

WHY IT'S TIME FOR AD AGENCIES TO ADMIT DEFEAT

Jackie Cooper and David Fine, United Kingdom

When ad agencies are rebranding themselves as “short form content agencies”, and media agencies are suddenly sprouting production arms you know the jig is up. You can't rename a 30-second spot a viral, or seed an ad online, pretending it's pure content and then bump it onto TV and expect no one to notice. The very ethos of a piece of entertainment that audiences self-select is that it is MADE to engage, to be relevant, to provoke conversation – not to sell, not to shout. It has to be entertaining first and commercial second to court and invite participation – that way lies proper loyalty from the audience. This is an age where appointment to view is dead, where viewers are in control and someone broadcasting from his or her front room can reach a global audience. In the world of public engagement, a brand, product or service can and must be a media channel in its own right – in order to have ownership and to start (and keep) the dialogue. This means authoring content, embedding the message and/or the ethos within the actual content – and not in the zappable space around it (and that includes bumpers and sponsorships).

Exclusive content is the fuel for engagement and the opportunity to gain audience participation and traction. But to get that engagement you need experts. And they are not 30-second ad creatives. And they are not media buyers. They are the professionals of the entertainment industry – production experts – together with those (yes, people like us!) who understand that the campaign does not live only by the content itself. Expertise is needed to work on the distribution, the conversation, amplification and exploitation online, in media and on networks. Pulling eyeballs back to the content and fueling discussion, driving participation and enjoying the momentum of sharing, while nailing publicity, fame and sales is what PR has always done. It's being agnostic in our channel choice but greedy in our desire to deliver.

The x-factor phenomenon shows how entertainment and content can work beyond broadcast. It is all about participation and even lack of control, as the production company themselves load excerpts onto YouTube; understanding that they need to play freely in the digital space in order to command the control (and money) with the phone voting when they do broadcast. They will make £20m on this series (Broadcast 30/10/09) and are nailing more than 20 million viewers.

But x-factor aside, the entertainment industry is in trouble. The loss of audience figures means advertising revenues are smashed, so production budgets get slashed and the content is diluted or programming gets cut completely. In September 2009, the government announced it would review legislation around product placement allowing brands to become integrated into existing TV shows. But we know from the U.S. experience that this is a weak alternative, accepted from a position of financial stress and where creative delivery is often compromised by commercial pressure, leaving neither partner satisfied.

However, what the production company really wants is brand-relevant partnerships that can take their content and build it online, in-store, in media, via downloads and on new influencer platforms with new consumer experiences beyond the TV screen. The money they will accept for access and exploiting

exclusive content is not that expensive. This approach is way beyond product placement, bumpers or name checks. It is more intelligent, more integrated, more shared. And it builds audience, loyalty and revenue for the brand and the networks.

A consumer brand recently paid £500k to sponsor a TV broadcast film – but the deal allowed the film to be released in weekly, 10-minute segments for nine weeks, airing the entire film at 10 weeks. After only two weeks, the film was nailing an audience of 5 million. The online power of garnering audiences before a program airs traditionally (or instead of) is immense. Networks will kill for this. And brands enjoy bulk audiences that positively replace the Sky Plus ignored ATL center breaks and add value to the consumer experience.

The time has come for corporations and brands to have the belief and vision to make the leap and break out of the marketing silos of old and embrace an opportunity that allows them to play on the screens of their target influencers in a way that is multiplatform, multiexperience, driving loyalty and participation that is priceless.

Audiences expect companies to interact with authenticity and transparency. Companies need engagement. Both will only achieve these if driven by compelling content that courts, plays and engages with credibility and professionalism. As Peter Whitehead wrote in the Financial Times, “Web 2.0 is a world in which anyone can have a go at generating content; Web 3.0 is where professionals take the lead in shaping that content.”

And those professionals are the production experts and the multichannel, multimedia engagement experts. A new world, needing a new marketing offer. It's all for the taking.