



Brand Building in the Digital Age: A Dizzying Array of Choices

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For anyone who is a baby boomer, the name *TV Guide* still conjures up an image of that digest-size magazine that came to your home every week with its listings of the nightly shows on the four or five channels in your hometown, as well as a couple of feature stories about "Gunsmoke" or "Gilligan's Island."

That image seems quaint in the era of YouTube.com, 300 digital channels, TiVo and DVRs, and videos watched on people's iPods -- but the irony is that with so many different video options, the one thing that viewers need more than ever is the original resource that drew them to *TV Guide* back in the 1950s and 1960s: Guidance.

"*TV Guide*, hopefully, still stands for your guide for entertainment," Richard Cusick, senior vice president for digital media at Gemstar-TV Guide International, told a panel on the future of digital media at the recent Wharton Technology Conference 2007. "We don't want to get caught up in what brand we deliver that in."

To that end, *TV Guide* has increasingly emphasized online, wireless or interactive content. In 2004, its parent company struck a \$250 million partnership deal to develop an interactive program guide with Comcast, while last year it teamed up with 4INFO to send television listings to mobile phones. Gemstar-TV Guide also builds popular interactive web sites, with blogs based on popular shows like "24" and "Lost."

The company's successful initiatives seemed to drive home some of the key messages of the panel, which was entitled "Digital Media: Brand Building in the Digital Age" and also included representatives from Comcast, the *New York Times*, alcoholic drinks producer Diageo Plc and ad firm MediaVest USA.

The group offered some solid advice to any executive or editor confronting a seemingly dizzying array of digital media -- from mobile devices to user-generated videos to blogs and podcasts and other types of Internet sites -- and seeking to decide how to best deliver content or sell their product.

The main message was that any media offering has to be true to the established brand name -- taking that brand's strengths and then figuring out which technology platforms are most compatible with its core mission. "We're 150 years old, and that's part of our opportunity and our challenge," said Hayley Nelson, the product manager for NYTimes.com. Simply put, that means keeping the same commitment to the qualities that have made the *Times* the most authoritative news source in the country, with 93 Pulitzer Prizes -- but applying those standards to news delivered on cell phones, or on interactive blogs where the general public is able to post comments.

Nelson said that NYTimes.com works closely with futurists, and its top digital executives hold a yearly meeting with information technology experts who pass new and upcoming gadgets around the table, while, she said, the journalism executives "try to envision what we can do with them."

That might sound like an odd image for a newspaper company that's nicknamed "The Gray Lady." But in



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fact, the *Times* is already a huge Internet presence. Its 42.6 million unique visitors make it the 11th most popular site on the web, with online revenues rising at an annual rate of more than 26%.

Reaching Upscale Audiences

While many Internet visitors come for the *Times'* core coverage of international news, an increasing lure is sites that are highly targeted at lucrative niche markets. Some of that new content is created with the needs of advertisers in mind. "We're trying to bring the advertisers earlier into product development," said Nelson, one of the few staffers at the *Times* who bridges the gap between the operation's editorial and business sides.

A prime example of these efforts is the relatively new blog called DealBook, a frequently updated financial news service -- including a daily emailed newsletter -- with some lively discussion areas, where occasionally a company's CEO will post a comment. "We've tried really hard to create these dialogues," said Nelson, "and one reason is so we can give advertisers a very targeted way at reaching these upscale audiences." That success allows for several ways to monetize the web traffic; recently, the *Times* announced DealBook Jobs, a new section within DealBook dedicated to job hunting and career management in the financial services industry, with an outlet for high-end help-wanted ads.

Several times during the discussion, panelists stressed that with all the focus on finding new media for reaching consumers, the old types of media -- including television and newspapers -- aren't disappearing and should not be neglected by advertisers. "It's not about the 15-second or 30-second commercial. Let me be clear. These aren't going anywhere; they're staying where they are" said Jen Soch, vice president and group director of advanced TV for MediaVest USA. "But it's how do we use them." For example, advertisers are frequently airing short TV spots that then direct viewers to a web site where they can be exposed to more information.

In fact, one of Soch's biggest problems seemed to be countering technology -- such as TiVo recorders -- that allow customers to skip over commercials altogether. She said MediaVest has been working on so-called "speed bumps" -- a kind of advertisement that will still appear on screen even as viewers are fast forwarding.

TV Guide's Cusick echoed the other panelists when he said that using new media or creating elaborate new web sites -- where it's to promote editorial content or to advertise a product -- is a waste of time if the subject matter is not something that interests viewers or Internet readers. On several occasions, Cusick notes, advertisers have approached *TV Guide* to create what he called "micro-sites" to promote a particular show or offering, but the sites have sometimes bombed because the show was not very popular.

Some of the panelists said that all the publicity about new forms of video -- which some experts are calling "Television 2.0" -- and new online communities is creating pressure from brand marketers similar to the late 1990s, when firms rushed to the Internet with little notion of how to best make use of the new medium. "We have clients who come in and say, 'Where's our RSS feed or where's our blogger?' when for some brands it doesn't make any sense," said Soch.

Interacting with the Public

One aspect of the newer Internet 2.0 that panelists had mixed feelings about is the surge in popularity of so-called "user generated content," such as posting homemade videos on web sites like YouTube.com. That development prompted *Time* magazine to name "You" as Person of the Year. The trend was the recipient of increased hype when leading tortilla-chip brand Doritos aired a 30-second commercial that was produced by an amateur during the Super Bowl.

But John Young, vice president for Comcast Interactive Media, wondered if there wasn't a little too much excitement about these home-grown commercials. He pointed out that amateur video on TV is about as old as the popular series "Candid Camera," and not always the most effective. "They aren't overshadowing the value of high-quality content."

The panel's moderator -- Mike Church, media director for Diageo Plc, the liquor giant that includes Captain Morgan, Guinness and Smirnoff -- noted that advertisements for alcoholic beverages are

expected to also promote things like sensible drinking or safe driving, messages that don't always come across on a home video from young and enthusiastic customers. "For the liquor industry, any user content has to meet regulations and standards," he said.

The *Times'* Nelson agreed that moderating online sites that take comments from the public can be a time-consuming new chore, yet on many projects the benefit of interaction with the reading and buying public outweighs the risks. She said one of the *Times'* most successful online projects involved a reporter's six-month global travels, in which he asked online readers to suggest places to eat, sleep and visit. The project drew thousands of comments, not to mention a high amount of traffic to the web site.

Nevertheless, *TV Guide's* Cusick suggested that either corporate clients or editors who want a two-way line of communication with readers or viewers need to be thick-skinned. "People aren't stupid, so just be prepared for honest feedback about your brand," he cautioned.

Even though the panelists were quite conversant in all the latest trends in video-on-demand, podcasting and so-called "place shifting" of television to mobile phone or computer locations, there was also a palpable sense of anxiety in keeping up with so many rapid technology changes at once. "These things may all be outdated by the time you get home tonight," Church told the audience. The Diageo executive also provided the lightest moment of the event, when he asked the audience how many people had ever visited a liquor company web site.

Not a single hand went up. "That's it. I'm fired!" Church laughed, turning his place card around in a visible sign of frustration at trying to find the consumer in an increasingly fragmented media environment.

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