good, but few can demonstrate it. Media synergy must add value but there's no accepted method of measuring it. It's what all advertisers hope to achieve with their media purchases but no one quite knows how to create it. Professor Don Schultz from The Medill School at Northwestern University in the U.S. discusses and illustrates why this "value added" mystery marketing communication concept has eluded marketers for so long and why an answer may be in the offing.

DEFINITION

The concept of media synergy has been around for years. Termed cross-media research in the last century, the goal has always been to determine the additional impact of a combination of media forms/messages for the same brand being attended to or accepted by an individual consumer. Today, media synergy is generally acknowledged to be:

Media synergy arises when the combined effect or impact of a number of media activities is different from the sum of their individual effects on individual consumers. Thus, synergy is a phenomenon in which the whole is not always exactly equal to the sum of the parts, but could be greater than, or lesser than that sum.
(Schultz, Block and Raman, 2011)

CURRENT THINKING

Most media research has been focused on individual media forms, i.e., the goal was to identify the greatest number of unduplicated audience members for a specific medium such as magazine titles, television shows, etc. Since the advertiser used mostly mass media messages, the media goal was efficiency, i.e., that to reach the largest unduplicated audience provided the optimal solution. Thus, synergy, either within or across media was an irrelevant question.

With the growth of new media forms and fragmentation of existing ones, because of technology and the Internet, beginning in the middle 1990s, media planners began to seek optimal media combinations. Media synergy became a media planning priority. Initially, synergy-thinking was driven by two approaches: (a) the added value of simultaneous media exposures (multiple media messages received at one point in time as a result of consumer multi-tasking) or (b) the extended impact of sequential media messages delivered by multiple media forms (audiences exposed to a sequence of advertising messages, i.e., television advertising driving the viewer to the advertiser's web site or similar). Both were considered viable approaches.

Most synergy research focused initially on the impact of ***sequential*** exposures since that was the traditional media planning approach - optimize one medium and then add another. In 2004, we developed another view, that of consumer media consumption brought about by consumers accessing multi-media forms at the same or in very close proximity. ***Simultaneity*** grew out of the idea that customers selected the media form they would use rather than just those the advertiser distributed. With an expanding number of choices, the consumer could and would select media forms of value to them, not just those that were efficient for the marketer. In 2005, Joseph Pilotta and I argued that the true goal of media was to be accessed and used by consumers and that was where marketing value actually occurred for the advertiser.

In 2011, I along with my colleagues Martin Block and Kalyan Raman developed an extended view of media synergy. Using consumer reported media usage data from nationally projectable bi-annual samples of U.S. consumers, we combined those consumer reports on the form of media accessed, the time spent with each of 31 media forms and the self-reported data on which each media form had in terms of purchase influence in nine consumer product categories.

Using a statistical approach, we demonstrated that those three elements (media form accessed, time spent with each media form and reported media influence) could be combined and the interactions of those three elements detected in the measured categories. Thus, marketers could statistically identify the best combination of media to influence a specific set of customers in a specific product category. Assuming the marketer was present in the proper combination of media forms, synergy would likely occur. The key, of course, was that the synergistic effects and impact of multi-media exposure came from consumers, not just as hypothesized by marketer's media distribution.

Today, in considering media influence or impact, marketers are still faced with making one of two choices: the marketer-driven, sequential use model determined by media distribution or the acceptance that it is the consumer who creates media synergy, based on their actions. Which is the most appropriate alternative? There are still strong opinions supporting each view with no clear consensus.

IMPLICATION FOR MANAGERS

Given the limited amount of research available on the topic, one is hard put to argue one side or the other. It does seem clear, however, that given the rapidly expanding social and mobile media spectra, marketing and brand managers still must decide whether sequential or simultaneous media use is the best choice for them and their brands. Media synergy may well be created under both approaches, but that synergy may not occur at the same level or with the same intensity in both systems. Either is difficult to measure today, but, it is likely those restrictions will soon disappear, based on the emerging new forms of electronic surveillance and consumer reported data. In the meantime, marketing and brand managers will have to make a choice of which alternative to accept to identify the mystery media ingredient.

FURTHER READING

Schultz, Don, Martin Block and Joseph J. Pilotta (2004) "Developing the foundation for a new approach to understanding how media advertising works", 3rd Annual ESOMAR/ARF World Audience Measurement Conference, Geneva, June 13 -18

Schultz, Don E., Martin Block and Kalyan Raman, (2011) "Understanding Consumer-Created Media Synergy" JOURNAL OF MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS, May, pp. 1-15

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