

THE FUTURE IS NOT MEDIA NEUTRAL

PART TWO
OF WILLIAM AND
SANGEETA LEACH'S
JOURNEY INTO
THE FUTURE REVEALS
WHY AGENCIES
RELYING ON LABELS
BASED ON A
PLATFORM NEED TO
RETHINK THEIR
APPROACH.

No self-respecting agency's credentials are complete without the magic mantra – media neutral.

The industry has gone from TV dominance, through “integrated” or “360” thinking to media neutrality. Rapid technological change has shaken television off its pedestal as the most effective way to reach audiences and words like narrowcasting abound in media strategies.

Media neutrality is rooted in the belief that the creative solution needs to be arrived at without media blinkers on – a very sound premise. But it still assumes there will be “media” at the end of the process – whether that is an event, a show, a website, PR or an ad.

What about the non-media interactions with customers – face-to-face, uniforms, cash-back, sales interface, packaging and blogs? Is

there not a tacit assumption in media neutrality that media will be the answer to the client business problem or opportunity?

The key, in our view, is not in a channel-led approach but an influence-led approach.

The agency of the future has to take a lesson from its past and understand the power of engagement – whatever the channel being used.

The agency of the future won't be media neutral, it will be engagement neutral.

Bob Greenberg of R/GA New York says: “To be engagement neutral means having an unbiased ability to solve problems across perception, behaviour, interaction and transaction. These four areas represent the broad totality of customer engagement as it stands today.”

Engagement neutrality will require the agency of the future to stop labelling itself based on a platform – digital, direct or mobile.

In the words of Andrew Robertson, chief executive officer of BBDO Worldwide: “The currency is words, pictures, sounds, experiences – form not platform. If you try to define yourself by platform, you're going to get stuck.”

The agency of the future will have to fundamentally believe itself to be a problem solver who can partner with clients on defining the right problems to solve and then be able to arrive at a range of solutions across the marketing spectrum.

That is what will get agencies back to the top table – not a focus on narrowly interpreting a marketing message to consumers.

And that's what R/GA did for Nike. With Nike+, it understood

running and runners and provided them with an opportunity to interact with the brand and with each other. And with NikeID, Nike customers had the opportunity to personalise their shoes. Both campaigns were designed to solve specific issues and generated enormous publicity, goodwill and sales for Nike.

The fundamentals of consumer engagement are still rooted in knowledge and insight – put the consumer at the heart of the issue to understand attitudes and behaviour and identify barriers and incentives to purchase.

To this end, agencies such as OMD and DraftFCB are increasingly incorporating “data” as part of their offer. OMD in Europe has set up its own quantitative research panel of 10,000 people to ensure OMD remains at the forefront of

consumer knowledge and can plan based on customer habits, rather than media channels. DraftFCB includes data strategists in its client teams as well as a "Smart Wall" for data analysis.

What has changed though, in terms of consumer engagement, is giant strides in technology have added inbound channels to the marketing arena, such as the web, kiosk, events, experiential, mobiles and interactive TV – in addition to traditional outbound channels such as broadcast media and DM.

This requires the agency of the future to be versed in both outbound and inbound communication skills and disciplines.

Interactivity will be at the heart of the agency of the future. This is not "digital", it's not about platform (although digital understanding is a prerequisite); this is about recognising the need to harness the opportunity of two-way communication, to recognise the importance of interactive communication as opposed to purely interruptive communication.

In some respects, the former is easier to monitor in terms of effectiveness, is more measurable and, anecdotally, more impactful as consumers have made a conscious choice to go there.

Consumers are making decisions in new ways today. They make

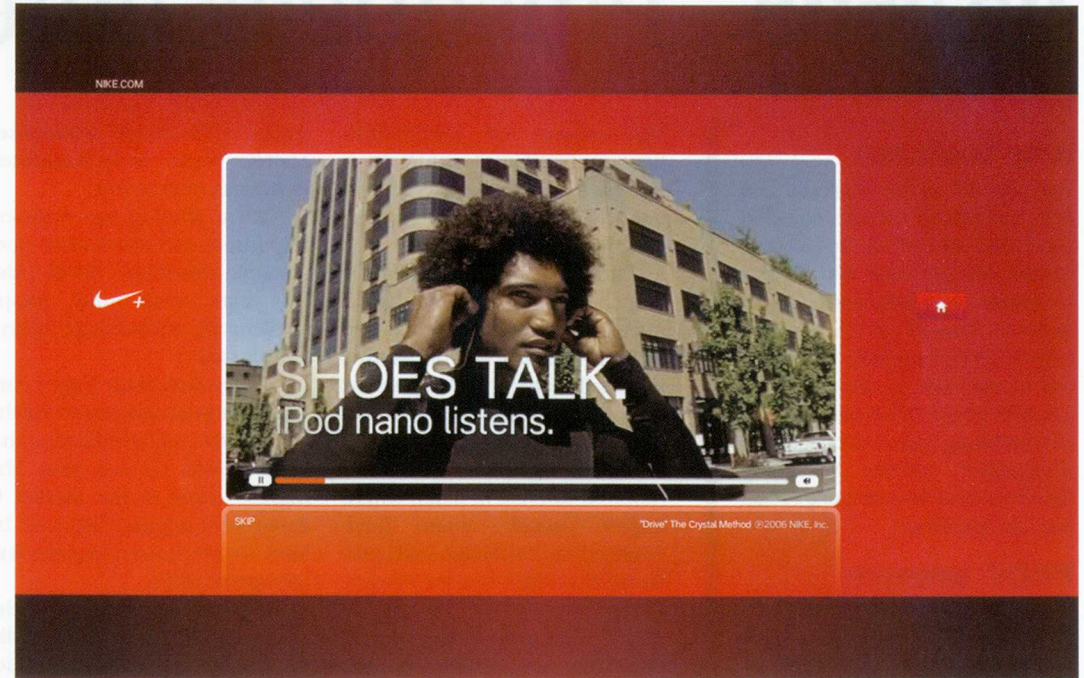
Interactivity will be at the heart of the agency of the future. [But] it's not about digital or platform.

the decision on when, and how much, they engage with a brand. They expect more bespoke communication. They access the information they need, when they need it, and make instant comparisons with competing brands.

They shop around for the best prices from their homes, and even choose whether they buy from a reseller on eBay, instead of a traditional retail outlet. They are in control.

A recent promotion for an *AdAge* webinar was titled "Take control back from consumers". This was perplexing in its own right. Why? To what benefit? Shouldn't they be in control?

Consumer managed relationships are infinitely richer. But they are difficult to manage and agencies that have not embraced the



R/GA's work for Nike+ showed an understanding of Nike consumers, providing them with an opportunity to interact with the brand.

inbound, as well as the outbound, will struggle in this increasingly consumer-centric world. The agency of the future will harness this new two-way relationship and not be afraid of it.

Those who get it, such as HappyCorp in New York, which is helping clients build communities around their brands, will reap rewards.

In the future, an agency's value will be determined by its ability to understand its customers' customers – understand where and how they get their knowledge – and then being able to engage them in a dialogue with the brand. <

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