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Cross-Media Research – Digging Deeper for Brand Managers: An Interview with Ethan Rapp



In the world of media research, Ethan Rapp has a habit of being first on the scene; but maybe that is because he is often instrumental in creating the action. Over the past 15 years, Rapp has emerged as a leader and innovator in the fields of marketing accountability and Internet advertising research.

Rapp was an original employee of DoubleClick, where he built one of the first online marketing research departments; while there, he was instrumental in introducing the use of ad serving platforms as one of the most rigorous data collection vehicles. At AOL/TimeWarner, his team supported one of the largest ad sales organizations in the U.S.; and in 2003 he co-founded Marketing Evolution, providing cross-media measurement and planning metrics to some of the U.S.'s largest companies.

Now Rapp has joined Knowledge Networks, charged with bringing new depth to marketing effectiveness and cross-media research. Pronouncing himself “energized” by his new role, Rapp spoke to *A:I/R* about his ambitious agenda and the changing media marketplace.

What attracted you to Knowledge Networks?

Two things really drew me – the company’s deep heritage of media and market research, and its entrepreneurial environment. Unlike a lot of traditional research companies, KN encourages a free flow of ideas and innovation. People feel comfortable challenging conventional wisdom, and there are no protected silos. The integration of new and traditional research could have no more fertile ground.

I love the fact that KN has a breadth of very experienced, client-focused research experts who have strong traditional backgrounds and deep research discipline. A lot of research right now is about dashboards and nifty-looking electronic delivery; but I think the most valuable part of research is the analysis and storytelling – and there are a lot of people here who have decades of marketing expertise. The value Knowledge Networks provides to each client is truly “custom.”

How do you think research in digital media has evolved?

I was around to see the very beginning, when we did some of the very first testing of online ads. We were able to determine that online display ads move the needle on brand metrics – something that seems obvious now but wasn't then. We also introduced true experimental design into online ad measurement – using the ad server to create a perfect test/control approach; that led to a reinvention of cross-media research.

This new approach to cross-media research built upon work that was started as early as the 1960s – a set of methods that have since become widely known as “opportunity to see,” or OTS cross media measurement. I believe Knowledge Networks is in a unique position to take a very rigorous approach to OTS and combine it with our decades of traditional and new media experience. Most new media research companies do not have traditional media experience or heritage; they came along with the Internet, and much of their cross-media research is focused on the role of the Internet. Knowledge Networks cut its teeth in media like radio and television.

I was just on the phone with Gale Metzger talking about this research, and his immediate reaction was, “This is similar to things we have done since the 1960s, when radio was seen as a way to get a better bang for your buck, through imagery transfer. It's great to see this renewed focus on cross-media measurement!” There's no one who knows more about traditional media research than Gale, so that is a high compliment to me.

What do you see as the most exciting opportunities in cross-media research?

Clearly the media environment continues to fragment. I think a lot of traditional methods are being revisited, so that they can accommodate clients and brand managers who want to have their brand strategies reflect consumers' changing patterns of media consumption. Imagine the ability to peel apart traditional brand tracking and look at how the various components of marketing impact overall effectiveness, and relative cost efficiencies in more actionable ways than have ever been achieved. The goal is a more scientific approach to spending marketing dollars. This is clearly where the industry is headed.

Another issue brand managers face is that it's very hard to experiment with unfamiliar marketing channels. We want to allow people to track not just the overall effectiveness of campaigns, but also to try new things at low risk. The obvious example is Internet – but the danger is that a lot of people are focusing on Internet as the motivation for new methods in cross-media. In fact, there are plenty of companies that just want to try a traditional medium they haven't used before.

What insights from your career so far do you feel you will be applying in your new KN role?

I think there is overdependence in market research on creating one-size-fits-all products. Whenever you walk into a client and give them examples of your work, their first words, quite justifiably are, “Well, my business is different.” Every business faces unique

challenges – new versus established brands, highly differentiated versus highly competitive, high-involvement versus low. My feeling is that cross-media research should reflect the marketing goals, not the other way around.

As a researcher, you need as much consultative understanding of the brand issues as you do knowledge of the methodology. That is where our deep bench and experience with traditional media is a huge advantage.

Can you talk about the importance of analytics to your cross-media approach at KN?

There is nothing more important. You can't patent analytics; the question is how well you know how to use them – can you get to all of the tools in your tool box, and choose the right one for each occasion? We have such a high level of discipline in using analytical techniques; it's one reason our panel is so well respected – because there are so many strong people who support it and know how to use the data.

For a study to be really actionable and strategic, as opposed to tactical, is completely a function of the analytical resources that you have and how deep they can go to extract stories out of the data. And what we have are brilliant, experienced storytellers.