



Advertising in context: The anthropology of contextual media planning

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Total Media

Placement of media in the most effective context requires an understanding of the anthropology of human behaviour. Here are five valuable lessons for planners.

Context is King

This article is part of a collection of articles on the importance of context in advertising. [Read more.](#)

The arrival of advertising technology, powered by intelligent, algorithm-driven machines, means we're all obsessed by 'maths'. As Sir Martin Sorrell puts it, 'Maths Men' and 'Mad Men' have come together to marry science and art.

It's a seductive idea: the intuition and creativity of traditional Mad Men given added impetus by the rigour, data analytical skills and empiricism of Maths Men. The combination of mass digitisation, the proliferation of devices, and the rapid development of programmatic trading, means the advertising business has a wide canvas on which to bring this new era to life.

At the heart of this idea lies the notion of contextual advertising, the possibility of serving up the right ad, to the right individual, at the right time, when they are at their most open to relevant commercial messages.

Contextual advertising is based on four pillars: time, location, device and content. By pulling together these four variables, we can create more meaningful, more relevant, advertising solutions. Take the example of a digital display ad for a Software as a Service (SAS) provider served up to a CEO poised to make a major investment in their IT infrastructure.

He or she is at home, it is evening, and they are on their iPad. Mix in the additional variable of known digital behaviour – we know that this individual is reading the latest technology news, and that they have 'signalled' intent by consuming content about SAS solutions in the past month.

It sounds like a media planner's dream: better targeting, minimised wastage, relevant content, receptive consumers. What's not to like about contextual advertising?

The anthropology dimension

But what happens when you add anthropology to the mix?

Anthropology is, in essence, the study of what makes us human; how humans behave; how they adapt to diverse environments; how they interact, dress, and communicate; and how they absorb information.

As an academic subject, it's an unusually broad mix of what we might call science and art. It combines social and biological sciences, as well as humanities and physical sciences. Elements of anthropology can be found in advertising's current love affair with behavioural economics.

One of the core practices of anthropological fieldwork is the use of experiential immersion techniques, often through the lens of participant observation. By observing behaviour, we can start to discover, not just when people consume information, but how they use it, the value they assign it, how they share, and more.

This allows us to go beyond targeting people based on context and start to match messaging with the way people behave, especially in a digital context. In anthropology-speak, behaviour is affected by the 'drive to the normative'. This means we make complex systems or ideas fit our behavioural preferences, not the other way round. Take money: all money is equal, but we assign different characteristics and values to it – food money, going out money, or beer money.

The same goes for digital, and how – transformative as it is – we shape our interactions with it to our own preferences. Here are five lessons media planners working with contextual advertising solutions can learn from anthropologists.

1. Treat the vogue for multiscreening with caution

The truth is that we cannot properly multi-task. Female, or male, humans can only focus on one cognitive function at a time. Yes, it's true we can flick quickly and easily between tasks, but when we do that, we're still only performing one function at a time, whether it is reading, listening, viewing or talking. In fact, genuine multi-tasking is not only impossible, but when we attempt it, it can significantly affect our ability to remember and focus.

In 2009, Stanford University ran a series of tests on 100 students (Clifford Nass and Anthony Wagner: Cognitive Control in Media Multi-taskers), split into one group of light multi-taskers and one of heavy multi-taskers. The heavy multi-taskers were easily distracted, could not compensate for this with better memory functions, and were unable to separate all the information they had into relevant pockets.

According to Wagner, an associate professor of psychology at Stanford: "When [heavy multi-taskers] are in situations where there are multiple sources of information coming from the external world or emerging out of memory, they're not able to filter out what's not relevant to their current goal. That failure to filter means they're slowed down by that irrelevant information."

In his book *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*, Harvard professor of neuroscience Daniel Levitin says asking the brain to shift from one activity to another causes the prefrontal cortex and the striatum to "burn up the fuels they need to stay on task. This leads to compromises in both physical and cognitive performance."

It's difficult to avoid the conclusion that by doing less, people can accomplish more – even Millennials. In Total Media's work for the Orlando Tourist Board, we make sure we concentrate media spend into an area where our audience is less distracted. We do not leverage tri-screening behaviour unless we can see a benefit. Even where we accept multi-tasking, we aim to own moments. However to mitigate against the cognitive cost of multi-tasking, we use things such as cross-device 'household

targeting', so even if our audience is quickly switching between devices, they consistently see our message.

Take-out for planners: Yes, it's possible to target tri-screening Millennials, on their mobiles, while they are consuming content relevant to your product or service. But they might not remember what you say. It might be better to avoid tri-screening altogether, looking instead for moments when the recipient's concentration levels are higher.

2. Understand circadian rhythms

Our bodies follow circadian rhythms (from the Latin 'circa', meaning around, and 'dies', meaning day) that govern our physiological and psychological functions. We're all slightly different, but one common characteristic is that our 'creativity' is enhanced in the evening or when we are at our point of non-optimal circadian arousal.

Why? Enhanced creativity occurs when our minds are free to wander, unburdened by the need to work through problems or complete tasks. The less we have to use working memory, the more creative we are. That's why we suddenly get ideas in the middle of the night.

So how does this work in media? Most planners have, at some point, responded to a brief from a client looking to capture user-generated content (and data) that can be curated and re-broadcast. In many cases, the mechanic is a creative challenge: how would you end this story? How would you use our product? What would you do if we gave you the holiday/experience of a lifetime? Thus, if we target consumers when they are, paradoxically, least alert, their responses could be more creative.

Take-out for planners: If we better understand how the body and mind work, we can target audiences at different times of the day depending on the desired response.

3. 'Big' birthdays and milestone dates

Imagine you're running a campaign to recruit marathon runners, a public health campaign around improved diets, or new users to a dating website. The standard contextual solution might be to find a health, weight loss or romance context. But the people most likely to be open to your message are those approaching a 'big' birthday or some milestone date. That's because, according to Hal Hershfield, an assistant professor of marketing at UCLA's Anderson School of Management and an expert in the psychology of time, there's a high correlation between people approaching a milestone birthday and experiencing a 'crisis of meaning'.

Actually, Hershfield is more precise than that: the peak time for this crisis of meaning – which often results in people running marathons, going on diets or having an affair – is in the 9th year of the relevant decade. Hershfield randomly picked 500 first-time marathon runners aged between 25 and 64. Of this group, 74 were '9-enders', an overrepresentation of 48%. The USP of the dating site Ashley Madison is that it targets married people who want to have an affair. Hershfield's analysis of men aged 25-64 signing up for the site showed that '9-enders' were 18% overrepresented.

Take-out for planners: Sometimes a simple age filter might be more important than a contextual solution.

4. Emotional versus rational

The advertising industry has long argued the merits of the rational messaging approach versus the emotional one. With support from the likes of Daniel Kahneman's influential book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* on System 1 and System 2 thinking, the pendulum is tipping towards the emotional end of the spectrum.

It is certainly true that contextual advertising combined with emotional messaging is a powerful double act. We can reach people in the right context and trigger deep-seated emotional reactions that are the key drivers in the decision-making process. But neuroscience suggests this is only the first part of the story. Exposed to a brilliantly targeted piece of emotional advertising, we then go through a series of rational reflections that, in some cases, lead us to opt out of making the decision our emotions are pushing us towards. Thus, contextual messaging in its own right is not a bullseye.

Douglas van Praet, author of *Unconscious Branding*, argues that while we cannot choose our emotional reactions because they occur unconsciously, we can choose our response to those feelings. We don't have 'free will', but we do have 'free won't'. As he says: "We can give in to the visceral impulses that drive us or choose to apply the brakes of rational restraint."

Imagine a consumer observes an out-of-home ad about a Sony laptop just outside a Sony retailer. It's payday. The ad may trigger an emotional reaction – 'I want one of those' – but the consumer may choose not to act on their first reaction. This complicates life for planners. The answer is to combine our understanding of the context a person is in with their position in the consideration process – not just from a purchasing perspective but also from a neurological response perspective. Will they apply their capacity for 'free won't'?

Take-out for planners: There are levels of behaviour that we are only starting to understand. They offer media planners exciting opportunities to layer a combination of contextual and behavioural solutions to achieve maximum effect.

5. When I feel powerful

Location is one clear filter for contextual targeting. But not all locations are equal. Depending on location, people may react differently to the messages they receive. French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, who wrote a number of influential studies on the dynamics of power and social capital, hypothesised that while there are socialised norms that guide behaviour and thinking (habitus), the social capital we gain from the way we act is determined, in large part, by the field (context) we're in.

This explains how people may behave differently at home and work. Researchers from the Bourdieu school of thinking cite the example of female politicians in Uganda who are figures of authority in parliament, but submissive at home. Similarly, our hypothetical CEO, believes that he or she will gain social capital at work from passing on knowledge about IT projects or SAS platforms, but would gain little or no benefit from doing the same at home or with friends. They may feel powerful at work, but not so in different environments.

Serving them a digital display ad on his or her iPad at home in the evening, while they are reading the latest technology analysis, and they have 'signalled' intent by reading about software platforms in the past month, is a powerful expression of media targeting capabilities. But our CEO may not feel the benefit of this information in the context of the home, where the status of their social capital is different. We should, instead, restrict our advertising to fields that more specifically match the environment to which the content is suited. For example, in a contextually targeted mobile campaign for European asset manager Carmignac Gestion, we added in very specific geo-fences so ads were only served within key financial centres during the day when our target audience would be receptive to our message.

Take-out for planners: It is important to think about layers of context. When combining contextual and digital behavioural targeting, we should be clear about what behaviour we are prioritising. So, putting together context, device and audience may not work well unless location is also factored in.

About the Author

Tom Laranjo is managing director at Total Media and the architect behind the agency's focus on behaviourally driven insights to inform advertising, he has an academic background in anthropology and economics.

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