Engagement - The New Metric for Media Research or Just Another Buzz Word?

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Engagement - The New Metric for Media Research or Just Another Buzz Word? By Manfred Mareck, Research Marketing Ltd, London

In 2004 Readerâ€™s Digest led an initiative in the USA to develop an â€˜Involvement Indexâ€™. The magazineâ€™s researche measured readersâ€™ advertising recall against a number of qualitative reading measures as reported on MRI, the US national readership survey. Not surprisingly, measures that indicate loyal and regular (four out of four issues) or intensive (more than 30 minutes per issue) reading correlate well with high advertising recall but so does a close relationship (this title is one of my favourites) between reader and publication.

This was followed by the 2005 Newspaper Engagement Study. Published by Newspaper National Network, a private partnership representing over 20 major US newspaper groups and conducted by Millward Brown this study qualifies engagement through editorial content, such as â€˜dealing with issues people care aboutâ€™ or â€˜representing the most comprehensive source of newsâ€™.
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The MI4 Initiative
Also last year the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF), the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA) and the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) announced details of a joint initiative to encourage industry-wide adoption ofÂ â€˜consumer engagementâ€™ as a new media measurement. Branded somewhat ackwardly MI4 (nothing to do with â€˜military intelligenceâ€™ but standing for â€˜Measurement Initiative: Advertisers, Agencies, Media & Researchersâ€™) th consortium has set itself three tasks, namely to develop an acceptable definition of engagement, to demonstrate the relationship between engagement and sales, and to validate the value of engagement, for example via tracking studies.

â€œIn the face of media fragmentation and consumer control over how they receive their advertising messages new forms of advertising are needed to reach todayâ€™s consumers and new metrics are necessary to reflect the impact of non-traditional messagesâ€•, so Barbara Bacci-Mirque, Senior VP of ANA. The driving force is the desire to develop a new measure for ROI, to â€œcreate a new media currency in cost per engagement that will complement cost per exposureâ€•, according to Mike Donahue, AAAAâ€™s Executive VP.

It seems clear, that the MI4 initiative is not yet ready to ditch the old model completely. At this stage the main aim is to complement reach and frequency with reach and engagement. What seems less clear is whether the focus will be specifically on new forms of advertising in new communication channels and emerging media, such as gaming, web forums and blogs or include traditional media and messages as well. One important element from MI4â€™s presentation is the dual nature of engagement, i.e. the need to consider the relationship between recipients and media brand as well as between recipients and advertising brand as both relationships will have an impact on the final outcome. This is good news for media owners as it acknowledges that advertisers (and their agencies) will have to share responsibility in order to achieve high engagement scores. By implication this means they should also share the future financial burden of measuring engagement, which is not always the case with the current audience measurement model.

Dynamic vs. Static
As there is no definition of engagement as yet it is difficult to see how any future metric may be incorporated into the planning model. Presumingly traditional exposure values will be weighted by the relevant engagement scores. The task is made even more complex as we no longer understand media consumption as a static activity that is focused on a single medium. With our multi-tasking behaviour, especially (but not exclusively) when it comes to new communication channels, engagement with any single channel is more often intermitted rather than sustained. Media engagement is a dynamic process, not a discreet activity â€“ it takes place within a multi-media environment where different channels are sometimes foreground media and moments later become secondary background media and another channels becomes dominant.

This is an exciting and important development, but one that should go a step further and consider consumersâ€™ receptivity toward advertising messages as well. I may well have a very close relationship, hence engagement with a particular newspaper, TV programme or Website, but it doesnâ€™t necessarily follow that I am always receptive to commercial messages. Including the consumer there are not four, but five stakeholders involved, which would give a new meaning to MI5.

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