TURNING YOUR AGENCY INTO A DATA LEADER

Using Artificial Intelligence to Lead your Clients into the Future of Data Inspired Storytelling

INSIDE

NOW IS THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA FOR ADVERTISING AGENCIES.

Radical changes in the way that people consume media and interact with brands — ushered in by two-way social communication and 'always on' digital, mobile culture —both enable and necessitate a revolution in the way that brands understand their target consumers.

Historically, agencies served as the guide to the consumer. While a brand was the expert on creating a stellar product, the agency was the expert on understanding, reaching, and conveying the product's value proposition to the consumer. Plus, they could make it look beautiful.

Agencies have always been home to the most creative players in the industry. Brilliant advertising is executed by artistic minds armed with a deep understanding of the brand's challenges and the consumer's desires.

The best agencies were (and still are) thought leaders for their clients. They provide strategic guidance based on a deep understanding of the client's goals, the target consumers' tastes, preferences, and habits, and the larger competitive marketplace. They execute on that strategic position with world-shaping creative talent.

It used to be a catchy jingle, a Draper-esque tagline, a neat magazine layout... the mediums have changed. But the deepest truths have not. To effectively advertise, you must deeply understand the person you're selling to and filter that knowledge through the prism of a talented creator.

While the truths remain, the methods for reaching and understanding consumers have dramatically changed with the proliferation of digital consumption.

UNDERSTANDING THESE CHANGES CAN HELP US UNDERSTAND THE CURRENT CROSSROADS FOR AGENCIES.

THE CONSUMPTION CONUNDRUM

Digital video is exploding in both production and consumption rates and this wealth of on-demand content availability is changing end-viewer consumption patterns. The medium has changed so dramatically that it has also morphed the surrounding culture. We are a media-consumption culture now. The Nielsen Total Audience Report from Q1 of 2018 reports that the average US adult aged 18 and older watches nearly 6 hours of video per day.

While the appetite for video continues to rise, the cost of producing video has declined due to the proliferation of easy-to-use technology.
Just as the ability to create video has been democratized, so too has the means of distribution.
As cord-cutting increases, digital networks battle for viewer screen time.

This cord-cutting can be directly attributed to the new patterns of consumption that audiences have come to expect from the flexibility of digital viewing. Audiences consume and engage with video differently across platforms. So businesses must not only make videos, but they must also make informed decisions on where and how to distribute that video content. The new consumer has choice, voice, and control.

THIS REVOLUTION IN DIGITAL VIDEO CONSUMPTION PROVIDES A WEALTH OF INVALUABLE DATA ON CONSUMERS.

CHOICE
Viewers have choice for what videos they want to watch and where & how they watch them.

VOICE
Viewers are able to publicly discuss video content with their peer groups in real time.

CONTROL
Viewers expect personalized, on-demand viewing experiences.

BRANDS ARE SCRAMBLING TO HARNESS DATA

To capture the value of video data, brands are seeking partners to help them better understand their audiences. Sometimes that means insourcing entire agency functions, obtaining technology partners, or hiring data consultants.

Research conducted by the Association of National Advertisers in the fall of 2018 found that core marketing functions, formerly executed by agencies, are being pulled in-house at unprecedented rates. 78 percent of ANA members have an in-house agency in 2018, versus 58 percent in 2013 and 42 percent in 2008. For 44 percent of respondents, their in-house agency was established within the past five years. The core functions now being executed in-house included: "strategy, creative for traditional media, creative for digital media, and media planning/buying."

Respondents listed the following top benefits of in-house agencies
- Cost efficiencies
- Better knowledge of brands
- Institutional knowledge
- Dedicated staff
- Speed, nimbleness

As the ANA survey outlines, the number one reason brands are insourcing agency functions is for cost efficiency. What is unclear from the research is whether the brands are also performing the agency functions better and more cost efficiently, or if they are only recognizing the cost savings of no longer employing an agency. Maarten Albarda, the founder of Flock Associates marketing consulting company, points out why brands should be scrutinizing these decisions:

What should be taken into consideration obviously is not only the cost of in-housing vs prior cost but the impact the in-housing decision has had on brand health, brand growth, and overall business performance. We have all seen what happens when the industry decided that low cost was the sole success factor for digital media buying. We're still collectively trying to clean up the mess that has been created as a result.

Setting up an in-house agency is no small feat, financially or logistically, and brands have to seriously consider the upfront investment alongside the ROI. Sometimes brands fail to realize that "these decisions have far-reaching consequences across the wider enterprise that impact working methods, required internal and external support structures, capital investment, HR policies, IT investment and talent, etc."

In addition to brands taking their agency and creative work in-house, many brands are beginning to use technology platforms and consultants to deeply understand their audiences and help them make better, data-driven business and marketing decisions. Agencies nationwide are losing out to these in-house shops and data consultants because agencies have been slow to adapt to the new data climate and brand marketers are on the hunt for data-driven marketing strategies.

DATA-DRIVEN MARKETING
IS ON THE RISE

New technologies are enabling brands to inspire or defend nearly every decision they make with data. Because of the sheer amount of information available from the digital activity of a brand's consumers, it is becoming nearly impossible for humans alone to make sense of that data. Technology solutions are popping up left and right to help marketers make sense of their data and make smart decisions with that information and these technologies are effective.

A recent study conducted by Magna Global found that machines were more effective at optimizing ad campaign impact when humans and machines were given the same inputs. Most notably, the machine was more effective while displaying the ad fewer times, therefore more economical than the human. And the machine was significantly better at priming consumers to make a purchase — vastly outperforming the humans on purchase consideration campaigns. These sorts of efficiencies are driving many brands towards programmatic advertising solutions. Brands are taking action to harness the benefits of data-driven and artificially intelligent marketing.

But brands aren't always proficient at implementing these new technologies. This is where agencies can step into a new facet of their long-time advisory roles and provide their clients with data-driven solutions.

The Mind the Data Gap 2019 Data-Driven Marketing & Advertising Outlook report, conducted by Adweek Branded and Dun & Bradstreet, acknowledges the advantages deep data can provide but concludes that implementing insights from artificial intelligence can be especially challenging for brands. The report highlights the many ways that brands are finding data difficult to acquire or correctly implement.

Furthermore, the report highlights the opportunity for agencies to assist brands with smarter data implementation. The report points out the ways that agencies already " appear to be more sophisticated in their ability to manage and analyze data."

Agency VS Brand Usage of Data-Driven Marketing Tactics

- 58% of agencies are doing real-time campaign optimization, compared to only 39% of brands

- 64% of agencies are implementing cross-device targeting, compared to only 36% of brands

- 42% of agencies are using predictive analytics, compared to only 28% of brands

Agency VS Brand Usage of Data-Driven Marketing Tactics

Source: "Mind The Data Gap," a study by Dun & Bradstreet, conducted by Adweek Branded
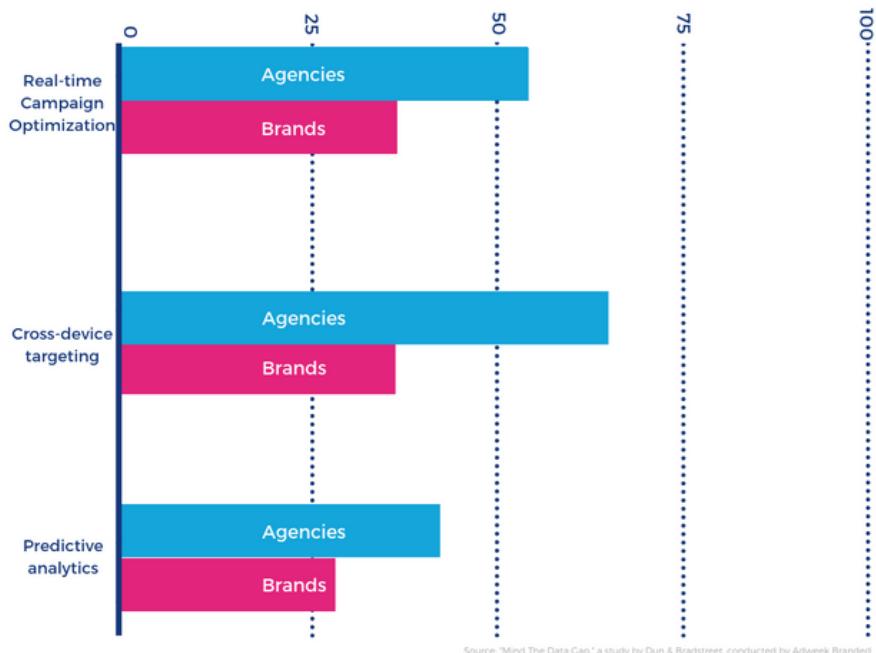
Brands are struggling to implement sophisticated data-driven marketing practices for themselves. The two most common challenges (reported by 32% of brands each) were siloed or inaccessible customer data and integration of marketing and sales platforms. A close second was the lack of data expertise, with 30% of brands reporting this as a major challenge. Brands are sending out the bat signal for help from trusted partners to guide them into the future of data-driven marketing.

AGENCIES ARE UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO SUCCEED IN THIS NEW DATA CLIMATE, AS LONG AS THEY ARE WILLING TO ADAPT.

In order for agencies to become the data solution for their clients, they need to solve the following problems for brands.

WHAT BRANDS ARE LOOKING FOR

We've established that both brands and agencies are moving toward data-driven marketing in this new digital world. There is no turning back to the days of vague metrics or approximated audiences being "good enough." The competition is too steep and the margin for error is slim when everyone has access to the same data from the social channels — they're all trying to differentiate themselves within the same scant data points.

So brands are increasingly looking for richer sources of data to drive their decisions and help them separate themselves from the pack.

Brands want rich, predictive data about their consumers

To cut through the noise of today's endless stream of content, marketers are turning to data science and artificial intelligence to learn more about their consumers and create content tailored to their interests. This has perpetuated a data arms race based on which insights can be most impactful for marketers. The challenge for marketers is that not all data is created equal.

So, as a marketer, what data is most relevant for your strategy?

In evaluating which audience insights are relevant, marketers need data that is both holistically informative and predictive. The data needs to be informative in that it is an accurate representation of the audience you're analyzing. When this is done holistically, the data will encompass a wide range of metrics to analyze. Predictive data will not only be representative but will also provide the type of value that can lead to your "a-ha moment".

QUALITIES OF DATA

The most desirable types of data can give a complete picture of the consumer and their lifestyle to provide marketers with the best understanding of that consumer's needs. The most desirable qualities of data are context, demographics, behavior, and sentiment — ideally, each of these qualities would be acquired real-time so that the data never gets stale.

- Contextual data tells you about the conditions of the world around a consumer at the time that they take an action.
- Demographic data tells you about the consumer themselves, including age, gender, location, income bracket, and education level.
- Sentiment data tells you how the consumer feels about certain topics or products.
- Behavioral data can give you insight into their preferences, interests, and habits.
- Real-time data tells you about the current realities of your consumers. It is quickly accessible and constantly refreshing.
- Predictive data provides you with the ability to forecast an outcome based on the historical actions of the data set.

SOURCES OF DATA

Not all data sources are created equal. Let's take a look at a few of the different types of data available to marketers and the advantages and limitations of each of these sources.

Polling + Surveys

Traditional polling techniques include mail, internet, phone, and in-person interviews as well as survey collection through the same avenues. Multiple modes of response collection may be required to reach the desired demographic.

BENEFITS

First person response to your brand's questions from a targeted group of respondents. This can allow you to gather direct feedback from a certain demographic that you're hoping to learn more about. Additionally, surveys are relatively inexpensive because there are many companies and technology platforms that power this kind of information gathering.

LIMITATIONS

Surveys require rigorous methodology and execution in order to ensure that the data returned is unbiased and viable for your brand's applications.

Surveys require both participation and honesty. These two factors can make it especially difficult to get a whole, representative picture of your audience from survey data. Survey participation has been dramatically waning over the years which makes it more and more difficult to get an accurate and representative sample set. Pew Research Center outlines the challenges the survey industry has been facing:

> "As Americans are now faced with more demands on their time, they are exercising more choice over when and how they can be contacted.[...] As a consequence, response rates have continued to decline over the past decade."

These changes mean that it now takes much more work and time to conduct a viable survey. Furthermore, the information gathered through polls and surveys is self-professed which means that it can be colored by a person's desire to represent themselves a certain way.

Web History + Cookies

Ability to track a website visitor across the web to view the other sites they visit and deliver them relevant ads across their browsing experience.

BENEFITS

Allows you to build a picture of the consumer based on their other interests beyond your site. Cookies provide a great source of behavioral data. Cookies allow you to track a user across the web and deliver retargeted ads to them, increasing the number of times they're exposed to your messaging.

LIMITATIONS

This type of data only represents behavior and does not encapsulate sentiment or demographic information about site visitors.This data source must be coupled with other data sources in order to provide a complete picture of the target consumer.

Users are able to clear their cookies removing them from your radar — and many people do as the current data climate has made consumers reticent about cookies and other overt forms of data tracking.

Smart Devices + Apps

Data collected from devices with deep infiltration of consumers' everyday lives, like voice-activated smart home devices and smartphone apps.

BENEFITS

Apps and smart devices provide a rich source of behavioral data and are unique to these other datasets because of their intimate place within a consumer's life — these devices are integral to consumer's home lives and are carried around with users everywhere they go. You can track all of your customers' moves within your app to deeply understand what content and/or products are most interesting to them and where they spend the most time interacting. You can use this information to provide super-targeted messages.

LIMITATIONS

To obtain this rich data, you must either have an app or purchase it from third-party sources, which can be pricey. To gather this info yourself, consumers must download and engage with your app. Getting users to download an app is an additional marketing hurdle alongside the challenge of maintaining a seamless and useful app experience for customers.

In fact, this data may be a little too precise. Today's data climate has made many users aware of and hesitant about the data exposure that apps entail. Users are becoming more aware of the intrusive nature of this kind of tracking and resentful of the 'creep factor' associated with it. A recent piece by The New York Times revealed that a single woman's location was tracked and recorded about every 21 minutes. The Times was able to easily identify her and follow her to work, the gym, a doctor's appointment, an ex-boyfriend's house and even track how long she remained in each place — a revelation rightly discomforting as each person reading this likely has a smartphone in their pocket.

Email

Correlating earned email lists with third-party data to deepen the understanding of your audience.

BENEFITS

Many consumers use their email address as their ticket to unlock the entire internet which means that you can obtain much deeper information about an individual consumer once you have that identifier.

LIMITATIONS

Building a robust email list isn't easy. To collect email addresses in an ethical way, you must earn the trust of users and provide a compelling value exchange.

Once you've collected those emails you then have to execute the perfect balance of email correspondence to maintain the list without abusing their inboxes and making them unsubscribe. People are often wary of giving away their email addresses — aware that they are a form of digital currency these days — and may have a 'junk' address that they use to sign up for offers or promotions.

If you've been successful in establishing, maintaining, and growing an email list, you're still not home free. Email addresses themselves are not especially useful as audience intelligence tools. These lists require third-party enrichment to become signifiers of user behavior across the larger web.

Social Media

Information from social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, about an audience's makeup and interaction with the brand's social presence.

BENEFITS

Social media data can give you a first-person account from your consumers. Social media data allows you to analyze the way that your engaged audience interacts with your content as well as their interests and brand affinities based on their social behavior. Because social media is 'always on,' this data source is constantly refreshing.

LIMITATIONS

First, you've got to have followers to get the analytics. This requires a certain amount of work to build and maintain an engaged social presence across different networks. For most brands, this is a challenge. For agencies, this requires access to the brand's owned social channels which many are reticent to provide to external partners due to brand safety and privacy concerns.

Social metrics only allow you to analyze the actions of the people who choose to engage with your brand — a limited, captive audience and a potentially saturated one. Those engagement metrics are historically thin. It can be difficult to properly weigh the value of a like, share, retweet, reply, or comment as it pertains to ROI.

Social data can be deceptive. Even if users interact with content in a negative way, as trolls do, the social platform still registers that interaction as an indicator of interest without taking sentiment into account. You've got to pay close attention to the micro-level interactions to make sure that a post is performing well and not going viral for negative reasons. Beyond the human behavior issues, there are the challenges of bots and fraudulent engagement metrics to skew this data.

Joseph Harper, the social media lead for Kellogg's UK, discussed the unique challenges of social media engagement through the lens of influencer marketing at the Digiday Brand Summit in November 2018. Harper noted the ways that social data can be easily skewed and manipulated, including engagement stats:

"One agency we work with said a campaign was a success because it generated loads of comments, but when we dug deeper into the report, we realized that the influencers we'd paid had just gone to a WhatsApp group of other influencers and asked them to make all of those comments"

For social media data to be a truly meaningful glimpse into your audience's lives, it should be coupled with technology solutions or serious man-hours digging into the sentiment and context around the engagement.

Video Data

An estimated 80% of all internet traffic will be video by 2019. With all this video being watched across social and web, viewers are leaving metadata trails that are rich in informative insights for marketers to analyze.

BENEFITS

There's lots of this data available and it encompasses several important qualities, including contextual, sentiment, and demographic.

Social video data is an amazing source of real-time data of what people are watching and what people are saying about a specific topic. This can just be traditional social listening, but it can be a lot deeper looking at specific engagement with videos. Machine learning and artificial intelligence can help determine which data points are actually useful and predictive and which data points to ignore.

According to Nielsen, U.S. consumers watch nearly three hours of video on their computers or smart devices each week. The time spent viewing social videos is what makes this data so valuable and predictive. Time is the ultimate resource. We all have the same amount, so where you spend your time shows a lot about your interests and priorities. Basically, you are what you watch. Viewers spending their time on video are giving strong, predictive indications of what they like. Listening to social video data lets you drag in a wide net of information about an audience and A.I. can help decipher what pieces of that huge amount of data are actually relevant.

LIMITATIONS

Requires a robust amount of video content on a topic or channel in order to analyze. However, this limitation is not unique to video. Any valuable dataset must be large enough to have statistical significance. The unique aspect of this challenge would be around clients who have not yet developed a substantial owned video presence. You can still analyze the videos of competitors and specific topics in order to understand and implement the value of video data for a client without a large video presence of their own.

## LEARN HOW TO MAKE VIDEO THE STAR OF YOUR SOCIAL STRATEGY

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● Brands want better audience understanding with context

There are tons of sources of data available to marketers today. All of this information is useful as a tool to paint a larger picture of your target consumers' lives and allow you to find ways to provide them with more value. But data is only valuable within context and data can be deceiving.

If you looked only at the performance metrics for Pepsi's ill-fated Kendall Jenner campaign without context, you might think it was a raging success. Without understanding the audience sentiment and the sociological context you would only see that viewers flocked to watch the ad and commented and shared like crazy. This demonstrates the importance of sentiment as a vital part of all truly useful data sets because it can help provide context and inform future actions.

Data is only valuable for what it can tell you and what actionable steps it leads you to. The best data leads marketers to a deeper understanding of their audience.

As the future of video production and consumption changes, so too does the future of advertising personalization. Consumers don't just expect entertainment, but they now expect on-demand, personalized experiences. Artificial intelligence is moving the industry towards a future (begun with A/B testing) where each message is succinctly and perfectly tailored to the individual viewer based on that person's digital behaviors.
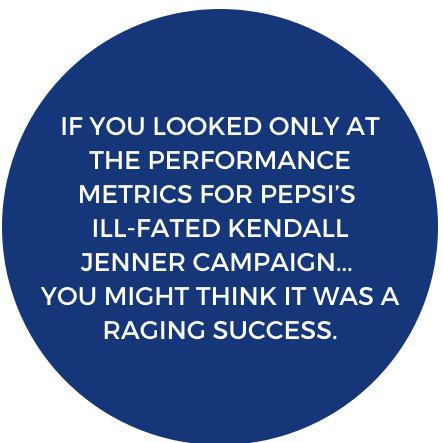
> IF YOU LOOKED ONLY AT THE PERFORMANCE METRICS FOR PEPSI'S ILL-FATED KENDALL JENNER CAMPAIGN... YOU MIGHT THINK IT WAS A RAGING SUCCESS.

● Brands want faster, smarter decisions and better results

No matter the source, there is an incredible amount of data available to marketers. The number of owned digital touch points available for marketers to analyze, not to mention the availability of third-party data for purchase, is overwhelming. Having too much data can be paralyzing and if you're unable to sort through that data and quickly find actionable insights, then the data will get stale and become useless.

Artificial intelligence is best suited to power this new, necessary kind of audience understanding because it can keep up with the speed of creation. The aforementioned study from Magna Global sites an incredible statistic: The digital universe grows by 2.5 Exabytes every day — that is equivalent to 90 years worth of HD video produced Every. Single. Day. There is just no way that humans could collect or process the magnitude of the information available. But pointing artificial intelligence and machine learning at those massive troves of data can help humans digest that staggering amount of information and detect patterns. Allowing humans to make faster, smarter decisions rooted in deep understanding.
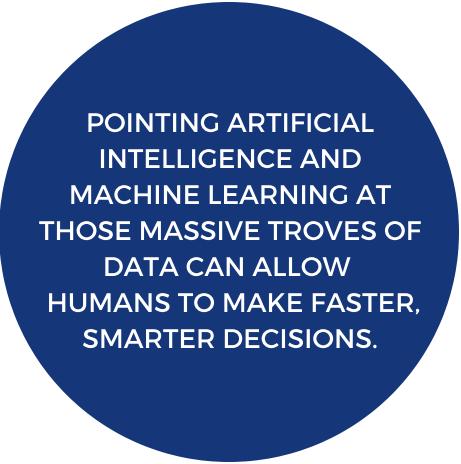
POINTING ARTIFICIAL
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HUMANS TO MAKE FASTER,
SMARTER DECISIONS.

The ANA's study on in-house agencies cited "speed" and "nimbleness" among the top benefits of an in-house agency versus a traditional external agency relationship. Many traditional sources of data can be laborious and time-consuming to collect, process, and turn around to clients packaged as thought leadership. Accessing the correct technologies to collect and correctly interpret data is vital to agencies' continued competitiveness.

Agencies have higher stakes in presenting correct information quickly. As insourcing continues and budgets for external services tighten, brands will continue to scrutinize the creative and strategic decisions their agency partners make on their behalf and demand not only quick and data-backed proposals but also an accurate measurement of success.

Brands want more accurate reporting

Alongside the incredible availability of data sources comes the incredible responsibility of reporting on campaigns. Like it or not, surface-level metrics aren't going to cut it anymore.

As Kellogg's Harper noted, "We're trying to move away from being solely reliant on vanity metrics and take into account the sentiment of posts as well as the different types of conversations happening around them." Many brands are following suit.

Agencies will need to begin to employ smarter tools to help them measure and report on the nuances of campaign activity beyond the surface-level performance metrics.

Artificially intelligent platforms that can help identify sentiment and provide predictive reporting will help agencies distinguish themselves as serious data leaders.

HOW AGENCIES CAN START
LEADING WITH DATA

In order to effectively lead clients into the future, agencies must deeply understand the new cultural video paradigm. This means understanding how to deal in the lingua franca of digital culture, namely video. They must be able to create and distribute effective videos on behalf of their brand clients as well as being able to measure and interpret the data that results from those video interactions.

Agency leaders that seize the emerging ability to use data science and artificial intelligence to provide deep audience insights will be setting their organization up for long-term success. Applying these capabilities for clients now, or failing to do so, will determine an agency's position in the future.

In order to survive the data revolution and come out on top, make sure you're working toward the following goals.

● Accessing the right data for your clients

We've covered many of the popular data sources available to brands and agencies as well as the overwhelming amount of data available. Work with your client to determine which data sources will be the most valuable for informing their audience understanding and creative direction. The best data is both personalized and predictive.

Provide that data at the right points— before and after the pitch. This means moving toward a future of data-inspired creative, where audience knowledge and interests guide your creative process towards successful forecasted outcomes, not just using selective data to validate the creative concepts you think will work. Additionally, you should be using data to give context to those successes or failures alongside the metrics of each campaign's performance.

> Data indicates that our audience loves auto content. Let's spoof a car commercial!

> Data indicates that our Valentine's campaign will resonate with millennials.

> "This worked great, here's why."

> " This didn't go so hot because audiences are actually more interested in X...."

● Using that data to make faster, smarter decisions

Speed is key. When brands describe the benefits of insourcing their agency functions, speed and efficiency rank high. The agency of the future needs to be sleek, efficient and obstacle-free. Having easily accessible, constantly-refreshing data sources at the ready will set you apart. Data is not only useful in retrospect but should be used to predict future outcomes and provide validation and rationale for all future creative concepts.

The future of branded storytelling is made up of brilliant concepts ignited through deep audience understanding. Agencies have historically been the creative engines and they can supercharge that position of creative talent with deep audience insights and data validation.

● Letting data inspire your creative

Creativity could be considered the opposite of data. After all, if you're making something brand new, you don't have many points of comparison to measure by. And many creative shops may feel intimidated by the new-found focus on data. Some of those fears are justified, but there are also myriad opportunities for creatives to use data to their advantage.

Creativity is intuitive and people's responses to it are unpredictable. It can be hard to anticipate what people will like, dislike, or find entertaining. Data allows you to quantify some of those abstractions in order to better understand what worked, maybe why it worked, and perhaps allow you to replicate that success in the future. Or, at minimum, use that successful formula to inspire the next creative endeavor.

Understanding the human side of an audience is the key to correctly interpreting data points and being able to craft storylines around shared values and points of interest. Ultimately, data can inspire and power better creative concepts and can help agencies reinforce their position as both creative powerhouses and thought leaders.

● Reporting back to your clients with meaningful, forward-thinking results

No matter how brilliant your creative output, you've still got to prove that it worked. Brands are beginning to understand that lots of marketing dollars get wasted on delivering carefully-crafted messaging to the wrong audience, or on the wrong channels, or to a bunch of bots. It can be nearly impossible to decipher meaningful metrics from all the other metrics available.
As we've outlined, the metrics available from the native social channels are often deceptive. And if you're not uncovering sentiment and interests, then your reporting isn't providing a full picture of your campaign's performance.

As thought leaders on customer acquisition, agencies should always be looking forward even when reporting on wrapped campaigns. This means that the focus of your reporting should be around success metrics as they inform future strategy-- not just numbers for delivery's sake. Does your current reporting consistently unearth new insights for your clients? If not, you're probably not dazzling them.

Agencies should employ tools that help them not only report on success but also deeply understand the audience to inform future creative strategy and delivery.

WHY AGENCIES ARE RIGHT FOR THE JOB

There is no turning back, video consumption and production habits have changed in this mobile, social world and they are constantly in flux as technology and the way it powers creativity continue to evolve. Along with these changes come new demands on brands— it is no longer enough to broadcast overt advertising messages.

Consumers are constantly finding new ways to avoid interfacing with ads and they are simultaneously demanding entertaining experiences from the brands they choose to follow and engage with. In order to maintain customer attention, brands are expected to be entertainers. Digital leaders are using video to rise to the top and social channels are prioritizing engaging videos.

But while it is easier than ever to make and share video, it is trickier than ever to make engaging video because now you must cut through the incredible noise resulting from this democratization. The consumer has nearly infinite choice in what to watch. So, in order to attract attention and own a share of consumer's growing screen time, brands must become not only entertainers but expert storytellers. And telling compelling stories is what they've always relied on agencies for.

Because brands need storytellers

Agencies have always been home to the best creative talent in the marketing and advertising world. Part of the appeal may be the opportunity to work on several different brand challenges and devise innovative, compelling solutions to many unique problems rather than focusing on the creative needs of a single brand.

To this day, agencies are still the masters of creative, emotional, compelling advertising.

Agencies are uniquely positioned to succeed in this new video paradigm because they know how to do what the robots can't do, and what brands need most: expert storytelling.

Video enables emotional storytelling and provides a uniquely captivating medium through which to engage consumers. Storytelling allows people to empathize with brands which is critical as brands have had to adapt to spaces designed for humans, like social media profiles, and must function as entities with personalities in order to correctly connect in these spheres.

AGENCIES KNOW HOW TO DO WHAT THE ROBOTS CAN'T DO: EXPERT STORYTELLING.

Agencies have an opportunity to once again lead their clients into the future of branded storytelling. This means helping them understand the value of messages that do not always feel like brand or product pitches and may or may not end in a CTA but are designed to appeal specifically to targeted groups and produce emotional connection and affinity with the brand message.

The most successful branded storytelling authentically conveys a brand's purpose by connecting with the shared values of its audience members.

Here are a few examples of exceptional branded storytelling from AirBNB and Burt's Bees.

Storytelling is a compelling means of explaining a brand story and making something intangible, such as a travel experience, tangible. On their Community Stories page, Airbnb features short videos that include real hosts who take the viewer around their town or city. Walking through the streets, visiting the local merchants, and hearing the passion behind the hosts' voices about their neighborhood makes the viewer want to visit.

It isn't about selling a location or destination, but rather the viewer buys into wanting to have the experience for themselves. Their brand story comes alive through these short videos because they highlight the nuances of different locations, uncover hidden gems, and remind the viewer of what the world has to offer.

Furthermore, the videos serve to show the humanity and hospitality of the Airbnb hosts around the world— tying the viewer into an emotional connection and making them wonder about the friendships they could be forging across the globe. There is no firm CTA driving people to click or buy, but instead, the brand is creating a culture of desire and emotion around the service they sell by telling enticing stories.

This natural brand has been selling the same story for 34 years: the story of a man and his bees. The line of body care and cosmetics got its start from a roadside honey stand and was named after founder Burt Shavitz and his hives.

Videos like The Nature of Burt showcase the company's deep-rooted history in the narrative and beliefs of their founder, even after his passing. An entire section of their site is dedicated to Burt's legacy: "Wild-bearded and free-spirited, Burt Shavitz was The Bee Man who contained multitudes. We fondly remember Burt as the man who taught us how to live simply and harmoniously with the natural world." The site features a 360 tour of the tiny house Burt occupied during his life— codifying his dedication to simplicity. These values are played out throughout the brand, all the way down to the smallest packaging details and product container recycling offer.

This kind of thorough, legacy-driven storytelling helps reinforce the company's wholesome, all-natural image — and ultimately it builds trust with consumers from a sense of emotional connection and transparency. Earth and health-conscious consumers can feel good about purchasing from Burt's Bees because they are clear on the brand's values.

What these examples of exceptional brand storytelling have in common is a deep understanding of their company purpose and their audience's interests. Deep audience knowledge is the only way to authentically deliver compelling branded storytelling that will resonate. Obtaining the right data can help you understand your audience at the level necessary to craft these kinds of impactful campaigns.

● Brands need "travel agents"

Everyone is moving toward providing data in some form or another. As we see brands insourcing their agency functions, they're also seeking out tools and consultants to help them navigate the glut of owned and external data available to them. Many platforms and tools have been popping up and brands are becoming overwhelmed by these options.

The consumer travel industry has undergone a similar revolution. For decades, travel agents were the go-to resource for booking everything from corporate trips to family vacations. With the emergence of the first popular internet travel tools like Tripadvisor and Kayak enabling consumers to coordinate their own travel, the need for travel agents decreased.

But the number of tools and platforms kept increasing, the airlines and hotels all began to cater to self-service trip planners, and sites like Airbnb and VRBO allow people to list their personal properties for rent… Now with a flood of travel-planning tools at our disposal, it has become overwhelming to navigate all of this information and determine the best value and best experience. So we're seeing the comeback of the travel agent.

Agencies can serve as the 'travel agents' for their clients in these new data-driven endeavors because of the long-seated position of trust that they hold.

● Brands need consiglieres

Similar to the travel agent, with their deep, historical knowledge of the travel industry, agencies are specially positioned to help brands navigate the glut of data available because they have been operating as trusted advisors all along. The agency has always been on the client's side, vested only in their best interests and success, whereas data-brokers can often have their own dogs in the fight. Some companies providing data may benefit from swaying a brand's decisions. Agencies can impartially interpret data, helping brands navigate with their best interests in mind.

Beyond providing unbiased data and guidance, agencies have the historical creative experience to allow them to disrupt and innovate on their client's behalf. Just as data outside of context is useless, so too is prescriptive data. Agencies have always served as the seat of creativity and innovation. To discard that avant-creativity in favor of purely data-driven decisions would be a huge mistake and a swing too far in the opposite direction. Instead, creative agencies have a distinct opportunity, and duty, to use data as the guardrails for their creative exploits.

Once you understand the data, you can actually become more creative within those boundaries. All data really does is give you much more real-time, credible information to move forward in a creative brief. And A.I. can provide predictive validation that your brief will be successful because the data clearly points it out.

Sometimes the data is actually telling you to ignore the trends. This is where creatives are especially well suited to succeed because they have historically been the disruptors and innovators for their clients. Being able to look at the data in the inverse is just as informative, if not more, than looking at its face value. Data can allow you to understand the gaps that exist around your audience interests and competitive landscape so that you can carve out new, ownable ideas for your brand clients.

AGENCIES CAN OWN THE FUTURE OF DATA INSPIRED STORYTELLING AND ICX MEDIA CAN HELP

HOW ICX MEDIA HELPS
LEADING AGENCIES

ICX Media captures and analyzes real-time, cross-platform, video intelligence to help inform true Data Inspired Storytelling-- allowing you to use data before and after the pitch to make smarter creative and more precise audience targeting decisions.
We apply proprietary artificial intelligence, machine learning, and custom data science to more than 5 million creators, 400 million consumers, and 4.5 billion social video data points to help our clients discover and analyze smarter video strategies.

We're helping cutting-edge agencies lead their clients into the future of Data Inspired Storytelling.

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