

Development of a conceptual model to alternative brand contact planning in the South African marketing and Communications industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature, role and planning of the alternative brand contact. Based on the outside-in and zero-based planning philosophy of integrated brand contact management, the alternative brand contact is defined as 'a planned point of contact with the brand that is experienced by consumers as unexpected and unconventional'.

A qualitative exploratory research study was conducted in 2003-2004 to engage the opinions, attitudes and motivations of the South African marketing and communications industry on alternative brand contact planning. For motivated reasons, exploratory focus groups were conducted with senior account teams in a sample of integrated communications agencies. Two further phases of research were conducted, namely: semi-structured depth interviews with key clients of the senior account teams and semi-structured depth interviews with key players within the senior account teams.

The key research findings were employed in the design of a conceptual model to alternative brand contact planning. The model is the focus of this paper.

It is envisaged that those agencies and clients that are responsive to the explorative and experimental nature of alternative brand contact planning will find the proposed conceptual model to be of immediate strategic value.

Keywords

Brand Contact

Alternative Brand Contact

Unconventional Advertising

Creative Strategic Planning

Disruption

INTRODUCTION

A company's very existence today depends on how effectively it builds and manages its brands. Consequently, a holistic and integrated business, marketing and communications mindset that acknowledges the collective effect of all

activities on the status and identity of the brand in the consumer's mind must be developed. As Dru (2002:66) argues, an enterprise-wide approach to brand building is required. A multiple of sources are sending messages to consumers through a multiple of marketing and communication media. Brands are formed, as Duncan and Moriarty (1997:9) explain, on 'bundles of brand messages that stakeholders automatically integrate'.

Schultz and Barnes (1995:3-8) refer to the many means through which a brand makes contact with consumers and through

which consumers come into contact with the brand as 'brand contact points'. Every form of contact with the company or brand communicates. 'The brand never stops communicating with customers and consumers. It communicates whenever and wherever the consumer comes into contact with it.'

Duncan (2002:138) points out that the concept of brand contact was first popularised by Jan Carlson, former chairman of Scandinavian Airlines Systems (SAS), who coined the term 'moments of truth'. Hofmeyr and Rice (2000:29) refer to brand contacts as 'touch points' and confirm that 'we commonly talk about touch points when we describe how brand identity is created'. McLean in Dru (2002:261) likewise applies the term 'connections' as anything and everything that exists between a brand and its target audience – that communicates the brand identity. O'Malley and Birge in Dru (2002:277) conclude that the concept of brand connections thus encompasses every aspect of a brand's interaction with its audiences, from product design to, for example, fair trade policies.

The common line of reasoning is that the brand contact approach follows an outside-in thinking (starting with the needs of consumers) and zero-based planning pattern. For customers to be attracted to and continue to buy the brand, Duncan (2002:202) proposes an eight-step, zero-based planning process that consists of '...determining objectives and strategies based on current brand and marketplace conditions. (The current conditions are considered the zero point).' The consumer's experience of the brand is viewed as the point of departure in working towards a consistent, unified brand identity. As Ries and Ries (2000:108) state, the view from the outside is very different from the view from the inside. The perceptions that consumers have and hold of a brand are the result of a myriad of interwoven brand activities and it is vital that brand communications planning be undertaken from the

consumer's frame of reference. The brand contact approach embraces the continuous nature of brand communications with the core objective to achieve continuity in brand identity at every level of contact.

PURPOSE

The aim of integrated brand contact management is to take ownership of a relevant, distinctive and focused brand positioning through every form of contact with the consumer. This is what the integration of brand communications implies. Brand credibility is lost – and the reputation and equity value of the brand suffers – when brand contact messages do not reinforce a focused brand promise with consistency. As Duncan and Moriarty (1997:70) warn, a lack of consistency in brand messages will create a brand identity that is 'unfocused, diffused, and fuzzy'.

Duncan (2002:129) concludes, therefore, that an integrated brand identity is achieved when the brand positioning communicated through planned communication contacts is consistent with the performance of product and service contacts and is confirmed by unplanned points of brand contact. In other words, all planned marketing communications, existing product and service contacts experienced when buying and using the brand and all customer-initiated communication contacts must be identified, influenced and controlled to communicate and reinforce an integrated experience of the brand.

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the perceived nature, role and planning of the alternative brand contact. The alternative brand contact is defined as 'a planned point of contact with the brand that is experienced by consumers as unexpected and unconventional' (Schultz in Belch and Belch, 2004:210). The outcome is the design of a Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The alternative brand contact

The key motivator to alternative brand contact planning is encountered in the consumer's experience of the brand communications environment. As Ries and Ries (2000:115) argue, consumers experience a cornucopia of choice and are inundated by a proliferation of communication messages.

This communication 'noise' has resulted in unique media and message behaviour. Duncan and Moriarty (1997:91) reason that consumers have come to condition themselves to psychologically ignore traditional advertising messages. Belch and Belch (2004:114) confirm that consumers apply increasingly aggressively selective exposure and selective attention measures. Communication clutter results in the erection of selective exposure and attention barriers. The likelihood that a point of planned brand contact will achieve exposure and receive attention diminishes as the level of communication noise increases. Duncan (2002:144) observes, furthermore, that, as soon as consumers 'recognise something as a commercial message, [they] try to block it out, they turn the page, throw it in the waste basket, or change to another station.' As fields of brand communication contact become more recognisable and cluttered, consumers increasingly erect more intensive selective exposure and attention measures. Baulk (2003) concludes that more and more advertising is, therefore, ignored in a world that is characterised by too much commercial noise and clutter.

Taking ownership of a relevant and differentiated positioning on a defined and single-minded level, at each point of brand contact, will present a focused and integrated brand identity. However, if points of planned brand contact are not noticed, the impact of an integrated brand contact strategy is diluted. The brand identity has little chance of being communicated if the point of planned brand contact fails to rise above commercial clutter. As Blackwell *et al*

(2001) conclude, brand communications that go unnoticed cannot inform or persuade.

Consequently, clients are increasingly seeking brand communications solutions beyond the tried and trusted, mostly traditional, brand communication methods, as Curtis (2001), Phillipson (2001), Mendoza and Greaves (2001), Dawson in Dru (2002), Steinhobel (2003) and Rogers (2003) assert.

Clients are in need of innovative thinking – or, as Rogers (2003:17) reasons, 'blue sky thinking' from their brand communication partners. It is becoming more and more difficult to rise above the flood of expected traditional commercial messages. Clients, therefore, expect their communication partners to present brand communication solutions that will ensure that their brand messages get noticed.

As Herber (2001) warns, brand communications that merely deliver more of the same in repackaged form are bound to fail. Ries and Ries (2002:85) more blatantly argue that advertisers are in search of alternative contact solutions because 'traditional advertising isn't working that well'. Today, brand communication or contact plans must contribute new strategic ideas and contact innovation to achieve branded impact, create awareness and make a meaningful brand impression. The alternative point of brand contact addresses this challenge.

Creative strategic contact thinking can penetrate clutter zones effectively. The challenge is to move beyond, or to manipulate, traditional communication vehicles in order to target consumers in an unconventional manner when and where they least expect to encounter a commercial message and when they are in a susceptible state of mind.

Harris, quoted in Chronis (2000:67) argues that alternative contacts achieve exactly this: 'They are head-turners, popping up when they are least expected.' The alternative brand contact, in keeping

with Blackwell, Miniard and Engel's (2001:446) assessment of incongruent stimuli, is noticed and achieves impact because it deviates from expected planned brand contact points. The alternative point of brand contact draws attention because it is incongruent with expected brand communications activity.

In the context of the outside-in brand contact strategy, according to Duncan (2002:14) '...a company must move from using *inside-out thinking* (focusing internally on sales, shares and quarterly reports) to *outside-in thinking* (focusing on customers' needs and wants).' Therefore, the alternative brand contact planning starts with the consumer and builds backwards to the brand (Schultz in Belch and Belch, 2004:210). The role of the alternative brand contact is to break through commercial clutter levels to achieve branded impact.

Examples of alternative brand contact strategies

The alternative brand contact is not bound by media type and is, therefore, in keeping with the zero-based planning approach, media-neutral. The strategic challenge and qualifying factor is the unconventional and unexpected experience of the point of contact, whether in a traditional or untraditional media environment.

Numerous alternative brand contact strategies were explored in this study. The following are some examples:

- Virgin Atlantic's egg trays with a wrap-around message 'Handled by Virgin Atlantic' placed on airport luggage conveyer belts in South Africa.
- Adidas's and Coca-Cola's global unconventional contact experiences with series of illuminated signs in tunnels that, when seen from a speeding train, appear to be animated.
- Cell C's 'For the City' campaign aimed at building subscriber numbers for the South African cellphone operator. The campaign converted central Johannesburg into an outdoor art

gallery using 40 original works of art from local artists as wraps and murals on buildings.

- Standard Bank South Africa's co-operative use of existing print advertisements for premium brands, such as Guess. A look-alike original, signed credit card proof of payment slip is simply stuck onto the Guess print advertisement to create an unconventional contact experience for the Standard Bank Achiever account.
- The South African campaign for Osram lightbulbs, for which the client and its agency, Saatchi & Saatchi, won the 2003 Advertising Media Association of South Africa (AMASA) and Roger Garlick Award for Media Innovation and Creative Media Strategy. Rather than producing a costly conventional television commercial, a prominent and unexpected product placement was introduced onto the popular DStv CSN and Supersport 1, 2 and 3 channels. Studio lights were doused (unbeknown to the programme presenters, thus adding to the element of surprise) long enough for Osram to deliver the brand message – 'Next time, use long-lasting lightbulbs from Osram!'
- Nike's penetration of Mtv programming with brand messages that resemble music videos. The videos, called 'hoop-hop spots', featured NBA players dribbling a basketball and dancing to pulsating music.
- Nando's, the Portuguese chicken fast-food retailer's branding of 1 Time airline planes in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative exploratory research was undertaken among senior account teams in integrated communications agencies in South Africa and their key clients (brand and marketing managers), to investigate the nature, role and planning of alternative brand contacts.

The study is positioned in the context of

integrated brand contact management and more specifically in the realm of planned points of contact with the brand. The aim of integrated brand contact management is, according to Burnett and Moriarty (1998:63), to co-ordinate all company-based marketing messages, ‘... those sent by the marketing mix, the unplanned messages (such as dirty parking lots) and other planned messages...’. The following central proposition was formulated into a primary research objective of the study: *The unconventional and unexpected point of planned brand contact can break through commercial clutter barriers to achieve branded impact.*

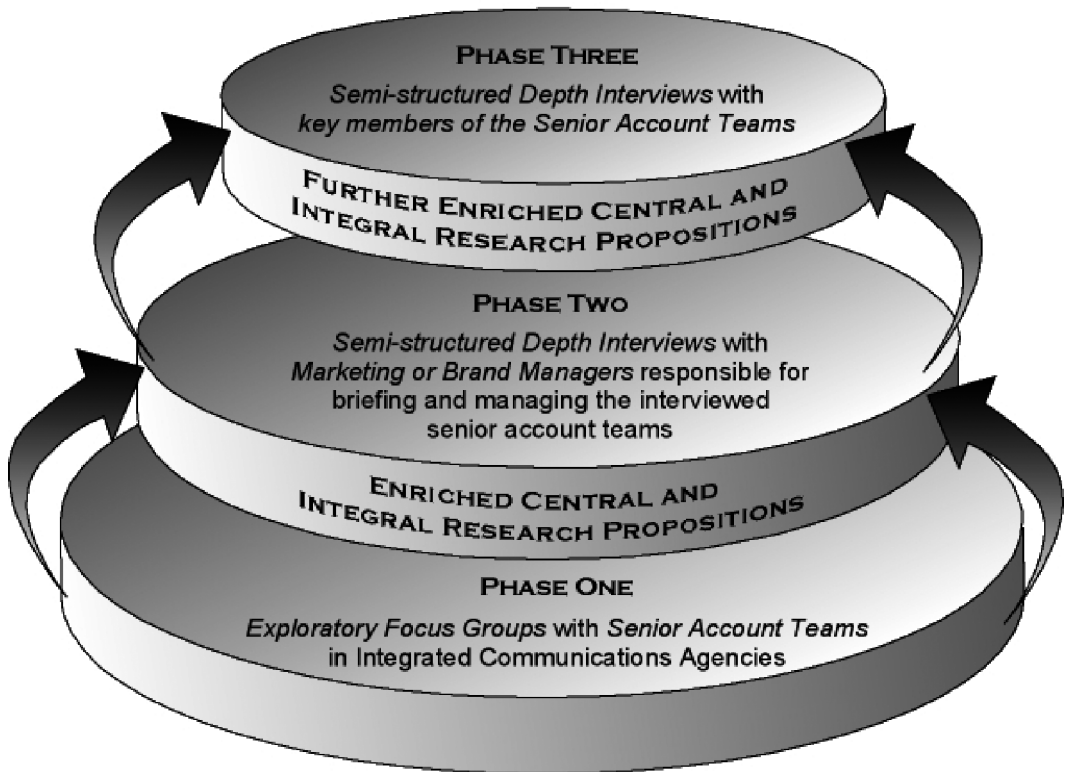
An extensive investigation of literature revealed that the alternative point of brand

contact’s ability to achieve the above is found to depend on a number of requisites. These presented further integral research propositions and were developed into supporting objectives.

Phases of data collection

Figure 1 illustrates the phases of data collection implemented in this study. The diagram demonstrates that exploratory focus groups were firstly conducted with senior account teams in integrated communications agencies. The key insights gained from the free-flow in discussion on the perceived nature and role of the alternative point of brand contact were employed to enrich the defined research propositions.

Figure 1: Research method process



The exploratory focus groups were followed with semi-structured depth interviews with marketing or brand managers responsible for briefing and managing the interviewed senior account teams and, thereupon, with key members of the senior account teams. The semi-structured depth interviews with marketing or brand managers essentially focused on the enriched research propositions developed in response to the focus group findings. The semi-structured depth interviews with key account team members encompassed key insights gained from the interviews conducted with the marketing or brand managers.

Sampling design

An immediate challenge was encountered in acquiring an appropriate frame of integrated communications agencies in South Africa. Two clear factors defined this challenge. Firstly, no frame of integrated communications agencies in South Africa exists. Also, the problem of ineligibility is encountered in existing lists of advertising agencies in South Africa. The agencies that may be functioning as integrated communications agencies are interspersed among the available lists of advertising agencies. Secondly, six independent industry experts in South Africa, who were consulted using the Delphi Forecasting Method to address the above constraints, were of the opinion that no clear estimation can be placed on the percentage of agencies in South Africa that are indeed operating as integrated communications agencies. Of greater significance is that the industry experts believe that the screening of agencies, to ascertain their status as integrated communications agencies, would have been a subjective and futile exercise. Lip-service is paid to the concept of integration and, if asked, all agencies would claim to be integrated.

The industry experts did, however, identify agencies that they believe to be delivering, or working towards delivering, integrated brand communication solutions.

Also, considerable overlap was encountered in the judgement of the individual industry experts. The individual interviews with industry experts consequently resulted in a critical assessment of the sampling procedure to this study.

In order to retain clarity in research purpose and to gain further insight into the challenge of selecting an appropriate and meaningful sampling method in sampling procedure, sample size was firstly investigated. For motivated reasons the value of information approach to setting sample sizes, was applied. The purpose and research design of the study was consequently described to three industry experts in the field of marketing and communications research in South Africa. The following sample sizes were recommended and approved:

- Six exploratory focus groups with senior account teams in integrated communications agencies.
- Ten semi-structured depth interviews with marketing or brand managers responsible for briefing the interviewed senior account teams.
- Fifteen semi-structured depth interviews involving key members of the senior account teams.

Insight into sample size enabled the researcher to address the challenge of selecting an appropriate sampling method. Given the judgement of the independent industry experts, the qualitative exploratory nature of this study, the planned data source methods to this study and the approved sample sizes for the study, a non-probability sampling method was employed.

The non-probability sampling method best suited to the nature, purpose and constraints of this study was judgement sampling. The following sampling strategy was implemented, leveraging the opinions of the independent industry experts, to produce the final focus group sample of integrated communications agencies.

The agencies identified by the industry

experts were tabled. The agencies that received more than one mention were isolated and ranked. The six integrated communications agencies that received the most mentions and collective approval of the industry experts, in rank order, were FCB, TBWA Hunt Lascaris, Net#work BBDO, The Jupiter Drawing Room, Ogilvy and King James.

In keeping with the Delphi Method of Forecasting, the results of the assessment of expert opinion were presented to the interviewed industry experts to provide an opportunity to compare their own previous judgements to those of others and to respond to the proposed sample of integrated communications agencies. The proposed sample met with all of the experts' approval.

Thematic content analysis (Cooper and Schindler 1998:417) was employed to analyse the research data delivered through the three-phase qualitative exploratory research study. The research results and findings were ultimately employed to

develop a Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning.

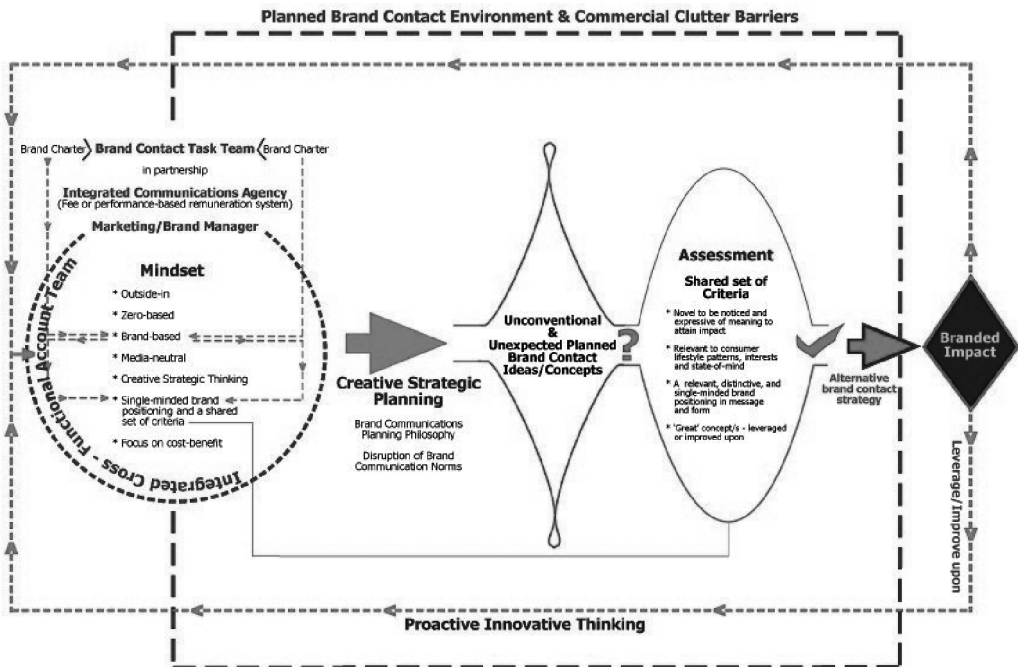
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL TO ALTERNATIVE BRAND CONTACT PLANNING

The primary finding delivered by the qualitative exploratory research study presents the focal point and envisaged outcome of the Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning. All senior account teams and clients interviewed confirmed that:

The unconventional and unexpected point of planned brand contact can break through commercial clutter barriers to achieve branded impact.

The Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning is designed to achieve branded impact. The qualitative exploratory research study also produced a range of supporting findings. These present the variables of the Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning, as indicated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: A Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning



The study culminated in the design of a Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning. The model is designed in the context of the nature and purpose of integrated brand contact management, in order to address the nature and role of alternative brand contact planning. The proposed Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning identifies four core constructs, namely:

- The mindset of the integrated cross-functional account team and client.
- The process of creative strategic planning.
- The assessment of unconventional and unexpected planned brand contact points.
- Branded impact and the need for ongoing, proactive, innovative thinking.

The Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning is discussed by means of the four core constructs, with respect to the key findings produced by the qualitative exploratory research study. The model, with its constructs and planning process, flows from left to right.

The mindset of the integrated cross-functional account team and client

The model establishes that alternative brand contact planning is pursued in the context of the nature and purpose of integrated brand contact management. The study of literature (Duncan 2002:129) and the qualitative exploratory research study confirm that the alternative brand contact strategy must contribute to the integrated brand contact strategy to support the process of brand-building. Alternative brand contact planning is also based on the outside-in and zero-based planning philosophy of integrated brand contact management.

For this reason, the model presents the integrated client-account team relationship as representative of a strategic partnership between the integrated communications agency and the client brand contact task

team. The brand contact task team, as Duncan (2002:90) explains, ensures the cross-functional integration of points of brand contact. The model thus enforces that alternative brand contact planning is undertaken with the brand charter or manual as the codified planning context. The brand charter or brand manual captures, as Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000:91) and Keller (2001:21) propose, brand learnings, the brand identity and brand positioning strategy, to serve as the strategic guide to the process of brand contact planning. The brand contact task team, with its integrated communications agency as a strategic partner, implements the brand charter to ensure that all points of brand contact communicate in a consistent voice.

The model, therefore, also qualifies the status of the integrated communications agency. The integrated communications agency delivers holistic integrated brand communications solutions and exhibits the strategic and creative skill to add value on all levels of brand contact. The integrated communications agency, furthermore, comprises integrated cross-functional units (account teams), to ensure that effective, integrated brand communications solutions are produced. In the context of alternative brand contact planning, the study of literature and the qualitative exploratory research study also establish that the confluence of strategic and creative skills into cross-functional account teams, is conducive to the development of alternative brand contact solutions that are both novel and relevant to the brand.

The model also positions the integrated communications agency, as one that operates on fee or performance-based remuneration systems (Oosthuizen 1996:35). The study of literature and the qualitative exploratory research study confirm that zero-based and media-neutral planning are only made possible if the agency is not constrained by a biased media-commission based remuneration system.

The aim of the Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning is to assist agencies and clients to develop unconventional and unexpected planned points of brand contact that will break through commercial clutter barriers to achieve branded impact. The qualitative exploratory research study establishes that an integrated client-account team relationship and a mindset that is conducive to alternative brand contact planning are requirements to attaining this aim. The mindset of the agency, client and account team is found to be of paramount importance, more so than the development of specific creative techniques, to produce unconventional solutions.

The mindset to alternative brand contact planning, as identified in the model and determined by the study of literature and the exploratory research study, requires the following:

- **Outside-in thinking**
Alternative brand contact planning is consumer-oriented, as it is the consumer base (target audience) that will determine what is perceived and experienced as unconventional and unexpected.
- **Zero-based thinking**
Alternative brand contact planning is platform-neutral and based on consumers' current experience of the brand contact environment and, therefore, does not harbour contact prejudices, preconceptions or preconditions.
- **Brand-based thinking**
Alternative brand contact planning must be brand-based, in that the focus is on communicating or reinforcing a single-minded positioning of the brand, in other words, as so many of the respondents in the qualitative exploratory study argued, 'what the brand stands for', 'a focused brand positioning'.
- **Media-neutral thinking**
It is the nature of contact with

the consumer that establishes the alternative brand contact appeal and not the use of one medium as opposed to another. The alternative brand contact is not defined by media type. One of the senior account teams in the exploratory research study argued: 'We shouldn't be thinking in media moulds: we should be thinking of communication spaces.' Alternative brand contact planning must not be constrained, therefore, by media biases or, as previously argued, biased media commission-based remuneration systems.

- **Creative strategic thinking**
The alternative brand contact is, based on the study of literature and the qualitative exploratory research study, the product of creative strategic thinking. The aim is to produce points of brand contact that are novel and relevant to the brand. It is for this reason that a cross-functional account team environment and an integrated client-account team relationship were identified in the qualitative exploratory research study, as requirements of alternative brand contact planning.
- **A single-minded brand positioning strategy and a shared set of criteria from which alternative brand contact ideas are developed and assessed**
Based on the qualitative exploratory research study, alternative brand contact planning must begin with a single-minded brand positioning platform and a shared set of criteria (co-developed by the client and senior account team), from which alternative brand contact ideas can be developed and assessed. This way, brand relevance can be achieved and a focused brand identity created.
The Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning identifies the need for a single-minded brand positioning strategy and a shared set of criteria in the core construct:

The Mindset of the Integrated Cross-functional Account Team and Client. A critical link is created on this level with the third core construct in the model, namely: the assessment of unconventional and unexpected planned brand contact points, to demonstrate that the development and evaluation of the alternative brand contact is conducted against the same set of criteria. The need for a single-minded brand positioning strategy and a shared set of criteria in the development and evaluation of alternative brand contact concepts will receive close attention with the introduction of the third core construct to this model.

- **A focus on cost-benefit**

The qualitative exploratory research study establishes that alternative brand contact strategies are, in general, not more costly to implement, as some tend to believe. Also, research findings reveal that clients are prepared to invest in alternative brand contact solutions, if they demonstrate the potential to break through clutter to achieve branded impact. The client approach is – in keeping with account team attitudes – that, when cost is considered, the focus in alternative brand contact planning should be on the benefit gained, ie. the potential to break through commercial clutter barriers and achieve branded impact.

With the mindset of the integrated cross-functional account team and client as the first and paramount core construct to alternative brand contact planning, the model shifts into the process of creative strategic planning, the second core construct to the Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning.

The process of creative strategic planning

The alternative brand contact is presented in the study of literature and the qualitative

exploratory research study as the product of creative strategic planning. Creative strategic planning entails the development of unconventional, unexpected or novel solutions that are relevant to the brand. The challenge is to move beyond, or to manipulate, traditional brand communication vehicles to target consumers in an unconventional manner when and where they least expect to encounter a commercial message and when they are in a susceptible state of mind.

The model identifies a further key research finding in relation to creative strategic planning. Alternative brand contact planning is identified as a brand communications planning philosophy that involves the disruption of brand communication norms to break through clutter. Based on respondents' attitudes, creative strategic planning must be undertaken in all brand communication spaces, to disrupt brand communication norms and develop alternative brand contact solutions that will break through clutter.

It is evident that a clear line of synergy exists between the notion of creative strategic planning, as defined and researched in this study, and the premise of disruption (*Stratégie de rupture*), as introduced by Dru (1996:54). This perhaps also clarifies why many respondents referred to alternative brand contact planning as a brand communications planning philosophy that involves the disruption of brand communication norms to break through clutter.

The study of literature reveals that disruption requires a three-step process:

- Insight into the conventional: strategic ideas and activity that maintain the status quo and are, therefore, hardly noticed are identified.
- Disruption: creative strategic thinking is applied to break intentionally with conventional strategic methods to produce unconventional ideas.
- Brand integration: the ideas/concepts

that most effectively communicate the brand positioning strategy are identified.

Dru's three-step approach to disruption also would appear to point to the need for outside-in, zero-based and media-neutral thinking (step one: insight into the conventional), creative strategic planning (step two: disruption) and brand-based thinking (step three: brand integration), in the development of unconventional strategic solutions.

The concept of disruption (step two), was not pursued in greater depth, in the qualitative exploratory research study, largely because the mindset toward alternative brand contact planning was treated by respondents as of paramount importance and, consequently, consumed most of the research time. Also, the study of literature pointed out that mindset and sense of purpose are more important than the development and implementation of structured creative techniques to produce creative ideas. However, a worthy future research area exists in that the actual nature of creative strategic thinking and disruption can be investigated more closely in real world terms, to contribute to the planning of alternative points of brand contact.

The assessment of unconventional and unexpected planned brand contact points

Creative strategic planning, as established, is undertaken in all brand communication spaces, to disrupt brand communication norms and to develop alternative brand contact solutions that will break through clutter. The qualitative exploratory research study, however, revealed that clients are concerned that agencies present alternative brand contact solutions that are not relevant to the brand. Agencies (senior account teams interviewed) in turn, are concerned that alternative brand contact planning is undertaken with no single-minded brand positioning strategy and shared set of development and assessment

criteria in place.

The Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning positions the need for a single-minded brand positioning strategy and a shared set of criteria from which alternative brand contact ideas can be developed and assessed, as critical to alternative brand contact planning. As a respondent observed, *'We need to affirm criteria before the process starts. It's very difficult to evaluate new alternative ideas if you don't know what you are evaluating them against.'*

This measure is introduced in the first core construct to the model, namely the mindset of the integrated cross-functional account team and client and is elevated and reinforced as the third core construct of the model, the assessment of unconventional and unexpected planned brand contact points.

To ensure that branded impact is achieved, alternative brand contact planning must be based on a single-minded brand positioning strategy. The qualitative exploratory research study revealed that clients and senior account teams alike believe that the unconventional and unexpected point of brand contact must break through commercial clutter barriers to achieve impact, to communicate or reinforce a *'focused'* brand positioning, as so many argued.

To undertake creative strategic planning, to produce ideas that are both novel and relevant to the brand, the account team must be clear about what it is that the *'brand stands for'* or what it aims to *'take ownership of'*, as respondents stated. Equally so, the alternative brand contact concept or idea can hardly be assessed for brand relevance and potential branded impact, if a single-minded brand positioning strategy does not exist. As one respondent commented, a vague brand positioning strategy will make for a *'lethal relationship'*.

The proposed shared set of criteria to be considered by the account team and client in the process of alternative brand contact

planning is based on the premise that a single-minded brand positioning strategy is in place. The proposed set of criteria are, furthermore, constructed from the key findings produced by the qualitative exploratory research study. As indicated in the model, the account team and client thus have the opportunity to assess whether the alternative brand contact concept:

- **Is sufficiently novel to be noticed and expressive of meaning to attain impact**

The senior account team's and key clients' responses revealed that it is a given that the alternative brand contact must be perceived as novel by consumers to be noticed and that it must be expressive of meaning to contribute to the process of brand building.

The alternative brand contact that is noticed by consumers because of its novelty, but fails in its expression of brand meaning, is relegated by respondents, to the level of a 'gimmick', an 'intrusion' or an 'invasion' that merely increases clutter and potentially damages the brand. All respondents and, in particular, key clients expressed this concern in more than one context on more than one occasion.

- **Is relevant to consumer lifestyle patterns, interests and state of mind**

The relevance of the alternative brand contact to the lifestyle patterns, interests and state of mind of the target audience was clearly established by respondents as a requirement for achieving branded impact. As one respondent concluded: 'You must engage with their lifestyles, their day-to-day experiences, what they think and feel, their outlook, what they will and won't appreciate at a point in time, to present relevant and effective alternative brand contact solutions.'

Again, respondents expressed their fear that alternative brand contacts that do not attain relevance in terms of consumer lifestyle patterns, state of

mind and interests will be experienced as an intrusion or invasion and will thus damage brand relationships.

- **Demonstrates brand relevance in message and form**

Phillipson (2001:19) and Duncan (2002:373) explain that the ways in which a brand chooses to communicate and connect with prospects will inevitably influence its image. All of the senior account teams established that the alternative brand contact must achieve brand relevance in terms of message and form of contact, to integrate into the brand contact strategy and contribute to the process of brand-building. All of the key clients interviewed perceived this to be a given. As one of the respondents stated: 'The brand is everything and brand relevance and integration must be achieved on every level.'

- **Is a 'great' concept that can be leveraged or improved upon**

Respondents argued that the alternative brand contact must maintain its unconventional status to ensure it consistently breaks through commercial clutter barriers to achieve impact. 'Great' alternative brand contact concepts, according to the senior account teams and their clients, demonstrate the potential to leverage brand communication spaces. They 'have legs', as several respondents argued, to ensure ongoing unconventional experiences are implemented.

The Conceptual Model to Alternative Brand Contact Planning suggests that alternative brand contact concepts that are approved, based on the above proposed set of shared assessment criteria, have the potential to break through commercial clutter barriers to achieve branded impact.

Branded impact and the need for ongoing, proactive, innovative thinking

The model identifies a further key finding

produced by the qualitative exploratory research study with reference to branded impact and, specifically, the maintenance thereof. That is, proactive, innovative thinking is required to leverage the alternative brand contact concept in its brand communication spaces to ensure that it maintains its unconventional status and consistently delivers branded impact. The model thus suggests that alternative brand contact planning is an ongoing process. Ongoing, proactive, innovative thinking, as indicated in the model, is required with a mindset and planning approach that are conducive to alternative brand contact planning and are consistently focused on the intended outcome – branded impact. It is critical that account teams and their clients continuously uphold and practise an alternative brand contact planning philosophy.

The qualitative exploratory research study produced two further findings, which are not reflected in the above conceptual model, but which are, according to the majority of respondents, an outcome of effective alternative brand contact planning. Firstly, respondents were of the opinion that alternative points of brand contact are more memorable and secondly, that they stimulate greater word-of-mouth than conventional communication contacts, because of their unconventional and unexpected status. Both findings would require empirical research to be justified.

CONCLUSION

The nature, role and planning of alternative brand contact strategies are, based on this study, a worthy pursuit in the quest for branded impact in a marketplace that is characterised by increasing levels of competitive activity and communicational clutter. Of importance is that the mindset and planning approach of the client, the agency and its account team are deemed to be paramount. The development and implementation of techniques and tools for creative strategic planning were definitely

perceived to be of secondary value.

It is envisaged that those agencies and clients who recognise and acknowledge the experimental nature of alternative brand contact planning will find the model of immediate value in the planning of alternative brand contact strategies. Those in need of empirical evidence can employ any one of the key findings in the development of hypotheses for further research. Topics for further research could, *inter alia*, include the following: investigating the perceptions of consumers toward the alternative brand contact and the possible influence of the unconventional and unexpected contact strategy on consumer behaviour; examining the actual nature of creative strategic thinking and disruption more closely in real world terms, to contribute to the planning of alternative points of brand contact; researching unconventional points of brand contact in the service environment; and a research study that is focused on the mindset of the brand communications consultancy towards alternative brand contact planning may produce valuable insights, especially so, if compared to that of traditional advertising agencies and integrated communications agencies.

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