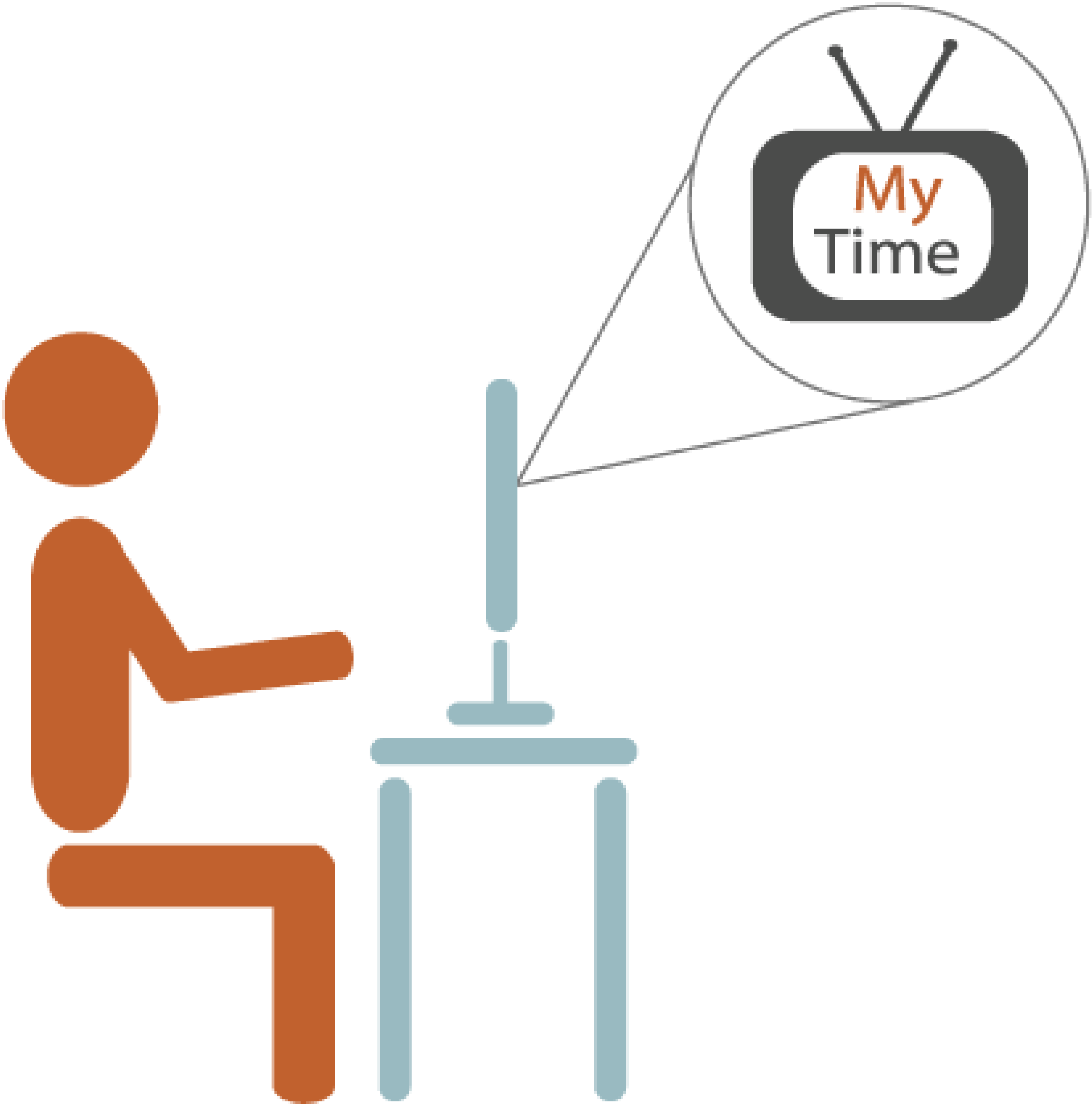

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As consumers shift from prime time to my time, marketers need to stop interrupting their content experiences and actually...

Be the Content

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There's an old advertising joke that goes like this: "The answer is a 30-second spot. Now, what's the question?" It shines a harsh light on the fact that in the world of traditional advertising the television spot has become the automatic "correct answer" for brands looking to deliver a message to the masses, whether or not it really is the right tool for the job.

Today, as the consumer exerts more control over her consumption of media, as primetime gives way to "my time" and as technology empowers more people to make the shift from content consumer to content creator, the effectiveness of traditional, interruption advertising has been called into question. In the age of broadband, TiVo, YouTube and MySpace, it's no longer so clear that interrupting viewers as they watch the Thursday night lineup is the best way to engage a marketplace. I'm not suggesting that television advertising is dead – of course, it isn't – but it does feel like we're headed down a slippery slope.

And at the bottom of that slope, we find the Internet - the place where, as Joseph Jaffe predicted in his 2005 book Life After the 30-Second Spot, the television commercial would make its resurgence. We are in the midst of a broadband video revolution, yet advertisers still cling to the 30-second spot, in the form of pre-roll ads.

In fact, if online marketing has its version of that old advertising joke, it probably goes something like this: "What's the right length for a pre-roll ad? You're asking the wrong question." But this joke isn't so funny. The debate over the right length for a pre-roll spot has been going on for well over a year and the truth is that pre-roll is not the right way for marketers to make the most of soaring consumer adoption of online video.

If online video is going to grow into the $2.9 billion channel that eMarketer forecasts it will be by 2010, it will get there not on the back of interruption advertising, but as a result of innovative marketing approaches that are custom-made for the online on-demand world. Instead of debating the right length for an ad unit that isn't right for the medium, the industry should focus its efforts on finding new ways of engaging consumers through the power of sight, sound and motion.

If the question is, “Then what’s the right way for marketers to leverage online video?” the correct answer is, “distributed brand content.”

First, let’s take a look at what I mean by brand content. For decades, advertisers have been filling the cracks between pieces of someone else’s content, but with the advent of the DVR and the promise of a million channel universe delivered over a broadband connection, it has never been easier for consumers to skip over those cracks and go directly to the content they wish to see. To me, this calls for a radically different approach. If we want to reach consumers in the on-demand age, we need to stop standing between them and their content and actually *be* the content they want to see. When it comes to broadband video, advertisers and agencies need to focus their energies on producing content that has sufficient appeal to attract, retain and engage the consumers with whom you hope to build lasting relationships.

With some exceptions, consumers do not want to watch content *about* your brand. But consumers will watch original programming that *supports* your brand, if it is entertaining, informative and provides value. Here’s my simple sniff test: if the typical consumer wouldn’t consider the video you’ve created content, then it isn’t content.

I called this a radically different approach, but in truth it isn’t a new approach at all. When P&G created the soap opera category, they weren’t shows about consumer packaged goods. They were bona fide entertainment vehicles that appealed to a large audience of household shopping decision makers. These shows may not have been *about* soap but were so successful at engaging their target audience that they certainly sold a lot of product.

Some progressive marketers have already experimented with brand content creation for the web – Brawny, Audi and BMW come to mind as early innovators. More recently brands as diverse as Budweiser, Diesel, Cadillac and Degree have moved beyond advertising and created leading edge original web video programming. To get web video right, more of our industry’s energy needs to be focused in this direction.

Not every agency or advertiser will be equally equipped to create content on their own. Mainstream media companies, independent production companies, the growing stable of professional web video producers, not to mention consumers themselves can all be good partners for co-production of original programming.

Now, let's move onto distribution. The creation or co-creation of brand content takes us partway down the path, but marketers should not simply present this content on their own destinations. For me, this has been a key flaw of many of the brand content initiatives to date. The web is becoming less destination-oriented and more about broad, open source distribution.

The brand channel simply is not a stand alone proposition. Instead, smart marketers will not only focus their effort on creating great video content, they will also look to syndicated portions of that brand content experience to other sites, putting their video on the sites where the viewers already are, rather than simply putting their video where the brand is and hoping to pull in a sizable audience.

Ford Motor Company seems to understand this. Their Bold Moves video blog segments run not only on the vlog itself but have also been distributed on third party broadband sites like ROOtv.

In the world of networked media, though, distribution is not limited to carefully orchestrated syndication deals. Consumer-to-consumer sharing of brand content assets provides marketers with a unique means of engaging consumers, making them our partners in brand storytelling, and gaining additional reach that, quite simply, cannot be bought.

For me, one of this year's biggest online video success stories was the Dove Evolution short film that illustrated the lengths to which marketers go to create idealized images of female beauty. While it is impressive that this two-minute clip garnered over two million (unpaid) views, it is at least as significant that thousands of blogs picked up the video and provided additional social distribution.

As marketers produce brand content, it is critical that they think about these assets outside of the context of a single branded destination and ensure that the content can be widely distributed through both syndication partnerships and social media channels.

In the end, the question for any online marketer is, “Would you rather invest your money in creating traditional advertising that consumers skip, or invest that same money in producing and distributing engaging content that they will actually want to see?”

Now, what’s your answer?

About the author

Greg Verdino is VP/Director of Emerging Channels at DIGITAS. For more of his perspectives on new media and marketing, or to contact him directly about this column, visit his blog at gregverdino.typepad.com.