Moving Targets

Contrary to what many marketers would like to believe, there is no such thing as a "captive audience" anymore. In fact, in today's digitized world, the term is misleading and even lazy. It implies that an audience has no choice but to watch what you push onto their retinas and into their brains. As such, it gives short shrift to the importance of relevant, quality content.

As we all know, each and every one of us has a choice whether to watch your content or not. It all comes down to whether what you've got to offer has earned the right to capture our attention, and hopefully prompt a desired behavior, like a purchase.

So, it's not about a "captive audience." It's about "captivating audiences." And "captivating audiences" is no longer a simple matter of cleverness and creativity. It demands a sophisticated understanding not only of those you wish to reach, but also where they are and what they need at any given moment.

This means that the consumer's frame-of-mind is paramount, and the most important thing to understand is that the consumer's mindset, more often than not, is that of a *shopper*. Further complicating matters is the relatively new reality that a shopper is not necessarily someone who is in a store.

As I wrote in the March/April edition of *The Hub* ("Merchandising 2.0," p. 18), retail is everywhere a transaction happens. If I see an ad for *American Idol* at the airport and as a result whip out my iPhone to

Shoppers today are anything but "captive audiences."

download one of the contestant's songs, I've shopped. I'm not physically at a store, but I've made a purchase nonetheless.

FRAMES OF MIND

Because shoppers increasingly decide when and where to make a purchase, communications strategies must be developed accordingly.

It's no longer sufficient to think in linear terms; we need to create something more like a matrix, where we can fully appreciate the intersections of a variety of considerations — demographics, dayparts and the retail environment itself, for instance.

These factors, when viewed in combination, help pin down the shopper's frame-of-mind, which is the key to captivating their attention.

Is it a busy mom, trying to top off a grocery list with a toddler in hand, just trying to get out of the grocery store without having a catastrophe of some sort? Is it a first-time homeowner trying to decide whether to buy the latest Blu-ray DVD player? Is it that same busy mom, this time toddler-free, stopping by her favorite boutique to accessorize a wardrobe?

Those are very different frames-of-mind and any communication must address that. To that end, some level of automation can be exercised through the use of "event" triggers. For example, an RSS feed communicating a regional flu outbreak might trigger content about flu remedies — or the passing of a film legend could trigger information about his greatest flicks.

It's our challenge to anticipate the shopper's frame-of-mind as best we can. We need to know our shoppers well enough to recognize that the small-business owner buying office supplies at 10 a.m. on

a Monday is going to behave differently than when she returns the following Saturday to help her kids do their back-to-school shopping.

None of that kind of narrowcasted communication is possible with traditional in-store media because it is static and can't be changed on-the-fly the way digital media can.

Even if you were able to pull together signage in time you'd be lucky to get 60 percent compliance, which would fall far short of the potential to connect with shoppers and capture incremental sales.

The Content Mandate

An even larger challenge concerns the content of the communication. When most of us think about digital media at retail we tend to think of high-profile ad-sales models, such as the Wal-Mart network.

Indeed, in most retail environments — whether grocery, drug, convenience, mass merchant, or even some specialty retail — the tendency is to try to replicate the Wal-Mart model. However, most other retailers do not have Wal-Mart's traffic, nor do they control a comparable level of their suppliers' ACV.

Even if it were within the realm of feasibility to copy Wal-Mart, it would miss the real opportunity, which is not to run ads but rather to enhance the shopping experience while driving sales and improving inventory efficiencies.

The goal should be to offer not ads but *content* that either provides useful information or in some way helps shoppers get their shopping done more efficiently and effectively.

This is not to say that advertising revenue is off the table, it is just that it does not have to be the dominate R.O.I. driver in justifying the implementation of an in-store digital media network.

To some degree, this means using in-store media to provide the shopper with recipes, menu ideas and other information.

I recently spoke with an independent retailer who is planning to use his in-store network to educate shoppers about the difference between "select" and "choice" beef. The most likely outcome of this is that more shoppers will not only be better informed, but will also opt for the higher-margin items.

He's also considering installing screens in the bakery and in end-caps in the organics department. The one place he says he *won't* install screens is at the checkout — because he thinks that's intrusive. Yes, it's a "captive" audience, but, again, that's not a license to irritate one's customers.

His coolest idea is to install a queuing kiosk in the deli department, where shoppers can place an order, continue shopping, and pick up their orders at their convenience later on.

The idea is that shoppers will end up purchasing more because they'll have more time to do so. The use of the kiosk would be promoted with content scheduled on a digital sign located at the deli.

The Content Solution

The question is, where does the content come from — how do you feed the content beast? If the goal is to speak to the shopper at the moment of truth and to inform, entertain and prompt action, then we need to be able to be very precise in terms of the content we offer.

The goal is to be able to align the shopper's frame-of-mind with the content to maximize the benefit. Fortunately, libraries of digital media content are being built — albeit on a somewhat fragmented basis at this point. Certainly, some brand manufacturers, as well as some retailers, have been working at building content libraries for years.

But it's not hard to envision businesses sprouting up that will be the digital equivalent of the image libraries that have long been available in print. Once that happens, we truly will have reached critical mass and will be able to exercise the full potential of matching content to shoppers on a just-in-time basis.

Until then, it's incumbent on us all to recognize that the old broadcast model of reach and frequency is giving way to a new model of targeted reach and relevancy. It's all about our ability to get the right message at the right time to the right shopper.

Best-practices in digital out-of-home media accomplishes this. In so doing, it captivates your shoppers — without treating them like captives. ■

STUART ARMSTRONG is president of **EnQii Americas** (enqii.com), specialists in digital displays for out-of-home and in-store solutions. Stu can be reached at stuartarmstrong@enqii.com or (212) 741-8575.