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Can Search Build Brands?

by Chris Copeland, Friday, April 10, 2009, 1:15 PM

Earlier this week, eMarketer published its [most recent view](#) on the U.S. advertising space and the spending trends within it. The company noted the point gains being made year over year for digital marketing and explained the impact in its intro as such:

"Digital marketing offers compelling benefits, especially for cash-conscious companies in a recession, because marketers can more readily measure the results of Internet advertising than with most traditional media. This produces more-efficient advertising and higher ROI, which in turn pushes traditional media to compete with lower pricing."

So, advertisers are gravitating to more measurable forms of marketing and also looking to channels that produce higher ROI. Makes sense, but when you look at some recent findings from SEMPO's annual search survey, you start to see a disconnect.

In their '08 study, SEMPO asked both advertisers and agencies what metrics they track and the findings were interesting. In the case of brand impact, the agencies surveyed said - by a wide margin (20%+) - that they measured this more so than the direct advertisers. If marketers are moving dollars online because ROI is better, then why are their agencies worried so much about brand?

It leads to the obvious question. Can search build brands?

I think the jury is still out; but I would contend that search is much more a facilitation vehicle than a vehicle for establishing a brand. Creating brand connectivity in 140 characters is a daunting task when a consumer is predisposed to a brand, let alone when engaging for the first time. If an unknown brand is trying to establish a place and is using search, then there is a one-off opportunity to become acknowledged. But it's unlikely that Apple-level loyalists are going to rise from such limited interactions.

So, what's with agencies' obsession with brand impact? My sense is two things are working here.

1. Agencies in the search marketing industry traditionally have worked under percent of spend models, whereby focusing up the funnel on brand development keywords is a financial win that can be explained as brand building.

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2. Up the funnel activity should be about creating a better connection with consumer intent to help brand owners understand if value exists from buying paid search or looking at alternative investments in the search space that allow for alternative focus. Instead, agencies are trying to justify further investment away from other channels by contending that they are moving the needle on brand loyalty.

Can a brand see lift by using search as a primary vehicle? Yes. Will those brands be able to go from 0 to 60 simply using search? If so, I've yet to see a solid example of it. All cases studies I've seen show that search is a tremendous supplementary vehicle for brand building. So, when agencies suggest they are more interested in brand build than advertisers are, it comes as no surprise. Should brands be more concerned about up the funnel actions? Yes. Should agencies do a better job on that function with priming the funnel and creating connections? If they want to keep growing their investments, it would be a wise move. Because search is not a brick by brick builder for brands, it's the glue that enables blocks to be added, upon using owned brand content.