Developing your fast-twitch marketing muscles

By Joe Paulsen

Testing is a common and useful marketing activity. Executives demand it, marketers require it of their agencies, and it has become a core instrument for improving marketing performance and return on investment. For many companies, testing takes place via one-off projects to gain insight into a particular question. However, this approach undervalues the positive impact systemic testing programs can have on marketing investments.

Marketers can feel overwhelmed when they consider the complexity of testing results across numerous media channels such as:

- Advertising (television, radio, outdoor, point of presence)
- Response marketing (DRTV, DRRadio, direct mail, catalogs, email, mobile)
- Site side (content, banners, SEO/SEM, landing pages, affiliates)
- Emerging media (mobile phones/smartphones, iPad, smart devices, social, embedded)

This issue is compounded by the difficult task of constructing systematic test and measure processes, which are often led by staffs that are already stretched and racing to activate campaigns while coordinating multiple partners and agencies.

The digital-marketing landscape

Most marketers are adapting to the on-demand nature of the digital age. We operate in an era where rapid testing of creative executions, offers and audiences has become a key to success, as it leads to the quick identification of losing campaigns and the swift emergence of winning strategies.

Of course, it makes business sense to test email pitches, homepage content, post cards and more routine customer outreach. Yet, marketers commonly believe that the majority of ideas don’t get tested in time — or with the frequency needed — to effectively enhance an ongoing campaign or respond to a marketplace challenge or opportunity. As a result, new business is left on the table.

But smart enterprises are implementing robust and sustainable target, test and measurement programs to weed out failed pitches, reveal successful ones and continuously optimize their conversion funnels. The days of minimal testing and gut-driven marketing strategies are rapidly evolving into the era of “fast-twitch marketing.”

Applying fast-twitch marketing

To enhance the frequency and rapidity of their success, marketers can utilize a robust target, test and measurement program that creates a connection to the right customer through the most relevant channels. We call it “fast-twitch marketing,” and it happens when we take advantage of the many innovations that have occurred in consumer research, database marketing and channel analytics to better identify targets and determine the best messages to influence those targets.

It’s a simple process. First you test and react to eliminate the costly
assumptions and guesswork that often drive marketing programs. Then you create stable and sustainable processes and tools that enable you to accelerate and leverage learning from testing across all of your channels, such as online, offline and in-store.

A summer dress or a bikini?
A major catalog retailer saw robust business gains using a multichannel fast-twitch marketing approach. Historically, the cover of the spring catalog featured a model in a swimsuit, but some recipients never bought swimsuits and would bypass a catalog or an email pitch featuring such an image.

Before the spring catalog shipped, a test email featuring a bikini-clad model was sent to one set of targets who were vetted as swimsuit buyers. Another group of targets, prescreened by purchase histories, received an email featuring a model in a sundress.

Almost instantly, the clicks told the story. The target screening variables were correct. With few dollars and little time expended, the retailer confidently shipped catalogs with the most salable cover images to the right consumers days later. Through rapid targeting, testing and measurement, revenue per message increased an impressive 54 percent.

Experian.com's experience
At Experian, executives wanted to improve the performance of the corporate homepage. Combinations of seven creative elements of the homepage were tested, including the key headline and image, for a total of 128 variants.

Experian.com was able to identify failures and roll out the winning mix within 30 days versus the standard six months it would have taken to test each unique combination over time. The successful combination resulted in overall revenue gains of 11 percent per thousand visitors.

Why use target, test and measurement?
Target, test and measurement programs are relatively affordable, underscoring the point that marketers should test more things more often. When you consider the cost of a misdirected marketing campaign, testing multiple message elements to find the optimum combination makes sound business sense. How much would your company pay to continuously improve conversion rates 10 percent to 20 percent or more per year?

Fast-twitch marketing is a reality — if not at your enterprise, then at a competitor’s. When you consider how much the digital era has revolutionized business, testing should be a daily discipline.

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