

## In praise of media neutral planning

*Professor Angus Jenkinson, CFIM, Centre for Integrated Marketing at Luton Business School and Chairman of Stepping Stones Consultancy Limited.*

That the world is beginning to beat a path to it might mean that media neutral planning (MNP) is indeed the better mousetrap, or that it's just the current passion<sup>1</sup>. However, it is difficult to argue against using the best mix of media for the job rather than being narrow-minded, prejudiced or fragmented.

The case against MNP is usually either:

1. MNP is a good idea, but that is all it is because in practice it is too difficult to implement; or
2. Since MNP is just good practice and what we are already doing, why invent another buzzword?

There is some limited merit in these views. Implementing MNP is good practice, and it is difficult and will often require significant improvement in skills and organisation. Indeed, this is a key reason for the CIM making it one of their Canons of Knowledge and a focus of this Journal, and it is why I suggest you may need to pay attention to it. It won't happen without leadership. Thus these arguments counter each other while pointing to MNP as a new discipline and way of thinking.

MNP is a specialist cross-functional discipline driven by research, analysis and creative insight, not by habit and preference, and is defined in the CIM's Canons of Knowledge website as:

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<sup>1</sup> Other terms for MNP include media neutral communication and media neutrality.

a customer-centric, inclusive and merit based review of media options during marketing communications planning<sup>2</sup>.

It takes a widemedial approach to communication planning, acknowledging the full spectrum of possibility, from face-to-face and viral marketing to product placement and TV, focusing on media in combinations rather than singly. Metaphors of cocktail or orchestra replace solo liquor or instrument.

John Grant, co-founder of St Luke's, confirms, "the media shift is from passive, single medium to interactive mixes of media. That doesn't just mean a shift from TV to the Internet. It is a shift to anything *with* anything. Sony describe it as moving from 'broadcast to anycast'. A big TV show now has an interactive component and at the very least a website." <sup>11</sup>

MNP accepts that all media *might* achieve any objective, subject to customer preferences, creativity, business objectives and market context, but a creative mix based on media characteristics, the customer's preferences and brand touchpoints best achieves success. Media neutrality begins therefore with insights into customers, merging disciplines in an open-minded and thoroughly informed knowledge of media potential and creative characteristics.

As Kevin Bishop, IBM Northern Region Marketing Director described it in a recent FT article, "Planning the right approach for each [type of customer] has to start from an understanding of the customer, not a preconceived view of the communications media. Before embarking on any kind of communications brief, I expect my team to understand the customer, their business issues and the way they are likely to be thinking. We then plan what kind of experience we want them to have, where that experience is

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from *Media Neutral Planning*, a White Paper by Professor Jenkinson published by Centre for Integrated Marketing, Luton Business School.

<sup>1</sup> John Grant (2002), *After Image*, HarperCollinsBusiness,

likely to come from within IBM, and what external factors will influence it. Only then do we start on the brief.”<sup>3</sup>

I would add that media neutral planning inevitably leads to discipline neutral planning.

## **Integrated communication works better and needs MNP to work best**

The case for focussing on MNP is based on just two points (with considerable evidence behind them): the *value* of mixed media planning and the *current gaps* in practicing it. Most readers will probably be aware of these: it is the causes and the implications for new thinking and action that will concern them. Briefly, the key argument is:

1. The most effective marketing communications requires a widely blended mix of communications types and media, using all the communication tools to achieve synergy. Research conclusively shows that harmonised, mixed media communication is more effective in reach, targeting and customer impact. Simply adding one more medium is likely to improve reach and effect by 10-20%. John Billett’s comment that, “We have to move from the old goal to find the best medium to finding the best *combination* of media for each campaign”<sup>4</sup> sums this up and now represents standard academic theory as well as best practice, usually under the term Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin Bishop, *Braver new world*, FT. June 17, 2002

<sup>4</sup> John Billett, *Hard edged consumer issues and hard nosed media solutions*, CIM publication and workshop 2001.

<sup>5</sup> See any text book on IMC. The following papers represent samples from innumerable others on the theme: Christian Stahl (1999) *Added Value of the Media Mix, Experiences and Lessons from an Experimental Test Marker*, European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research. Joe Mandese (1999) *The Brits are Unbundling Again, Strategy shops take account-planning approach to media*, American Association of Advertising Agencies, Winter 1999. Rishad Tobaccowala and Christian Kugel, (Feb 2001) *Planning and Evaluating Cross-media Programmes*, Admap. Marian G. Confer (1992) *The research study: The advertising impact of magazines in conjunction with television, waves I and II*. Report No. 65, Magazine Publishers of America. Press Research Council (1990). *The Media Multiplier*. London. Thorson, E., & Moore, J. (Eds.) (1996). *Integrated communication: Synergy of persuasive*

2. In a competitive world, you therefore need to be *finding* and *using* the most efficient and creative mix in order to achieve your objectives. Gerhard Franz captures what many commentators and practitioners believe: "The strategic planning of the media mix is becoming even more crucial for effective communication with the target consumer. A wrong decision on the media mix can lead to a serious waste of the advertising budget."<sup>6</sup>
3. On the whole, though, marketing practice is significantly divergent from this goal. Media planning is frequently bedevilled by historic concepts and assumptions about the disciplines and media; by past experiences that may no longer be as relevant but still shape decision-making; by political infighting and commercial pressures; and by agency/client structures, data and system planning resources that don't make for good decision-making<sup>7</sup>. A private forum of senior marketers invited by the CIM to discuss MNP in November 2001 reported very serious issues in leadership, culture, skills, structure and tools<sup>8</sup>. This is echoed in many studies, including ours<sup>9</sup>.

### **The trend towards integration and MNP will improve practice**

An added dimension of the case for MNP, at least for agencies, is that it is where practitioners are going. Agencies that adopt MNP can take advantage of this trend, and media agencies in particular see it as an opportunity to gain the strategic high ground. The importance of MNP in the new thinking is demonstrated by British Gas, which consolidated its £36 million media planning and buying business into Carat in the spring of 2002 following an agency pitch requiring the delivery of a data driven, media neutral strategy.

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voices. Mawah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Adrian Weser, (1997) *Advertising increases market shares and media mix achieves most. The proof* European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research. Alan Smith, (1997) *Integrated marketing communications starts with print plus television*, European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research

<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Franz, *Better Media Planning for Integrated Communication*, Admap Jan 2000

<sup>7</sup> For example, Franz's comment that, "As a rule media-mix decisions today are not backed up by systematic analysis because appropriate data are not available. The missing link between numerous single-medium studies is a central strategic study for cross-media budget allocation." Op cit.

<sup>8</sup> Moderated Jenkinson, and transcription sent to participants.

<sup>9</sup> See for example any textbook.

There is other evidence of the shift in the industry:

- While P&G reduced its overall advertising spend in 2001 by 13% (\$550m)<sup>2</sup> and Unilever posted a EUR60m reduction in its advertising costs for the first quarter of 2002<sup>3</sup>, both companies *increased* spend in new media.
- Nestle Rowntree's spend has gone from 100% on TV in 1991 to only about two thirds now and a projected 55% by 2006<sup>10</sup>. Along with many other brands they no longer see TV as the best route to launch new brands given the substantial relative increases in TV cost and the advantages of other methods and mixes.<sup>11</sup>
- The share of US clients' overall marketing budgets accounted for by traditional above-the-line disciplines decreased from 70% in 1990 to 30% in 2000, while in the UK, one-third of marketing communications spend is now on sales promotion alone<sup>12</sup>.

Such impetus should eventually create greater competence and therefore confidence in MNP execution, vitally important given the well-publicised complaints about lack of competence by major figures such as Carol Fisher (ex CEO of COI Communications) and Dawn Hudson, senior vice president, strategy & marketing Pepsi-Cola, who recently commented, "Lots of agencies understand brands & how to reinvent them, but I'm not seeing the kind of big-picture thinking that will help clients take advantage of the multiple ways in which people experience brands"<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> [www.rab.co.uk/rab\\_tv/radio\\_effectiveness2](http://www.rab.co.uk/rab_tv/radio_effectiveness2)

<sup>11</sup> "Put bluntly, supermarkets are the new media. If I want to get a message cost-effectively to 70% of British households in a week, do I plan a centre break in a peak-time soap or do I run a display end in Tesco? It's clear that in-store, at point-of-purchase will have a greater impact. Increasingly we're learning that trade activity builds brand equity ... watch out for the retailer – TV's true competitor." Andrew Harrison, UK marketing director of Nestle Rowntree: Conference: TV2001 Madrid, TV 2002 21<sup>st</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> March, Prague.

<sup>12</sup> ISBA/Advertising Research Consortium (ARC) research study, 'Sales Promotion: Activities Resources and Agencies 2002'.

<sup>13</sup> Fast Company, April 2002

## **MNP leads the way to integrated marketing**

Costs and media mix benefits together encourage new thinking, but the change is more than just adding magazines to TV or radio to mail media advertising, it is taking an integrated customer experience-based view that blends the disciplines and media.

Kevin Bishop (quoted earlier) described the IBM approach as “We then plan what kind of experience we want [customers] to have, where that experience is likely to come from within IBM, and what external factors will influence it.” Jeremy Bullmore says, “That there has to be some communication between a brand and its public is obvious; but its name, its packaging, its stores if it has any, its vans and its news value, can all give people important clues to a brand’s character - and in some instances, these non-advertising communications media will be the all-important ones”.<sup>14</sup>

This leads marketers to want new and more effective ways of communicating holistically with customers. James Stengel, head of global marketing, Procter & Gamble, agrees: “The consumer is different today and we have got to be experimenting all of the time. We have to look at new channels and new ways of connecting”.<sup>15</sup> Leading agencies also agree, such as Ogilvy with its 360 degree branding concept, while Mediaedge:cia believes, “The planner of the future will have to embrace every relevant channel which connects a brand with an audience, and will have to understand the potential contribution of every marketing discipline. In this way, planners can provide clients with truly objective advice. We believe that this makes sense, not least because this is how consumers see brands - they do not discriminate between sources of communication”<sup>16</sup>.

Our research at the Centre for Integrated Marketing suggests that the future involves integrating IMC and customer relationship management (CRM)

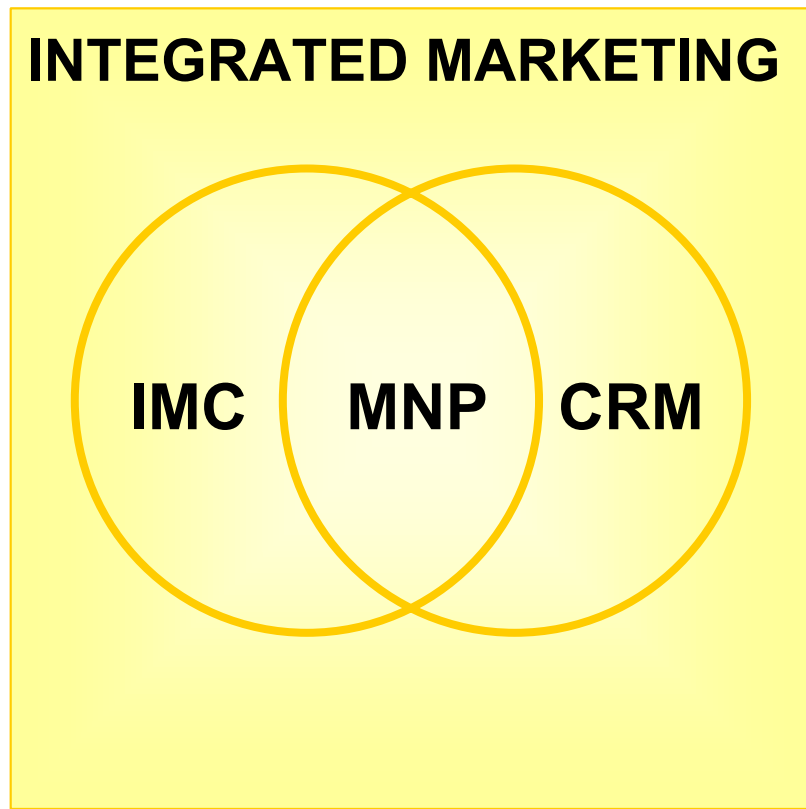
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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Market Leader (Spring 2002)

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in The Financial Times, 23 April 2002

<sup>16</sup> Internal paper: *Communications Planning & Implementation*, June 2002

disciplines, along with (or including, depending on how you define IMC and CRM) a roster of others like internal marketing, service marketing and selling, and that MNP is the core discipline for connecting them, see Figure 1.



*Fig 1: MNP as the mediator between IMC and CRM within Integrated Marketing*

### **Re-thinking disciplines and media**

Simplistic judgements about communication tools and what they can do are the real barrier:

- Direct marketing and sales promotion create sales
- Advertising builds brands
- PR creates reputation
- Mail media is used by direct marketers
- Coupons are used by sales promotion

Such beliefs, although legitimate, may also be highly limiting: expertise is only prejudice in waiting. As Andrew Harrison noted, sales promotion can be a tremendous way to launch the brand, as can mail media. The more you recognise the variety of disciplines that can be used by a single medium or communication, the more effectively you can use it. Furthermore, the very definitions of some disciplines need to be rethought or the disciplines recast.

Take AOL's use of mail media targeted to most homes in Britain, which blends direct marketing, sales promotion, mass advertising, new media, affinity marketing, word of mouth and viral marketing elements, if not others. If AOL really took that on board the packs would get better, save them money and produce better results.

John Grant, whom I quoted earlier, reformulates media into seven new categories that seem to me to be more useful than the classical ones, at least for planning purposes:

1. *Knowledge media*, which include instructive books, factual TV programmes, online or cd-rom courses, seminars, user groups and venue based learning experiences
2. *Reality media*, reflecting the importance of design
3. *Dialogue media*, including face-to-face service and phone lines, e-mail, bulletin boards and interactive systems
4. *Memetic media*, in which people see what others are doing or thinking and copy it, from casual conversation to opinion polls, musicals and viral marketing
5. *Community media*, which Grant considers to be an active version of the dated notion of the passive target audience
6. *Story media*, ranging from fictional dramas to computer games to TV ads that provide ways to research modes of life
7. *Reputation media*, not only corporate advertising, PR and publications but also "big actions by companies" such as IBM's Deep

Blue chess computer whose defeat of Kasparov helped to put IBM back on centre stage as the company inventing the future.<sup>17</sup>

Bold thinking such as this is needed to meet today's challenges, and it is media neutral planning that is the forum of the future to get us there.

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<sup>17</sup> John Grant (2002)