

How different can a supermarket be?

Well, according to Bloom, very different. Zany songs and even “zany” commercials are portraying Bloom as the store with a smile. I guess smiling at the supermarket would be different.

According to its website, Bloom is a happy shopping experience, hassle-free even. In a sense, I think the commercials work because they do make you kind of shake your head, maybe even smile. The one I saw today was a classic comedy move—the response is not appropriate to the situation. For instance, a guy says he is thinking about his daughter, clearly worried about her, and the Bloom shopping associate says something like, check this watermelon out, it’s one of hundreds of fresh produce items. Huh? Are we supposed to go shopping at Bloom to forget our troubles? Or, is Bloom a place where there are no troubles? Or is the commercial trying to be memorable? All of the above. Maybe I should go to Bloom, there I would forget why I had issues with their advertising.

Junk calling

Thanks to Tony Attwood, from the U.K.-based Hamilton House, a direct mail enterprise, for pointing out that telemarketing calls are more intrusive than junk mail. I quite agree and that is why the U.S. government was right to create the “Do Not Call List.” It is about choice. We can reduce the “junk mail” and “junk calls” we get. Of course, we can always just hang up the phone when we realize it is a telemarketing call. Particularly offensive, in my opinion, are those recorded

calls you get on your cell phone.

This got me to thinking about telemarketing calls. Somewhere, a marcomm person wrote a script for those calls. Ideally, the caller should move the call receiver to some sort of action—buy something, subscribe to something, donate money, etc. As in direct mail, these calls do have a success rate, and I am sure it varies by product or service and all by telemarketer (I have had rude telemarketers call me. Needless to say, they don't get very far.).

The media was busy reporting this week that a new nuisance is text spam, in which you get unsolicited sales messages as text messages on your cell phone. Email spam is noxious, primarily because it is unsolicited and often advertises pharmaceuticals or sex-related services. We have legitimate email solicitations, which feature an opt-out option. But we don't pay per email message. We do pay for text message. Text spam may be even more nefarious than email spam.

Back to telemarketing—there is a role for direct calls in a marketing campaign. Clearly, politicians use this technique quite a lot, since they are trying to reach people “directly” and motivate them to vote. In some cases, it can backfire. If I get too many recorded messages, I get irritated. I wonder if telemarketing is more effective to retirees or people who are homebound. To these people a call is not an intrusion as much as chance to connect with someone. Somebody who has been on the phone all day and just wants to relax in the evening may find unsolicited calls from telemarketers very intrusive.

From a marketing standpoint, my advice about telemarketing is to proceed with caution. Certainly, the more targeted your message and your list, the more successful. Telemarketers who ignore common sense (calling too early or too late or too often) or run afoul of the Do Not Call list will not help the product or service they are trying to sell.

Direct mail or junk mail?

Direct mail is an industry on to itself, with an association (Direct Marketing Association) and a whole class of direct marketing specialists. The idea is that direct mail is the ultimate targeted medium. It is also ultimately invasive. Who does not get letters and catalogs overflowing the mailbox? Of course, some of this direct mail comes from organizations (usually nonprofits) to which you have contributed or otherwise been involved with. Some catalogs come from stores you have shopped in. Although not solicited, these items seem to be less junk than other junk. What is junk, in my mind, are the thousands of unsolicited credit card applications and circulars that we get. Those aren't targeted at all. Especially not the circulars (although I am sure there is a circular manager out there that will argue they are targeted by zip code and all that). But as a writer, there is a difference between convincing an existing or former donor to consider giving again to a charity and a mass mailing for window blinds or steam cleaning services. For the latter, direct mail is just another form of advertising. It is basically the same as their electronic or print advertising, and may even be part of a package (newspapers often sell this as an added value...advertise in the newspaper and we will add you to our weekly circular to zip codes you choose, etc.)

The trouble is many people just toss out all direct mail, especially circulars. Thus the garbage can is really the targeted audience. Also, the amount of paper these mailings generate has become the target of many environmentalists out there. Yet the mailings keep coming. I was just in Australia where many mailboxes carry the sign "no junk mail." Unfortunately, we don't have this here in America. And, from

what I understand, the mail carrier is required by law to deliver the circulars and other mail to your box.

It would be better for both the direct mailer and the direct mailee if there were choice involved. If I choose to receive a mailing, I may pay attention to that mailing. If all I do with unsolicited mail is throw it out, the message is not being heard and there is actual harm being done to the environment.

Talk to your doctor

There are so many medicines being peddled on television and in print...most notably ones for erectile dysfunction, cholesterol and GERD. Yesterday, during the ABC Evening News with Charles Gibson, I saw a commercial that left me shaking my head. It was for a prescription pain medication, although it took about half the length of the commercial before that was clear. The commercial itself was the longest I have ever seen for a drug—either a minute or a minute and a half. It purported to discuss both the risks and benefits of this drug, while comparing it to similar drugs. This class of drugs, NSAIDs, have been shown to cause heart risks. The commercial was completely graphic—no actors playing tennis or gardening. And it went on and on. But what most astonished me was that for the first 30 seconds, it seemed almost like a public service announcement (PSA) talking about the various dangers of this type of drug, and specifically pointing out the dangers of the drug being advertised!!! It was weird.

If you want to know the name of the drug, please email me and then you can talk to your doctor about it!

Segmented audiences

Last night, PBS aired African American Lives Part 2, a series exploring African American history featuring Henry Louis Gates, Jr. This documentary is really wonderful—interesting and informative. I highly recommend it (it goes on Wednesdays through February). On the marketing side, it was interesting to see who was sponsoring the show: Coca-Cola, Johnson and Johnson, AMBI and others. Coke had an ad made specifically for the series, focusing on African American history and achievement. It was highly stylized and designed to appeal to emotion. Johnson and Johnson did something similar...about generations and showing how “baby changes everything.” The family appearing the J&J ad was black. I started thinking about how we process messaging in this day and age. If I am black, do I have to see a black family using a product to consider it? If I am white, and I see the aforementioned J&J commercial, do I disregard it because it is so clearly targeting African Americans?

Audiences have always been segmented, and advertisers have always worked to tailor their messages to each audience's needs. Aren't we so tremendously media exposed that we would see different ads for the same product on different channels/media outlets? Does the message really change? Certain products, like AMBI, are meant specifically for African Americans. The company probably does not advertise too much on mass media. But do other products, which may not be so specific (Coke for instance), need to present different advertising? Or maybe it is not about need per se, but rather image...

Super Political

Super Tuesday is here. There is a lot of media hoopla about this—ABC, CBS and NBC were discussing it non-stop during the morning news shows. All candidates have ramped up advertising for the primary, and Barack Obama even ran an ad during the Super Bowl.

Political advertising is tough, especially on a national level. You want to hit the right chord to get out your supporters, convert non-supporters and not alienate everyone else. Obama has to be very careful not to alienate Clinton supporters (and vice versa for Hillary Clinton with Obama supporters), because there is a potential ticket of Obama/Clinton to contend with after the presidential candidate is chosen.

Since I have only seen the Obama ad, I can only comment on that. His strategy is very clear: emphasize change to appeal to everyone disenchanted with the current administration AND to everyone who doesn't want to see Bill Clinton back in the White House. He is also working hard to appeal to the Millennials. This is wise—I think Millennials will turn out for this election, and of all the candidates currently out there, Obama probably has the most appeal.

Super Ad or Super Bad?

I admit I didn't watch Super Bowl 43 in its entirety. So, I wasn't able to watch every ad. In a sense, all the ads were

predictable. Some trying to hard to be interesting (while not achieving a thing for their brand) and others just bland. Fox was pushing their programs big time, especially the falling-in-the-ratings American Idol. Ads got lots of added value—you can see the ads again on MySpace. And, commentators will discuss the ads in the newspapers and on TV. In the end, this is the real strategy: get publicity for your ad.

The most ubiquitous advertising came from a certain “king” of beers. It makes me wonder what their advertising strategy is. Is it to establish supremacy as the number one beer advertiser? Is it to make sure that the audience does not know there are other types of beers out there? Is it to make sure you get good and drunk while watching the Super Bowl? As a beer drinker, there is no amount of beer advertising that would make me want to drink that stuff. It is all about the taste, right?

Some ads just made me shake my head. Garmin had a Napoleon re-enactor (I think) driving to a re-enactment. Huh? Sunilk compared Marilyn Monroe, Shakira and Madonna? The Victoria's Secret Valentine's Ad I felt, was offensive to women by objectifying. I didn't get the Doritos ad at all. I must be in the wrong demo. Some ads were genuinely funny—the Planter's ad, Nationwide and Taco Bell (the Fiesta Platter). E-trade seems to want you to think they are so simple to use a baby could do it.

The cola wars are always played out during the Super Bowl. Pepsi's Justin Timberlake ad was funny and big budget. Coke took a more subdued approach...not as frenetic or loud. Clearly, Pepsi is trying hard to appeal to a younger demographic. In fact Coke's political ad, featuring James Carville, would be surely lost on a younger person. I liked them both.

My favorite ads were for Careerbuilder.com. They were created based on certain truisms about career planning—you should follow your heart and wishing won't make it so. Clever. Of

course, Monster had one that showed people trying to block the sun, and thus Monday, because of the dread of going back to work. Also clever. Both trying to appeal to people's unhappiness (is it so widespread?) with work.

In the end, I wonder if spending this much money on production and media space pays off. Will you drink more Bud? Are you going to try SoBe water? Are you going to apply for a new job?

Super Bowl

Today, the Super Bowl is played. New England Patriots vs. Giants, in case you have been out of the country in the last week or so. For advertising and communications people who wouldn't otherwise watch football, this is a must-see game. For the advertising. It costs a lot. Because lots of people will be watching. Some advertisers only run advertising on the Super Bowl. That is their strategy: spend millions once a year to get a large, captive (and hopefully, receptive) audience. It has become sport to talk about the ads, dissect them, analyze them, discuss them. In this respect, they win. In fact, on CBS Sunday Morning, they just had a story about Super Bowl advertising, in fact, giving some free advertising to one of the advertisers. And there is the real value of advertising on the Super Bowl—extra publicity in the form of media attention. Traditionally, this is called public relations and some people call it free advertising. But in fact, this is not free advertising...it is expensive advertising. You get the public relations bang because you spent lots of money. Not because you are newsworthy prima facie.

One other interesting aspect that the CBS story pointed out is that most of the Super Bowl ads will send you to an Internet

address. It makes it interactive.

Entertainment Weekly has a gallery of the most "memorable" Super Bowl ads here
<http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20010598,00.html>

The interesting thing is I only remember one or two of these. What does this tell you?

I will probably watch part of the game...and I will watch the ads of course. It's for work.

Necessary information

Today, in the Washington Post, I saw an ad for a ski resort. It is \$79 per night and seems reasonable (not that I ski, but if I did...). However, I don't know where this resort is located. Why? Because the ad either deliberately or by mistake omitted this crucial information. Maybe they want me to visit the website for more information (the URL address is included). Maybe they just think people know where they are located. In either case this is a no-no. Ads are meant to stimulate interest and action. There is the whole AIDA theory (attention, interest, desire, action). Although this ad caught my attention, I lost my interest when I got frustrated at not knowing where this place is located. Perhaps knowing this resort is located close by would pique my interest. Maybe not. But ads should never make their readers work too hard. In this case, I need to get to my computer with the ad in hand to find out a very crucial bit of information.

Websites

Today, it is imperative to have a website. No doubt. However, just having a website is not enough. In the last few days, I have been doing research for a trip, and have come across several great websites, but also, some not so great websites. What makes a great website? I will give you my breakdown:

- Easy to navigate (this means no funky/weird pull down menus or navigation that is not available on every page)
- All the necessary information is readily available (contacts, address, etc) and easily accessible
- Updated regularly (no 2006 information for instance)
- Aesthetically pleasing—not busy or dated
- No dead links or pages
- Looks professional
- Not overly busy or with screaming graphics
- Not too much flash and no sound

It would be useful for website owners to have someone look at their website from the “outside.” Sometimes you forget the user!