

Advertising's lessons for homeland security ; Countering every extremist view on the Web not the best way

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TODAY, 2 March 2009

There is no lack of analysts calling for the close monitoring of every new podcast and twitter entry posted on the Internet for possible security threats.

However, how do we make sense of this cacophony of data? Should we jump in alert at the birth of every new media and view it as another potential terrorist recruitment or indoctrination tool?

The media-advertising perspective has several lessons to offer for homeland security. To begin with, the competition aims have to be clear.

For example, are we countering a competitor's claims? Or, are we aiming for greater consumer reach? The two issues are not the same and should not be conflated.

A marketing campaign stressing that a competitor's product is not as effective, is different from one that solely aims at introducing a house brand to as far and wide an audience as possible.

An example of a counter-claim based strategy could be found in the description by Mr Jim Glassman, former United States Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, of the US' attempt at curbing the appeal of extremist ideology.

He has commented that the priority is "not to promote our brand but to help destroy" Al Qaeda's.

"Think of American values and political system as orange juice. Think of the Al Qaeda system of violent extremism as lemonade. Our job for the short term is not to put all of our efforts into getting people to drink orange juice, but to get them not to drink lemonade."

This sort of counter-narrative approach is similar to the marketing strategies taken up by warring brands who are constantly on the lookout for claims of "better services and product efficacies" by their competitors.

As such, when a competitor's ads appear more often, some advertisers would enter into an offensive mode and retaliate with a kaleidoscope of media releases asserting one's product superiority.

It's simply a war of words

The approach has both its strengths and weaknesses. Most advertisers would agree that even in the hands of a skilful copywriter, seemingly sensational write-ups could well be ignored or forgotten by the readers.

Moreover, it also tells us that the power of narratives is dependent on how it is perceived by competing brands and consumers.

The relevance that this particular observation provides to homeland security is two-fold.

Firstly, the more you talk about a competitor's brand, the more attention it is going to receive — either giving it free publicity or indirectly lending weight to a competitor's claims.

This does not suggest that one should ignore potentially dangerous expressions found on the media to avoid endorsing the groups propagating such thoughts.

Rather, it is a reminder that a war of words may not reap any positive returns. It either reinforces an extremist view or the narratives could be lost in the information jungle.

Moreover, such discourses usually do not engage the audience, who are the true consumers of information. The consumers still hold the decision to believe or to reject a thought.

It is therefore crucial to constantly ask each time a new Internet posting, for example, appears if it is an accurate reflection of the society, an extension of a group's ideology or if the message represents anything new, before countering all narratives just for the sake of doing so.

Finding the right medium

Secondly, it is not purely a game of counter-narrative between two competing brands.

It is also about communication with the consumers. When media planners consider possible mediums to place an ad, for example, they are essentially looking for the best communication bridge to their target audience.

The attention therefore shifts from the need to counter claims each time they appear to one that is centred on interacting with both current and potential users of a product: Quantitative versus qualitative reach.

Such an approach forces media-planners to look beyond the quantitative and seek ways to effectively communicate with their intended pool of audience.

The message that advertisers would like to sell could remain the same, but the choice of media will make a difference in how the information conveyed will be treated.

Some might argue that the challenges that confront the homeland security landscape are different from those encountered in the advertising industry.

Hence, strategies to deal with conflicting claims will differ.

Yet, in this age of mushrooming media technologies, it would not be pragmatic to constantly monitor and counter every expression.

It is also crucial to remember that it is not a competition where the party with the highest number of ideological material on YouTube and on television programmes, is the victor.

Mr Marshall McLuhan — the Canadian author who popularised the expression "the medium is the message" — had argued that new media forms could be seen as extensions of human thoughts, beliefs and interactions.

Audio, visual or written expressions found on new media should not be studied just for their content, but also for the changes they may bring to society and for the shifts in behavioural patterns they may portray.

The challenge now lies in whether we could adopt a similar media-advertising approach in the fields of homeland security.

As a long-term strategy, it might be beneficial to consider the advertising approach to new media and its influence on societies.

It is, after all, a race to communicate an alternative solution to those espoused by extremists.

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