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Embrace change in your media planning

3 pillars of effectiveness

Introduction

Over the past 18+ months of uncertainty, consumer lifestyles have changed dramatically—everything from where we work and how children engage in schooling, to where we shop and how much time we spend with friends and family. With these shifts in lifestyle, habits around media consumption and interests have also changed, forcing advertising models to shift and brands to adapt in order to effectively reach consumers. Some of the pandemic's effects on consumer behavior and media consumption will linger long past its grip on public health.

In 2020, the paradox of rising media consumption amid declining marketing budgets directed decisions for how brands allocated their advertising dollars. With that, a brand's ability to create genuine connections between itself and consumers grew increasingly important. Today, disruption is the new normal, and marketers must keep navigating it while simultaneously planning for an unclear future. With advertising spend on the rebound for many industries, marketers are facing a new host of challenges.

Planning for future uncertainty isn't just about changing processes; in order to thrive, it's critical to shift from a fixed mindset to one of growth. The old way of doing things doesn't have to be the only way—media planning has become an always-on exercise rather than something done yearly—and brands can become wiser through experimentation and experience.

In a recent webinar, Jay Nielsen, SVP of Global Planning Products for Nielsen, discussed what he considers the three pillars of effective media planning when so much of everyday life remains in flux. To navigate the current and future state of disruption, brands can center their planning efforts around the people they're trying to reach, evolve strategies and tactics with continuous planning and aim to increase efficiency through connected planning. Let's take a look at what each of these pillars entail.

1 People should be at the center of planning

The ripple effects of the pandemic have permeated consumer behaviors. With that in mind, there's never been a more critical time for brands to prioritize understanding how to reach the consumers they're trying to connect with. To begin, marketers can canvas their target audiences to understand new behaviors. Defining your brand's target audience and understanding what they're engaging with—and not making decisions based solely on what you have done before or what a competitor in your space is doing—is key.

Data can help brands invest wisely to maximize target reach and improve advertising efficiency. In recent years, many brands have invested heavily in rich first-party data to create strategies to effectively engage their target audiences. With the impending deprecation of third-party cookies, brands with detailed first-party data will fare best. For now, first-party data commingled with second- and third-party data can paint a vivid picture of audiences—which is key to reaching the right people, the right way and at the right time.

Utilizing data to understand an audience is key to marketing effectiveness, and data will be increasingly useful as the U.S. population continues to diversify. As diversification grows, so will the opportunity to satiate every consumer's unique tastes. With that, on-screen representation should be at the core of a brand's efforts to connect with people. The media industry has made some strides toward a more inclusive ecosystem: Nielsen found that across the TV landscape of the top 300 most-viewed programs in 2019 (broadcast, cable and streaming), 92% of all programs measured had some presence of diversity (women, people of color, or LGBTQ+) in recurring casts.

However, there is still a long way to go in achieving parity between the diversity we see around us and what we see on-screen. To illustrate, in 2020 women made up 52% of the U.S. population, yet they only had 38% of the share of screen. Visibility differs across platforms, but subscription video on demand (SVOD) comes closest to delivering gender parity at 48.9% representation. Some genres more effectively represent women than others as well as different demographics among female viewers.

Share of screen for women by genre
Representation varies for women across genres
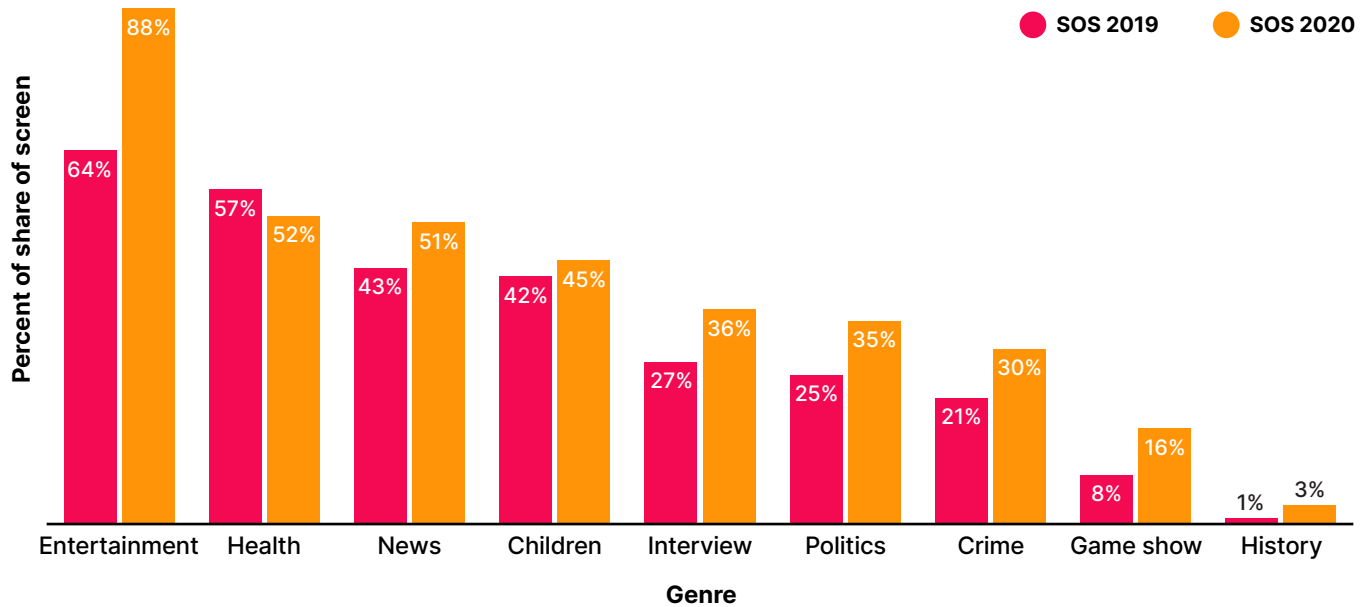
SOS = Share of Screen

Source: Nielsen Gracenote Inclusion Analytics

As the U.S. diversifies, so do the options available to consumers for where they engage with content. Marketers can leverage person-level data and insight into media consumption to form an understanding of consumer behavior and the broader environment in which they operate. Audiences are interested in content that prioritizes representation, and when utilized on a continuous basis, data can help brands reach their target audiences with precision—in a manner that is inclusive and representative of the audiences' lived experiences.

2 Treat planning as an always-on exercise

Media planning needed a reboot even before the pandemic. Now, brands are treating it as a priority, and adoption of an always-on approach is being expedited. Of the three pillars discussed in our Back to the Drawing Board: Media Planning Through Uncertainty webinar, continuous planning may be the largest area of opportunity for brands. The days of "set it and forget it" are gone, and 12-18 month planning cycles may not be effective going forward.

In the months and years ahead, adaptability will remain critical for brands across all industries. Media planning needs to be nimble and fluid, while allowing marketers to revisit ideas from previous quarters to help make decisions to go forward. With a mindset of continuous planning, advertisers can prepare for what's ahead as best as possible during uncertain times.

Plan media in pieces and often
Less certainty means planning throughout the year is necessary

Target audience profile/media usage

Review competitive spend

Optimize reach and frequency pre-buy

Use findings to project reach and frequency

Continuously plan to mirror the evolving needs of your key consumers. Iterative planning will help you keep a pulse on what matters most—your audience.

Iterative media planning enables marketers to pivot their strategies quickly, based on the feedback from the monitoring processes and changes in budget and sales requirements. Academic research shows that changes in brand share of voice are closely connected with changes in market share. That makes a thorough understanding of how competitors are spending their advertising dollars—and how heavily they're reaching your desired target—critical to knowing how to adapt plans. In channels where it is possible to track, brands should measure the competitor's reach and frequency to the brand's own target. This allows brands to understand if increased competitive spend is being directed at their target or elsewhere, and make accurate assessments of the level of risk to sales goals.

As budgets and goals change, or as gaps to goals surface, brands must exercise agility in optimizing their marketing resources at all times. Whether done manually or via machine learning tools, brands can run optimization scenarios and find efficiencies to adjust plans for upcoming campaigns, as well as make tactical adjustments to improve campaigns in flight. With up-to-date information on-hand, marketers can readily see what is performing well and what is not—then reallocate dollars quickly to bolster success.

As an example, a subscription-based global media and entertainment company and client of Nielsen was able to lower its cost per acquisition (CPA) by showing agility both in flight and on successive campaigns. The client leveraged both attribution and marketing mix modeling (MMM) to maximize their results. The company optimized channel allocation with MMM, resulting in a decrease of 11% in CPA. Additionally, the client leveraged multi-touch attribution (MTA) to optimize the digital campaign in-flight, resulting in a decrease in CPA of approximately 7%-13%. In total, the final investment resulted in a 20% decrease in CPA. This example illustrates how combining in flight optimization and post-campaign learning maximized results.

By using optimized channel allocation, MMM and MTA, a media company lowered its CPA by 20%.

3 Create a holistic view into campaign success

Connected planning—planning that involves having one task inform another within the marketing workflow—has come a long way over the past year. When systems are connected, accuracy improves, human error is limited, resources are optimized and everyone gains a holistic view into a campaign's success. Looking ahead, there is an opportunity for planning to evolve, with one goal in mind—make things easier and more consistent across the entire marketing workflow.

In a perfectly connected workflow, a brand leverages historical data and uses the same audience profiles across each of its software solutions so that planning and buying are aligned. A systematic approach establishes more connectivity throughout the entire process and includes:

- Understanding who the audience is
- Understanding where they are
- Building plans against that audience
- Quickly activating against the plans

- Ultimately, measuring and reconciling against the plans
- And repeating it

A start-to-finish approach is made challenging by the sheer number of partners marketers work with; the average marketer works with 28 different technology vendors. Further, a single campaign will often make use of different target definitions across media channels, or vary the target definition as they move from planning to buying to measurement. A fragmented approach can cause inefficiency, slowdowns and confusion. Marketers are reckoning with these issues— Nielsen's 2021 Annual Marketing Report found that brands of all sizes and industries have very little confidence in their existing martech capabilities. The importance of data quality and consistency can't be overstated, and yet regardless of budget size, it remains an obstacle for marketers.

To what extent is data quality an obstacle?
Regardless of budget size, data quality is an obstacle for marketers
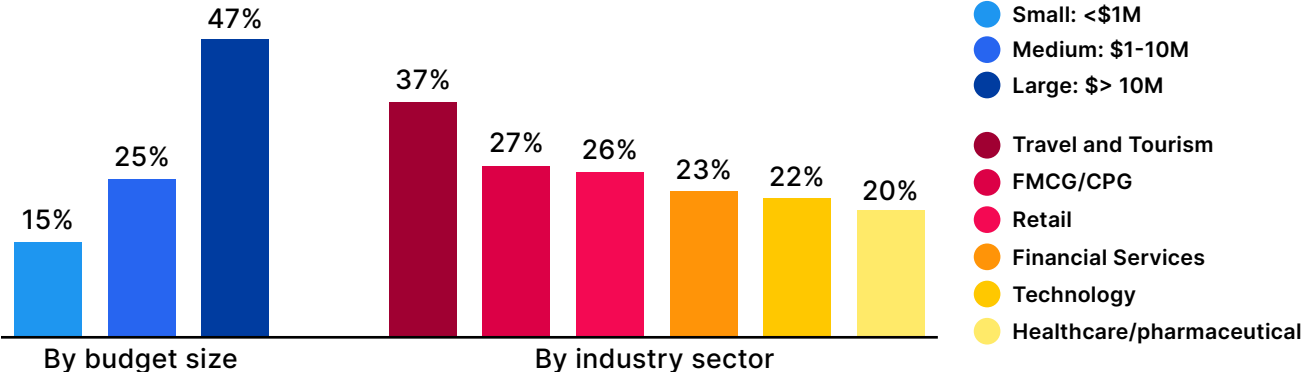
Q: What level of difficulty do you face, if any, with each of the following audience data topics? Chart shows percentage of respondents with top-2 answers (very difficult or extremely difficult) on a 5-point scale

Source: Nielsen 2021 Annual Marketing Report

However, the report also found that brands are planning to address this challenge by increasing both their marketing analytics projects and technology software budgets by an average of 30% over the next year. With that, it's crucial for technology and data partners to evolve to make the process simpler, so the brand can go to fewer, if not one place to execute the marketing workflow. Simply put, working with a single provider that can cover all of your needs offers a more seamless experience than working with multiple providers. With the right approach, a brand can maximize their marketing ROI.

Consider that just a short time ago, a typical brand had planned, bought and measured in multiple channels with different target definitions in each channel and phase. The brand would have connected its own behavioral data to digital platforms, but not to offline platforms—forcing an initial divergence on target definition for a single campaign. The brand then would have used third-party data as a proxy target for planning in offline channels, but perhaps shifted completely to a demographic target for buying and measuring. In the end, the execution of the media and its measurement would have had little connectivity to the desired target.

By contrast, brands are now able to employ uniform target definitions in multiple channels by ensuring their data, software and partners are in sync. Though consistency from planning to buying was always the norm in digital channels, brands are now finding that same level of consistency in offline channels. Improvements in technology and collaboration tools allow consistent target definitions to be distributed into planning tools, buying platforms and even out to media sellers.

With a focus on consistency, a significant benefit of connected planning is its ability to give decision-makers feedback on campaign success that aligns with the initial brief. Insight into how specific channels and investments are delivering the desired audiences can encourage a marketer to either double down on a winning approach or move resources away from one that is failing.

Today, brands can use uniform target definitions in multiple channels by ensuring their data, software and partners are in sync.

Key takeaways for marketers

Navigating an uncertain future presents an abundance of challenges—but also an opportunity for brands to grow and evolve. In order to be effective, every aspect of a brand's planning efforts must be centered around the people it's focused on connecting with. To understand their behavior, marketers can leverage person-level data on a continuous basis, and create content that prioritizes representation to engage a continuously diversifying audience.

Importantly, each of the three pillars discussed in our Back to the Drawing Board: Media Planning Through Uncertainty webinar—focus on people, continuous planning and connected planning—work deliberately together. If you engage in continuous planning that isn't based on people, or if your planning is based on people but you're only doing it once a year, you might be missing the mark. Going forward, brands should let go of antiquated planning schedules and lean into planning as an always-on exercise. With connected processes in place, marketers can have a more holistic, simplified view into each of their processes—making reaching the right audience at the right time more attainable than ever.

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About Nielsen

Nielsen shapes the world's media and content as a global leader in audience measurement, data and analytics. Through our understanding of people and their behaviors across all channels and platforms, we empower our clients with independent and actionable intelligence so they can connect and engage with their audiences—now and into the future.

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