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Branded Entertainment /

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Branded Entertainment / The attention economy is upon us. Be careful how you invest / By Vincent Balusseau /

In France, this year should finally see us making up some serious ground in branded entertainment. This country's big-hitting creative and media agencies, scenting a stronger economic model than that of the lowly viral, have been queueing up in 2007 to announce the creation of specific wings and departments to cater to this phenomenon.

However, the underlying reticence in France – a market now comfortable with buzz and viral marketing techniques – is almost certainly symptomatic of a more universal problem: the distinct lack of information and an established methodology enabling marketers to fully understand the inner workings of branded entertainment, the factors that lead to its success, and above all, a means of measuring ROI.

Currently, only non-proprietary studies analysing the specific contribution of branded entertainment to the ROI of an integrated campaign, or the results delivered by new systems of measurement like 'engagement planning' give us any inkling of the economic effectiveness of these initiatives, or help to persuade unconvinced marketers. And these cautious clients, anxious to make the most of their budgets, always come out with the same series of arguments against involvement in this space. They argue that production costs for branded entertainment are too high, or at the very least, they're higher than they are for a short viral film, or that the 'cost per engagement' on immersive online experiences like Goodby Silverstein's Gettheglass.com is higher than a simple 'cost per view', one of the key indicators of success in the viral arena.

I'm going to leave it to the media agencies to address the key ROI issues, whether Return on Investment or Return on Influence. Instead, let's take a moment to look at a producer's point of view. Première Heure's perspective is born partly from experience, and partly from the pioneering role we played in French branded entertainment. Early in 2006, The Hotdog' campaign for the launch of a new product at fast food chain Quick – a campaign we conceived and produced – introduced a band of strange hip-hop characters. Store traffic went up by 11%, sales by 5%, and the music track we issued as part of the campaign, performed by a series of canine gangstas, subsequently entered the Virgin charts at number 12…

The attention economy

Any initiative predicated on the idea of consumers voluntarily spending time with branded content, anything that attempts to forge an emotional connection between viewer and brand, by necessity enters into competition with all other content, both branded and unbranded. It battles for eyeballs alongside Call of Duty 4 and the new season of *Lost*. Shouldn't we remind ourselves here that emotion is viewed by experts as the best 'predictor' of advertising impact?

Consumer attention has become the rarest of commodities, as the principles of this 'attention economy' remind us. So the costs of production are no longer 'cost drivers', but have become the new 'value drivers'. This includes the cost of writing, especially if we assume that these new formats demand the skills of authors rather than creatives.

These brands, acting as media or entertainment providers, are indeed targeting an audience, and are no longer addressing what they usually consider as 'prospects' or 'consumers'. In an attention-driven economy, attention has to be earned and rewarded. An audience, by nature, is fickle and demanding: it will decide whether or not to interact with the content/experience offered by the brand according to whatever 'perceived value' the right communication strategy or PR campaign will manage to attach to it. As a result, audience satisfaction with the content/experience will be a key driver of talkability and actual recommendation.

Emotional connections

From there, a piece of content will live or die based on its ability to forge a real emotional connection with the viewer. To achieve this, brand planners must allow for a value proposition that's bang on brand – a proposition to effectively move the target audience down the purchase funnel towards commitment. In branded storytelling initiatives such as the currently running 'Ypes' for Eurostar (Mediaedge:CIA/Première Heure), a high profile writer, quality scripting, an engaging storyline, and high production values became the real value drivers, demonstrating that, done well, branded content can draw a loyal audience, build new associations with the brand, and more importantly, provoke the right changes in consumer behaviour.

It stands to reason that if you spend less money on an initiative, you're more likely to be disappointed with the content you end up with, and feel cheated out of an inflated media spend. It's astonishing how a leading media agency, claiming the ability to 'plan', create and execute a campaign single-handedly, can pip a creative agency to the post and announce with a certain smugness that it has conceived and produced a 30 minute online fiction for a quarter of the cost of a traditional advertising TV spot – and then go on to convince the client into spending more than seven times the cost of production in media buying. And even

more surprisingly, the whole operation ended up with a massive offline media plan, though a more sensible objective would have been to optimise online cost per engagement.

Big channels

If the object of branded entertainment is to create an army of brand evangelists, and to connect on the same level of emotional engagement as non-branded initiatives, so the logic of the viral world – a short, one-off hit, distributed on platforms on which all content is jumbled together, where the quality of the viewing experience is decidedly low – reveals itself to be flawed. Not only in terms of impact, but also in terms of forging any real connection with niche audiences outside of the typical 15 to 24 year-old age range.

The different ways in which entertainment properties are aimed at younger and older audiences bears a closer look.

Anyone viewing big, popular series like *The Sopranos* and *30 Rock* is 'rewarded' for their time: identification with complex characters whose psychology is carefully developed throughout the viewing experience is an enormous source of pleasure, and highly addictive. On the other hand, the near-physical immerson of the videogame player in a game such as Super Mario Galaxy or Bioshock takes this even further, allowing the participant to forget themselves completely.

The creation of properties forged by brands over longer periods of time and particularly through complex characterisation doesn't just create additional emotional leverage. It also offers the possibility for some real cultural capital belonging to that brand, and could be developed into a veritable franchise to be played out across all media, thus opening the door to new revenue streams.

Wilkinson's 'Dare' (Mediaedge: CIA/ Première Heure/Streampower), a movement of eccentrically groomed men which saw its inception on the internet in early 2006, was eventually integrated into a TV series of notable success, a broadcast on a popular cable channel, Paris Première. It told the tale of an unusual presidential candidate who tried to establish a connection with the most powerful lobbies.

What's more, episodic branded content like this can act as a powerful persuader without losing any of its appeal as entertainment. Witness the success of '24' spin-off *CTU Rookie*, created by MindShare Entertainment/Science + Fiction for Unilever's Degree Men deodorant.

Playability

In addition to these compelling storylines, interactivity and immersion in a brand (named 'Brand Playability' by Bruno Walther, president of Ogilvy One, Paris) constitutes another extremely powerful trigger. This was perfectly exploited by Crispin Porter + Bogusky for Burger King in their series of games developed for the Xbox last year, and subsequently credited with a 41% rise in profits.

And these two threads, – a strong identification with characters played out over an extended period of time plus 'playability' – can be melded together at will to target much more mature audiences, as our interactive fiction 'Famille Barclays' for Barclays proved (Mediaedege:CIA/Première Heure). By letting users choose a character from a completely dysfunctional family, our consumers could also learn to mirror their investment behaviours and play with their money online. And this has already proven effective: the highly entertaining www.famillebarclays.fr directly contributed to a 30% increase in traffic to barclays.fr during the course of the campaign.

The moral of the story? The smart money says that the savviest consumers will soon demand entertainment in place of advertising, which means that every single brand will have to earn the right to our time. This is the new attention economy. Spend your resources accordingly.

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