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Why Integration Is Not the Grail, And Causality Is Overrated in Search

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Integration.

If you are keeping score at home, it's the buzzword bingo center square. You know, the free one that everyone claims before the game actually begins.

Next week, I'm on a panel at SMX East titled "Ad Agencies & Search Marketing." The panel's construct is to take three agency-employed leaders and tout the merits of search marketing inside an agency. The teaser line for the session off the SMX Web site is, "Do traditional agencies 'get' search?"

This is part of a series of panels that will attempt to validate or dispel the notion that agencies get it. And all will talk about integration. Everyone should agree that a causal relationship exists amongst media, but many will disagree on whether or not the search agency sitting inside the traditional media agency is the right tool for fulfilling the goal of integration.

In thinking about this question, I was struck by a statement made last month at an event I attended. At this event, someone made the following comment. "50% of all people watching the Olympics on NBC were also online at the same time. 10% of those people said this is a common behavior." And this ongoing behavior shift forces us to redefine integration, cause and effect and how we manage or buy search. It might even help answer the question of my panel at SMX. (For the audience's sake I hope it helps; otherwise, I'm just a guy in a brightly colored shirt.)

Let's start with the common viewpoints on what is integration and what role does search play in the causal relationship of media. I think most see the two as inextricably linked. Search is the effect to the cause created in other media. TV advertising runs, display advertising shows and THEN people search. Engagement mapping and attribution of credit exist to ensure no one vehicle gets the credit. Search is discredited because it's the bottom of the funnel and is able to be tracked — suddenly two bad things when the objective is to measure the less measurable. Thus, other media creates a cause and search delivers the effect of fulfilling interest. And here comes integration.

Integration is typically presented from the search point of view as ensuring you are running ads at the same time as your other media.

One of our strategists recently wrote a [post](#) on the lack of presence and reaction from the financial institutions during this deep economic crisis. Even those marginally affected, and with positive stories, seemed unable to engage in a valuable manner with existing and potential customers. Every year search marketing and the Super Bowl are touted as a highly integrated vehicle. A 30-second spot runs and then companies are expected to buy search ads that connect consumers with further experience on a Web site. Every year people get better at covering the basics. Yet, the always-on nature of search tends to do a disservice to what I think is the hidden nugget in the quote about NBC's Olympic audience.



In an always-on search environment — where you never pay unless someone clicks and you know if you have the proper, read 100%, share of voice, and you can always be seen — it would seem that integration is a simple thing to accomplish. And it can be. With a minimal amount of communication and messaging change, the call to action goes from everyday support to event-specific. But that's like shooting fish in the proverbial barrel - a minimum bar to be cleared. Always-on lets us feel like we can always make a connection with the vast majority of people who experience cause through other media and act on the effect through search.

But what about those NBC viewers? It seems that causality is being replaced by a greater need for synchronization. The trouble with TV critics is that they just watch the show. They watch it in prepared installments that remove commercials. They also now do not have the synchronization effect at their disposal. TV shows like “Lost” and “Heroes” are changing the interactivity that exists and thus opening opportunities for the experience to be more than just watch and react. It also changes the notion of interaction. AMC has done a phenomenal job with “Mad Men,” its hit show about the ad industry circa the early 1960s. This show has a unique “DVR proofing” component, where advertiser-specific facts precede the commercials, thus negating the fast-forward element.

So, what comes next? Next month I'll explore synchronization in media and how that, not integration, should be the square that helps win the bingo game, not just get in the game.