

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Web of Interactivity

Our practice grew out of Web-related conversion rate marketing, so people often expect us to exhibit a bias toward the Web as the most important element in the media marketing mix. Many are surprised to learn we actually believe the suitability of the Web varies depending on the business objectives and what's being sold.

For a branding campaign to work, you need reach, frequency, and salience. A good media buy was often sufficiently successful using only the blunter, less precise techniques of reach and frequency. Today, most marketers still use the old broadcast model that relied heavily on entertainment for engagement. Marginal salience was good enough. But now that fragmentation makes reach and frequency more difficult and costly to achieve, salience becomes the critical piece.

What do we mean by salience? Having a quality that thrusts itself into attention is one definition. For our purposes, we also mean something that is relevant.

People evaluate salience at a point of interaction between human

beings, when we come in contact with a message or with a Web site. A Web site can be human-like because the experience is dynamic. That means if you think of a click as a question, the place a click takes you is the dialog's answer. This is why you must answer the implicit question associated with a click with relevance.

We turn to a story from Yahoo! Search Marketing to demonstrate the importance of relevance.

Honda was virtually unknown in the pickup truck category when it decided to introduce the new Ridgeline truck early in 2005. With the help of Rubin Postaer and Associates (RPA) and the Yahoo! Search Marketing Editorial team, Honda was able to develop a comprehensive product launch strategy that incorporated direct mail, print ads, television spots, and a Web site. The goal was to increase the association between the Honda brand and the truck category and enable interested customers to get to a Web site for a “test drive” of product information that they couldn't get from other forms of advertising.

To create cohesiveness between offline and online efforts, RPA wanted to work the Ridgeline tag, “Above all, it's a Honda,” into their Sponsored Search listing descriptions. Together with the editorial team, they developed different buckets of keywords—some specifically associated with the vehicle model, others simply related to the truck category.

As RPA wrote titles and descriptions for these keywords, they realized they needed to be more responsive to users' search queries—the tag was not necessarily the best means of driving visitors to the site. They altered titles and descriptions accordingly. To maintain maximum control over the brand experience, RPA tailored messages to focus on insider details about the vehicle and bid into the top positions on search pages—so people would see Honda's listings first.

Because only 1 percent of automobiles are purchased online, site visitation was the primary metric used to measure campaign effectiveness. With more than 18 million impressions and over 200,000 visits to the Ridgeline page on automobiles.honda.com, the campaign greatly surpassed Honda's goals. The spike in site referrals from search engines was much larger than the lift in referrals to Honda.com, generated by other

forms of advertising. Additionally, the Yahoo! Buzz Index showed a 364 percent increase for the Ridgeline the week after the Super Bowl.

Salience works!

Branding online

The Web is not intrusive. It's very hard to ignore or underrate the intrusive value of sound from a radio or television.

Online, e-mail filters thwart attempts at frequent repetition. The Web is not an always-on sound environment in which someone else controls the programming (unless you are streaming Web radio in the background). People are becoming dedicated users of pop-up blockers. All these factors and more make the Web a challenging place for traditional branding. Today's online branding campaigns, which will certainly evolve in time, are mostly limited to reinforcing existing brands and trying to refine the use of reach and frequency. Most marketers are still concerned with making bigger and better media buys, or trying to enrich experience by using rich media for simple purposes of engagement.

Online branding does attempt to address salience through the popularization of search advertising based on the keywords customers use in their queries. While this can produce results with the potential to be more salient, current practice does not really go deep enough. It usually doesn't target the *intention* behind the query. Salience needs to get much richer and more specific to accomplish that.

Joshua Hay, one of our conversion analysts, shared a lack-of-planning-for-salience example in our blog, *A Day in the Life of a Persuasion Architect*:

Every year my friend Sarah has her birthday around the holidays. Sometimes I get her a birthday present and sometimes a holiday present. This year I decided I would get her something for her birthday. 1-800-Flowers.com sounded like it would be a good place to find a present. I didn't see what I was looking for on the homepage, so I decided to type "birthday" into the search engine.

The search result showed me 182 different items to choose from. On the left hand they had an option to "refine this search."

I figured this was a great way to find the right present. Looking closer, I noticed that this tool wasn't helpful at all. Some of the options presented to me were "Anniversary," "Wedding," and "New Year's." How will these trigger words help me find what I need? If I went to a florist and told them I needed a birthday gift, would they point me over to the anniversary section? Would they ask me if I needed it for New Years? The florist wouldn't ask me irrelevant questions. This year I will just have to go down to the store and get something there.¹

1-800-FLOWERS enjoys excellent marketing, both online and off. So, even the best marketers regularly overlook salience. They don't plan for it on the granular level we propose.

Web branding considerations

Branding attempts work best for mass-appeal goods and services. Whether we have a strong preference for a particular bath soap brand or not, most of us use soap. It makes sense to brand soap since little else differentiates it. However, branding goods or services that customers rarely purchase is more difficult. These things simply aren't salient in the top-of-mind sort of way.

The Web is best for branding when you want to reinforce relevance and reach customers in the earliest stages of the buying process. If a customer is not yet aware of the brand or is searching for alternatives, then nothing beats the rich information experience only the Web can provide.

Every medium, from passive to intrusive, has a role to play in branding. To evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the medium, you have to factor in appraisals of where and how to direct effort. Branding campaigns that don't factor in the Web are probably missing the boat.

The Web as glue

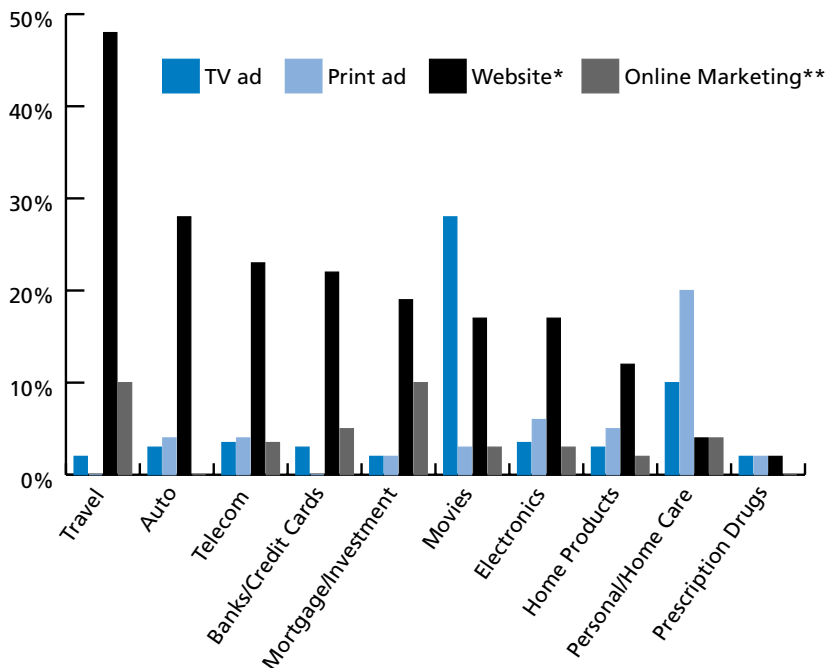
The Web is extremely important to the media mix. Why? It functions as the glue that binds all this information. It's a form of connective tissue, like ligaments that allow muscles and bones to work together.

In many ways, the early image of the Web as a monumental resource library is still appropriate. The Web is an excellent place for getting information to people, for persuading them to make decisions and take actions, and for measuring and optimizing the interactions to evaluate effectiveness.

Forrester Research found that “people spend thirty-four percent of their media-consumption time, including both home and work, on the Internet. That’s slightly more than the amount of time they spend watching TV.”² When it comes to marketing vehicles that influence buying decisions, the Web is the clear winner in many business categories (see table below).³

Influences on Buying

“Which of the following most influenced your decision to purchase this product/service?”



* “Website” includes both official company website and third-party websites

** “Online Marketing” includes web advertisements and email programs

Source: DoubleClick Touchpoints III, 2005

The Web provides a function no other medium can match: It is able to engage with the customer at the earliest stages of the buying decision

process. The Web not only provides opportunities for businesses to package information so it is available from all foreseeable angles, it also sets the stage for the quality of the experience promised across the range of a business' persuasion entities.

The simple fact that the Internet makes a phenomenal quantity of information available to the average Joe and Josephine is daunting. How can single voices get heard? Aren't we all suffering information overload?

Sponges, thimbles, and sieves

Amid the hullabaloo over how much information we have available to us today and how thoroughly exposed we are to messaging of every conceivable stripe, it's understandable we would create metaphors that characterize how we feel about the proverbial information overload. We liken ourselves to "sponges" that can soak up only so much and not a drop more. Or we compare ourselves to "thimbles," at which a fire hose gushing water is trained. *Poor sponges (or thimbles)*, we muse, perhaps as we're deleting our 413th junk e-mail of the day while local news on the television plays in the background. How could anyone possibly expect us to cope?

Actually, we cope quite well with incoming information. In fact, we hunger for it. Our brains, thanks to the gate-keeping benefits conferred by Broca's Area, are well-equipped to deal with it.⁴ Imagine driving down the same city street every day on your way to work. There are a phenomenal number of details that actually fill your field of vision, but most of them you ignore. Broca's Area has already catalogued them as pieces in the expected pattern. However, when something unexpected in the pattern happens—a child's ball rolls in front of your car, or something new moves in between the bakery and the Laundromat—you take notice.

When it comes to all the information that rains down upon us daily, we're much more like sieves. We filter out the bits that are of value to us or present us with something unexpected, and let the rest wash down the drain. We may coarsen the mesh of our sieves so that more passes through without capturing our attention, but we don't really stop paying attention.

Good thing, too, because there's not very much you can do when your audience is a collection of saturated sponges (or overflowing thimbles)

and you want to be the drop that gets retained. But if your audience is a collection of sieves, you can work productively at becoming one of the bits that simply won't wash through the holes.

Doing something unexpected—surprising your audience—will work. But your most effective strategy for staying in the sieve is salience. When you communicate relevance, your customers don't just notice you, they are willing to pay attention.

Relevance rules

Relevance is the piece of the Web equation that everyone seems to acknowledge is important—after all, irrelevance persuades no one. Yet irrelevance abounds in cyberspace. The failure of businesses to identify and provide relevance is one of the top reasons behind the stunningly crummy conversion rates that plague online businesses.

To get a perspective on relevance, let's start at the absurd end of the continuum. Imagine a live chat session between Bryan and a customer-service representative. Bryan is interested in getting a deck-sized outdoor fountain, so he can listen to the soothing splash of water as he works outdoors, wirelessly, on his laptop:

Bryan: “I had a question about the finishes on your Serenity water fountain.”

CSR: “The sky is blue.”

Bryan: “Well, blue was one of the finish colors, but actually I was wondering if the finishes would hold up to weather. Can I put the fountain outside?”

CSR: “The great outdoors is a glorious playground.”

This is the epitome of irrelevance. Put yourself in the equation: If you ask serious questions but never get a relevant reply, how eager are you to do business with this company? Total relevance would look like this:

Bryan: “I had a question about the finishes on your Serenity water fountain.”

CSR: “I’d be happy to answer your question about the finishes on our Serenity water fountain. What would you like to know?”

Bryan: “I was wondering if the finishes would hold up to weather. Can I put the fountain outside?”

CSR: “With the exception of the blue finish, all our finishes will hold up very well in outdoor conditions.”

Now this is relevance! Responses like this would help Bryan feel much more confident about buying one of those fountains.

You think we’re being silly, right? Then tune in for some real-life examples that completely miss the target of relevance.

Irrelevance

Experience #1. Lisa is trying to resolve a mobile telephone issue. After dialing Verizon Wireless’s customer-service number and listening to the message about how she can handle all her concerns through the Web site, she toddles off to the online arm of the operation, where, unsurprisingly, she fails miserably. So she calls customer service back. At automated prompting, she enters her ten-digit phone number, then her zip code. Eventually she gets a real person on the line. What’s the first thing that person asks her? (Hint: It isn’t “How can I help you today?”)

CSR: “May I have your 10-digit phone number beginning with the area code?”

Lisa: “I already entered that.”

CSR: “Please give it to me again.” (Lisa sighs and intones the 10 digits.) “Now could I please have your zip code?”

Lisa: “I already entered that too. Followed by the pound key. Doesn’t your phone system forward that information to you?”

CSR: “The five digit code will do.”

Not only does this prelude lack relevance, it sets the stage for an experience of adversarial frustration. Lisa concludes Verizon Wireless needs to work on its Web site navigation and integrating its systems . . . until which

time it shouldn't be making irrelevant suggestions she solve her problems online! She's also considering trying that other mobile phone service.

Experience #2. Jeffrey wants a Conair lighted makeup mirror for Cindy's birthday, so he touches base with Yahoo!, where he finds what appears to be the perfect pay-per-click ad. It even has "Conair lighted makeup mirror" in bold letters. Enthusiasm runs high as he clicks. When he lands on the company's home page, there's nary a picture of any lighted makeup mirror. Not even a mirror of any flavor. Not even the word *mirror* anywhere in the copy!

Far from satisfying his need for a relevant follow-up on his search query, the landing page drops the ball, terminates Jeffrey's scent trail, and crushes the chance for a sale. At the very least, Jeffrey should have been directed to a category page for "makeup mirrors."

Experience #3. Jeffrey is on Google, investigating the source of his dog's unfortunate bout with diarrhea. He submits the query "dog diarrhea" and gets over 2,400 results along with some pay-per-click ads. One pay-per-click catches his eye and has him thinking he's hit pay dirt . . . until he reads it:

Dog Diarrhea. Huge selection of Dog diarrhea. Low prices,
cheap shipping, secure. www.MonsterMarketPlace.com

What has MonsterMarketPlace.com done? They've merged Jeffrey's query with their generic copy. It's a "form letter" pay-per-click. There's no way this is relevant and no way MonsterMarketPlace.com can deliver on the literal promise. And who'd want them to?

Is Jeffrey impressed? Well, aside from the fact this gave us all the best belly laugh we'd had in ages, Jeffrey is not likely to consider MonsterMarketPlace.com a credible resource and click through on one of their pay-per-clicks in the future. This is actually a pity, because if you dredge up the courage to follow the link, you do find some reasonably relevant options.

Experience #4. Lisa signs up for an online dating service and specifies a geographic preference that is admittedly a bit of a long shot. She knows

she'll have to be patient to get a match, but that's okay, because the Web site persuades her at every turn that they are really working hard on her behalf to match her with truly qualified people. Relationships take time, the business reassures her. It's worth the wait.

One morning an e-mail from the dating service lands in Lisa's inbox. Due to inactivity, they have put her account on hold. There won't be any more matches for Lisa unless she wants to reactivate her account. She reactivates and then writes an e-mail explaining her situation. She gets a reply; the company says it understands completely and they are on her side. A month and no matches later, the company again puts her account on hold.

Again, she reactivates her account and e-mails a passionate missive—"Honestly, the inactivity on this account is not my fault! Send me a match, and watch how active I get!" She gets this reply: "We understand your situation. I have checked your account and do see that it is active and available for matching. It has been a pleasure assisting you."

The Web site itself was brilliantly persuasive and offered total relevance. But the actual experience completely failed the relevance mission in promise and execution. Lisa's account is now permanently inactive (by her choice), and she's sworn off dating services.

It's not just the producers of content who are scrambling to identify relevance, but also those looking for content. Here, the ability to articulate the exact nature of compacted and non-compacted information heavily influences success.

For increasing numbers of individuals, the Web is the focal point in their search for relevant information and experiences. Relevance is not optional. Businesses must provide it—and that relevance must be echoed across all touch points: cyber, live, paper, or otherwise.

Those "sieves" that make up your audience are developing a growing intolerance for irrelevance; they're coarsening their wire meshes so only the information that delivers pinpoint relevance gets noticed. People typically give you few opportunities to disappoint them, and they judge you harshly if you persist in disappointing them.

Search engines live and breathe relevance

The Web provides an incredible venue for targeting and addressing salience. Google's story should serve as a model to any business that thinks this doesn't matter to customers.

Only a handful of years ago, an unknown search engine company with a silly name went head-to-head with well-positioned competitors. In record time, it became a dominant player. So dominant that "google" became the verb people use to describe the activity of searching: "Just a sec; I'll google it."

Google's success had nothing to do with fancy graphics (it's a pretty stripped-down, dull visual experience). It had everything to do with the fact that Google searches produced exceptionally relevant results. So relevant that the company's "I'm feeling lucky" gimmick, which produces a single search result, is very often right on target!

Search engines have only one purpose: To sort and index relevant content so people can access what is relevant to them. As search engines have responded to the need for relevance, each of the major players today has developed a focus that exists on a continuum of emphasis on technology versus media. Google focuses heavily on technology. MSN relies on both but favors technology. Yahoo! best balances technology and media. AOL has emphasized media.

Capitalizing on salience is an essential part of the equation. If you are looking for a digital camera, results that make digital cameras pop out will be far more relevant to you. And while you might not be directly in the market for accessories for that digital camera, a business can target that associated information because of its salience. If you are routinely reading *The New York Times* articles about interior decorating (the focus of your interest), associated advertisements promoting related resources that otherwise might not be salient to you have increased value. These advertising associations and cross-sells find a comfortable and productive home on the Web.

As customers continue along the path of ignoring overt advertising efforts, content must evolve to provide more sophisticated forms of

product placement that not only provide relevant information in context, but also entertainment. There are already Web sites where you can learn more about product placements on shows—especially fashion—and the sites provide links to places where you can purchase the products.

But the true brilliance of the Web lies in being there when the information is required. In the early stages of the buying decision process, many customers turn to Web search as a way to initiate solving their problems. And it is through search that customers clearly and unequivocally broadcast their intentions.

Are you really listening?

Marketers have always claimed, and honestly believe, that they listen to their customers. However, most of this “listening” is carried out in unnatural circumstances—in focus groups or through surveys. In contrast, the Web allows us to *really* listen to customers. They are talking about us on the Web. They are doing millions of searches daily using words and phrases that are related to the problems for which we provide solutions.

The remarkable transparency of the Web allows us to gain a level of intimacy with our customers that is unprecedented. It also allows us to use Web analytics to track and measure many of the dimensions of the interactive relationship that were simply unavailable to us before.

Search is such an integral part of the Web experience that search engine marketing has become its own hot-commodity area of expertise. But search engine marketing that merely tries to regurgitate the words the customer is using, so the search engine’s algorithm can find you and put you in a more prominent ranking, is misguided.

The ultimate value in search engine marketing is its ability to help you understand the customer’s intent and ensure you present relevant information. Moreover, the value of relevant high rankings is completely undone if you don’t follow through on the promise of the result, as we saw in Jeffrey’s make-up mirror experience.

Media wars have always been about distribution—getting your information and your product to as large an audience as possible. With increasing media availability, directories like TV guides will become irrelevant.

When you can watch any piece of content that has been created at any time you want, the issue becomes how to find it.

On the Web, marketers have the coveted opportunity to be flies on the wall. There's no way they can eavesdrop on a conversation between Bryan, Jeffrey, and Lisa as they eat take-out Chinese while discussing this book. But on the Web, marketers can pull up a virtual chair.

Online forums, discussion groups, customer reviews, blogs, and many other forms of consumer-generated media are profoundly valuable for their candid declarations of how customers feel about us, what they think about our product or service (irrespective of what we told them they should think or feel), and what sort of experience they had interacting with us.

Interactive companies like the Shopping Channel, HSN, and QVC also incorporate "listening" that influences the presentation of information. Based on input from viewer calls, these companies can redirect the course of a presentation and start to conclude when the number of incoming calls begins to drop off.

The Web is by no means the only medium available in our emerging-media, experience economy. But it is the glue that binds customers' experiences. If our practice is Web-centric, it is because the Web offers us insights and opportunities no other medium can. It allows us to base management decisions on actual behavior rather than on speculations derived through focus groups and surveys.