

Brain Game

Integrated attention planning

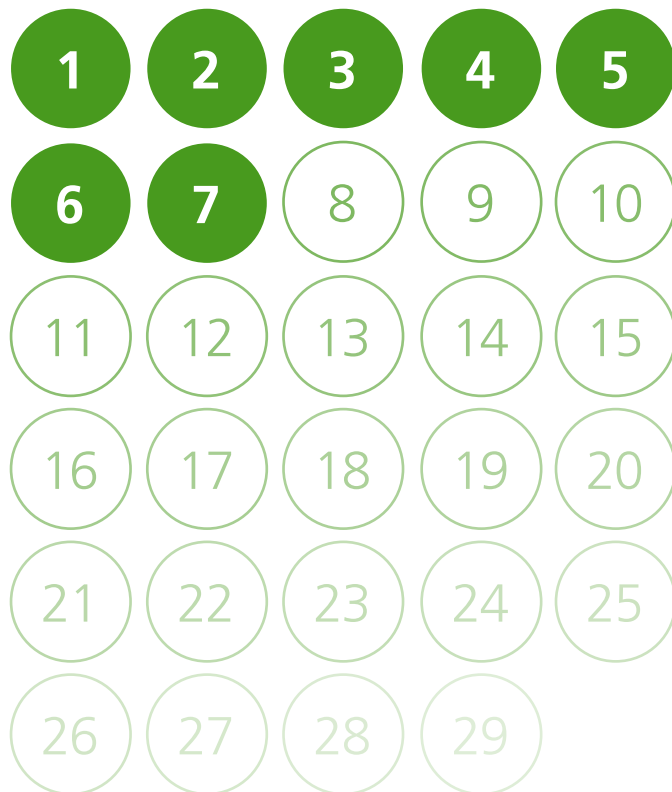


Marketers have a wealth of touchpoints at their disposal to help command their audience's attention; they need to start using them in the right way.

“Our understanding of attention has been transformed in recent years.”

Any marketing strategy needs to work with the human brain rather than against it, if it is to be effective. This is particularly true when it comes to the challenge of capturing and holding human attention, the essence of effective brand communications. Our understanding of attention has been transformed in recent years. However, such an understanding can only contribute when it is incorporated meaningfully into creative and media strategy. Campaign planning can no longer end with putting the creative assets that we happen to have in front of the consumers that we are looking to target – and expecting those consumers’ attention to play along. It needs to include an appreciation of how, where and when to most effectively engage people’s attention.

Integrated attention planning



Marketing's law of diminishing returns

We are already very familiar with the statistical evidence of human attention thwarting all efforts to engage it. It comes in the form of the diminishing returns from continually exposing the same audience to the same marketing message. Let's take the example of a large US corporation that a few years ago spent \$70 million on media for a campaign launching a new brand, with 50 per cent of the spend going to digital media, where it bought over 4 billion impressions.

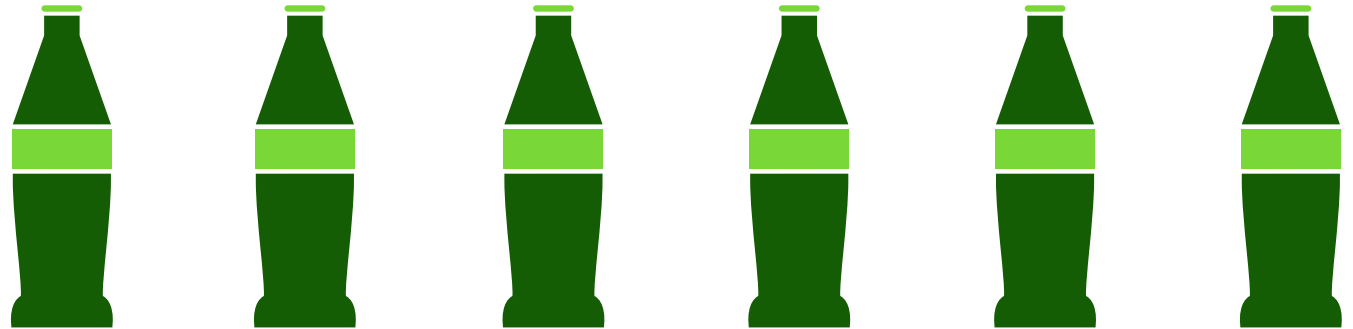
These are big numbers – and they initially produced some movement in awareness for the brand in question. Over the first three months of the campaign, this increased from 6 per cent to 10 per cent – a modest but promising rise. However, over the subsequent three months, brand awareness rose by only a single percentage point. The net result was that, after eight months of spend, the brand remained relatively unknown.

A closer look at the numbers reveals the source of the problem: those 4 billion digital impressions involved

exposing the average digital user to the brand's ad on 29 different occasions. However, TNS's detailed study of the impact of increasing exposures on awareness demonstrated that the optimum number of exposures for this campaign was actually seven. The other 22 were effectively wasted, since exposing a consumer on more than seven occasions had minimal impact on their likelihood of becoming aware of the new brand.

Campaigns have an optimal level of exposure because the human brain is so adept at screening out messages that it does not believe are relevant and valuable to the individual in question. And bombarding that same individual with a particular message again and again is not an effective way to persuade him or her to reconsider. This is why effectiveness of campaigns is non-linear. After a certain point, the point of diminishing returns, most of those individuals whose brains paid attention have already been affected by it, either becoming aware of the brand or updating their neural networks to reflect different perceptions of it; most of the rest will not notice the marketing no matter how many times they are exposed.

Integrated attention planning



The promise of prolonged attention...

It's worth reminding ourselves at this point why a marketer would want to pay more for exposing consumers to his or her ads more frequently. The answer lies in the value of capturing somebody's attention repeatedly. This helps to build stronger, more affective memories (the linking of specific neurons within the brain that relate the message to the brand and link to personal goals and values) and ensures that these associations are more durable, less likely to be eroded by contradictory messages or experiences, and more likely to spring readily to mind when it comes to influencing behaviour. When marketing is able to command repeated attention, and build upon its initial impact, it tends to produce more powerful and lasting results.

...and what it takes to achieve it

The 'Share a Coke' campaign, first launched in Australia

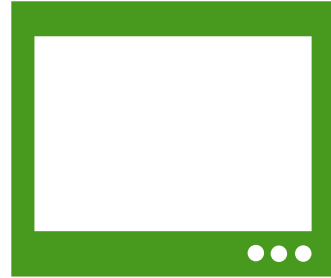
and subsequently rolled out worldwide, provides a great example of how this works when things go to plan. Starting with the appearance of Coke cans branded with the most popular names in Australia, it went on to invite its target audience to personalise cans, bottles and billboard ads with the names of those they cared about, a concept that resonated ever more deeply with individuals the more they encountered it. The more often people were exposed to the campaign, they more likely they were to drink Coke.

When brands manage to capture prolonged attention in this way, when the point of diminishing returns in the graph occurs only after many exposures, it is often because the creative was capable of capturing and holding the audience's attention effectively. Brand communication has the best chance of capturing our attention if it surprises us, if it generates an emotional reaction, and if it is relevant or aligns with a task

that we are focused on at the time (consciously or unconsciously). Advertising that can do all these things has a greater chance of capturing attention and creating strong memory structures around the brand and its message.

The workings of the brain suggest other strategies for capturing prolonged attention as well. The Zeigarnik¹ effect describes how our brain remembers unresolved tasks better than completed ones – and can be used to help capture prolonged attention through marketing that is more demanding of us, plays with our expectations or compels us to interact with it. Part of the early success of the Share a Coke campaign could be put down to the fact that Coca-Cola did not immediately explain why it had started printing people's names on its cans and bottles; it left it to the target audience to try and figure it out.

Integrated attention planning



Attention and context

Creative approaches though, are not the only influence on how our attention works. Cross-media research repeatedly shows that the optimal level of exposure for any campaign also depends on the media platform being used. The same ad will support very different levels of exposure when viewed on TV than when viewed online – and this testifies to the huge influence that context has on how our attention is directed.

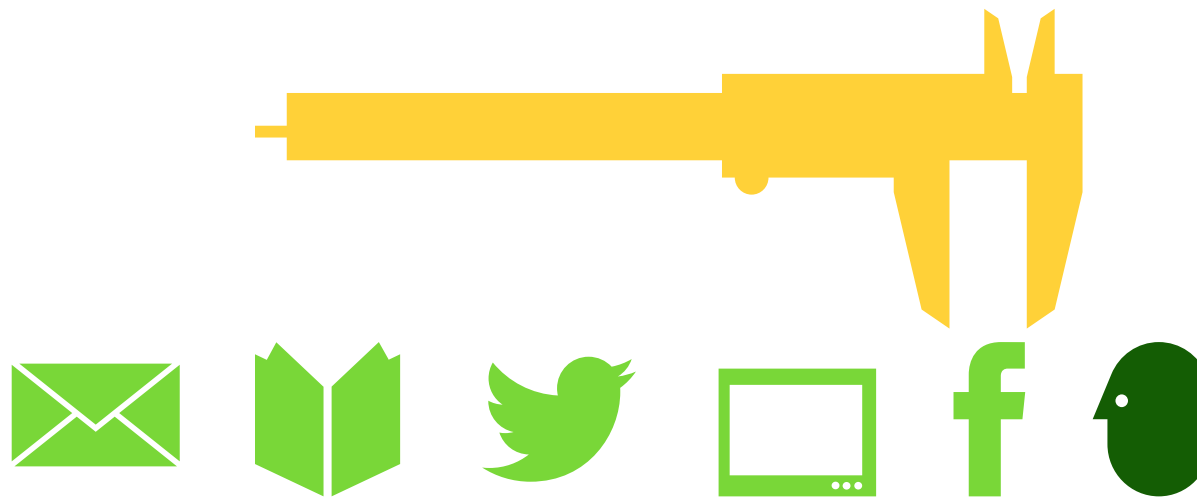
Our attention focuses and refocuses very differently

when conducting research online to when watching TV, when walking through a shopping mall or when flicking through a magazine. Neuroscientists point to a clear distinction between our bottom-up (or exogenous) attention, which is focused outward and influenced by the characteristics of external stimuli, and our top-down (or endogenous) attention, which focuses on conscious tasks. When operating in bottom-up mode, we are far more receptive to a broader variety of ads or messages than when we are concentrating on something specific. The weakness of much multi-platform marketing results from a lack of

adaptation of creative and media strategies to these different attention scenarios.

In one sense, we cannot blame marketers and campaign planners for this, since our understanding of the impact of exposure to ads on different platforms has often been vague. This is due to traditional survey techniques that fall foul of another characteristic of the human brain – the difficulty that it has recalling apparently insignificant details such as whether, when and where it encountered advertising.

Integrated attention planning



Away from memory-intensive metrics

Recall metrics, in particular, depend on our conscious System 2 brain to testify as to whether we saw an ad. The problem is that System 2 only engages with messages to which we pay relatively close attention, and is therefore not a reliable witness to which ads we were exposed to but barely noticed.

This is why TNS believes in 'Opportunity to See' (OTS) as a key measure of exposure to marketing – and the essential foundation for understanding the impact of different media platforms. OTS focuses on

reconstructing individual routines and assessing whether an individual had reasonable opportunity to notice an ad. It uses a combination of observational sources (from digital tracking to innovative mobile listening apps that record actual exposure to TV campaigns) and surveys concentrating on regular, repeated behaviour. The more robust data that such techniques produce allow the impact of exposure on different channels to be meaningfully compared: whether an individual attended an event, visited a store, received a monthly magazine or watched a TV show during which an ad appeared.

Once we have delivered a more robust measure of how frequently individuals are exposed to campaigns through each media platform, we can start to construct a more meaningful analysis of the contribution those different platforms make. When we do so, it quickly becomes clear that different platforms have very different capabilities when it comes to repeatedly cornering our attention.

Integrated attention planning



The role of different media

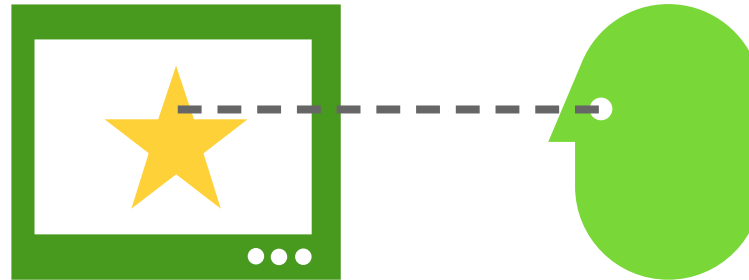
Let's take the example of a recent French L'Oreal campaign for a new innovation in personal care, which had a particular objective around re-engaging lapsed former customers of the brand in question. When exposure to different forms of activity was tracked against increases in brand awareness, purchase intention and brand imagery, distinct roles emerged for the different touchpoints in the campaign. Traditional offline display advertising, using print and TV, proved effective at driving large-scale awareness; digital media, PR and interactions at the point of sale did the best job of shifting purchase intent, particularly amongst the key target audience of lapsed users.

When we take into account the way that human attention works in different scenarios, we get a clearer sense of why this was happening. Mainstream display advertising proved effective at capturing the bottom-up, external-facing attention that tends to be in control when people are relaxing and watching television, casually flicking through a magazine or walking down the street. However, in this context, the brains of lapsed users screened out conventional advertising for a brand they had already concluded was no longer relevant to them. In order to capture the top-down attention of individuals focused on online tasks, the campaign had to go further – and it took an unexpected, alternative approach to the task; people were invited to engage with product testers, discussing their experience of

the product during online chats. This fresh, atypical and interactive approach successfully recaptured the attention of lapsed users, whose brains had screened out mainstream ads. It was able to build new affective memories around the brand, which then influenced their response to it.

Analysis of the responses that different media generate can transform the efficiency of campaign planning by directing different media components towards the goals they are best suited to. However, such studies also make it strikingly clear that the nature of marketing creativity needs to adapt to the environment of each platform if it is to be fully effective.

Integrated attention planning



Not just another screen: attention on digital media

L’Oreal’s highly effective, celebrity focused digital activity formed only the first part of the personal care campaign, a ‘seeding’ phase for the subsequent main launch. In this main launch phase, mainstream TV advertising came to the fore and the focus of online budgets shifted to reproducing and extending the reach of the TV campaign.

When the multimedia strategy was adjusted in this way, the value of online media to the campaign dipped considerably. In fact, this second-phase online display advertising had almost no significant impact on either awareness or purchase intent for the brand.

This is a situation that we encounter frequently when it comes to tracking the effectiveness of digital campaigns. And it points to the weakness of campaign planning that continues to see digital media as simply an additional screen. TV ads that can capture the bottom-up attention of those relaxing on a sofa, often fail to engage top-down attention effectively on digital media. The bar has been raised by the nature of the media environment. On the other hand, a well-judged invitation to engage with a celebrity, or to use a beverage bottle to show how much somebody means to you can be significantly more effective on a digital platform than when reflected in a TV campaign. High-quality creative remains hugely important, but the definition of high-quality creative changes depending on the media platform involved.

An integrated view of attention

In a hugely diverse media environment, incorporating such attention-related insights into campaign planning cannot simply be an optional extra, or a piece of impressive-sounding science for agencies to incorporate into new business pitches. Leveraging different media channels effectively and efficiently is increasingly essential for marketers to achieve their objectives, and for executing freshly consistent brand strategies that can command prolonged attention in an “always-on” world.

About the author

Anne Rayner is APAC Regional Director, Brand Equity & Communications. Anne is an expert in brand equity and communications, working with clients across diverse sectors to develop insights that support the success of their brand.

Since joining TNS in 2002, Anne has built extensive experience of delivering brand equity and communications programmes to brands across Asia Pacific. Her expertise ranges from planning and pre-testing of advertising programmes and touchpoint planning, through to in-market evaluation and optimisation via brand tracking and cross-media evaluation'.

Anne is a regular commentator on the impact of digital and social media on brand and communications. She has pioneered TNS's Authenticity Analysis, drawing links between brand performance and customer satisfaction, and has been instrumental in rolling out TNS's new approach to brand tracking.

References

1. Zeigarnik Effect: the psychological tendency to remember an uncompleted task rather than a completed one

You may also be interested in

[May I have your attention please >](#)

[Making memories >](#)

[The secret life of the brain >](#)

[You can't always get what you want >](#)

About In Focus

In Focus is part of a regular series of articles that takes an in-depth look at a particular subject, region or demographic in more detail. All articles are written by TNS consultants and based on their expertise gathered through working on client assignments in over 80 markets globally, with additional insights gained through TNS proprietary studies such as Digital Life, Mobile Life and The Commitment Economy.

About TNS

TNS advises clients on specific growth strategies around new market entry, innovation, brand switching and stakeholder management, based on long-established expertise and market-leading solutions. With a presence in over 80 countries, TNS has more conversations with the world's consumers than anyone else and understands individual human behaviours and attitudes across every cultural, economic and political region of the world.

TNS is part of Kantar, one of the world's largest insight, information and consultancy groups.

Please visit www.tnsglobal.com for more information.

Get in touch

If you would like to talk to us about anything you have read in this report, please get in touch via enquiries@tnsglobal.com or via [Twitter @tns_global](https://twitter.com/tns_global)



Share this   