

mere exposure

A conversation between Arne Schmitt
and Peter Steffens from the media agency OMD

AS In the series *Mad Men* there is the character of Harry Crane, who at the beginning of the series, around 1960, represents the entire media department of the advertisement agency which the series evolves around. Practically, this means: he sits in his office and checks whether booked commercials are broadcast on television. This is basically the only sphere of activity of his department.

By the end of the series, his importance within the agency has grown: mainly because of its computer, which takes up the volume of an entire office and which becomes a kind of insurance of the agency's modernity for many clients.

You once mentioned that this development was emblematic of the shift in importance of creative and media aspects of the advertising industry. Can you explain this in broad terms? I guess many people still think of advertising agencies primarily as creating slogans and designing aesthetic imagery and typography.

PS Advertising agencies in the narrow sense can be divided into two basic areas: creative agencies and media agencies. Creative agencies focus on everything that has to do with defining the actual content of the given ad and the overall theme of a campaign, while media agencies are responsible for the orchestration of media channels that are needed to reach the intended target group in the best possible way. Classically, media processes were part of creative agencies, as in-house departments. In Germany, this started to split up the 1990s, mainly due to the emergence of private television. This time saw a huge increase of the number of available advertising spaces: the complexity increased so much that separate companies were founded that only dealt with the necessities of media planning. This separation is a bit artificial - but with the increase of digital channels since 2000, it became inevitable for an efficient and effective orchestration of all the possible advertising channels.

Reducing complexity thus became a central task of the media sector: the aforementioned computer has not only helped with all kinds of accounting procedures, but it has also explosively increased the number of available communicational options through the various online channels - from advertising banners to YouTube videos and social media measures. And: the amount of data that these new digital channels produce is also ever increasing.

AS How can we imagine the process that a company or an institution goes through until its advertising appears? What is the typical order of steps taken, from creating the slogan and/or the motif on the one hand, and the decisions as to where the ad will be positioned on the other?

PS First of all, there is always a problem at hand - because advertising always is an investment and no one will make an investment if there is no objective. For example, sales or visitor numbers shall increase or -more abstractly- a brand image shall be changed. That is the starting point from which creative and media agencies work in dialogue, ideally. How this works varies greatly from client to client: Until the 1990s, the creative idea was developed first - later, media agencies moved into the lead role more often, since it first has to be defined which target group should be addressed, how this group can be subdivided and how it can be reached most effectively. And then there are certain channels such as *search*, i.e. advertising on search engines and especially Google, where creative work is relatively unimportant when compared to other channels.

AS How does the process work then, leading up to the finished outdoor advertising?

PS As I said, it always starts out with a problem. As an example: At a certain point in the coming year, the new model of car manufacturer X will be launched. Various processes begin many months in advance: The creative agency is briefed on a certain staging of the new product, while media begins to identify potential customer groups to be addressed and to conduct a competitive analysis.

One possible recommendation could then be: Outdoor advertising -or out-of-home, in agency jargon- should be used as a medium to make the product or brand better known. Out-of-home is generally a good channel to create awareness.

Creative agencies are then concerned with breaking down the campaign into different formats, while media gets into the complex and very technical processes of booking, for example: Which ad space providers are available? What sizes and formats do they offer? Which cities will be provided with posters and to what extent, according to the respective target group analysis? This is also where questions of commitment come into play, i.e. the exact financial conditions: How much capacity should be booked from a certain provider and is there the possibility of a volume discount? How many and what types of poster and digital panels are really available in the end? The competition also books spaces, of course...

And in the end, it's about the printing of the actual posters, which have to be available at the respective providers in approximately 10-14 day cycles in order to be installed.

AS Can you give examples of such factors that favour certain cities over others in large out-of-home campaigns?

PS First of all, there is the basic question of whether you want to reach target groups in urban areas with the campaign -which is usually the case- or whether you want to primarily address a more rural population or commuters in traffic, for example. Everything else is part of very small-scale decisions and considerations, for example which of the big marketers -in Germany mainly Wall/Dcaux and Ströer- has how much poster space in which city. In the case of large, national flights, they may make offers such as: If you book a number X of additional posters in city Y, you will get a better price in city Z, and so on.

AS And after that: how detailed can we imagine the exact selection of the respective advertising spaces? If we imagine a large traffic axis with large and small, backlit and pasted posters: Is there someone who decides exactly which surface is used, or is it more of a scattergun approach?

PS Usually it is the scattergun approach. Larger media agencies often work together with sister agencies that exclusively take care of booking these spaces. The strategic objective in the out-of-home sector is usually to maximise coverage, meaning: the greatest possible distribution in the respective city and/or nationwide. Some formats, for example the so-called *Citylights*, cannot be booked individually at all, but only as a network. These booking modalities also prone to change based on the vendors' strategic agenda, of course. However, if there is a very specific objective in a particular campaign, this can also look quite different: for example, if a fitness studio wants to show presence in the vicinity of branches of the competition. Or if the central offices of certain companies are to be targeted within the framework of recruiting processes. At this point, however, sensitivities can come into play...

AS Sensitivities?

PS Let's put it this way: communication is complex. For all its quantifiability, it is always a great and perhaps THE great challenge to be able to say in retrospect: Have the measures taken been effective? This is complicated even more by the fact that it is basically almost impossible to harm oneself through advertising. Because every form of advertising has some kind of impact - the only question is how big it is and how cost-effective.

In the case of media, this is even more complex: many things can be measured and checked, but others are much more difficult to grasp, especially within the realm of abstract qualities.

Of course, this also affects the decision-makers in the respective companies who always want to know whether the money they invested was worth it. That is why, for example, clients often want their company headquarters to be surrounded by posters of the new campaign - or prominent advertisements to be placed in a daily newspaper that they know their board of directors reads.

AS An acquaintance of mine once had a strange job: he had to take photos of advertising spaces in the city in order to register how many people walk by and see them. An absurd task from a photographer's point of view, completely arbitrary in its outcome. Big Data plays a big role in the media sector. How does this number game play into out-of-home advertising? What ways are there to collect data in the streets where there are no cookies?

PS Of course, the OOH vendors have the claim to show their customers: Our billboards are seen by X million people every day and thus produce Y million gross contacts. This is determined by standardised surveys or by manual documentation. Mobile movement data has also played a role for some years now. On the one hand, the media agency always wants to get a forecast from the vendor of how many contacts a certain investment will produce. On the other hand, it has the duty to document a finished campaign after it ended. (A necessary, if not very rewarding aspect of the work). Some of this is outsourced to other service providers while in the print sector, many agencies have their own departments for this task. Some providers of advertising space also offer to do this documentation themselves: Here, mutual trust plays a key role. In principle, however, we as an agency are obligated to prove to our clients, at least upon request, that the bookings have been checked.

AS What are the reasons for doing out-of-home advertising today, e.g. in relation to online advertising? Some people consider the web to be the new public space - where people spend much more time than on the street.

PS On the contrary: compared to print, for example, out-of-home has benefited massively from the expansion of the online sector! There has been an increasing fragmentation in media use in recent years: not all of Germany watches "Wetten, dass...?" on Saturday night anymore (the recent reboot of that show might have been an exception here), younger people don't watch TV at all. That is why out-of-home is one of the few channels that can achieve a kind of general impact or presence. This has made out-of-home advertising massively important and is the main reason why it is a central component in so many campaigns today.

AS In your opinion, what are the specifics of out-of-home advertising and its psychological impact, also in contrast to other advertising channels?

PS We talked about impact measurement or accountability earlier. It might be possible to predict roughly how many contacts my TV commercial, my poster, etc. will produce - but the actual effect of these contacts is difficult to determine. One could assume that a large, illuminated advertising poster has a greater impact than a small banner on a random website - or that an eye-catching TV or cinema commercial has a greater impact than a static advertising poster. Different media certainly do have their own specific characteristics with regards to how people respond to them.

But again: in out-of-home advertising, the main objective is spreading the word, making a product known to people. There is, for example, the term *awareness* which is used very frequently in the industry and originates from a certain school of communication theory. Out-of-home advertising is particularly effective here - and sometimes problematic. I have to briefly elaborate on this:

There are certain memory techniques, for example: Here are 10 terms, link them to certain parts of your body. Or, closer to our subject: Link them to your daily way to work. Meaning: One of the things that makes out-of-home advertising so effective is that it is closely linked to people's daily paths and perceptions. Thus, it produces a different presence of the product in the case of a pending purchase decision. There is a whole evolutionary psychological derivation to this mechanism of action, known under the term of *mere exposure*. The idea is that we find something we see frequently, no matter what it is, more likeable and familiar on a very basic, implicit, emotional level - than something we have seen only rarely. The evolutionary derivation goes something like this: thousands of years ago, if we saw something often without it poisoning or attacking us, we tended to trust and like it - in contrast to something new, unknown, from which danger could potentially emanate.

AS In Germany, there is a quite striking campaign that occupies outdoor advertising spaces from time to time. The slogan says "Outdoor advertising hits everyone". The client and the intention are invisible and difficult to guess in this case. The ads appear as a discontinuity in the usual advertising cycle. Also, there is a -somewhat strange- political/ethical component, for example when people of colour are photographed, being spattered by colour pigments.

PS With this campaign, vendors of OOH advertise for themselves when certain spaces are not booked. But they also point to a key problem of out-of-home advertising. The benefit for the recipient is different here. In print, TV or online, many offers are financed by advertisements that would otherwise not exist or at least not in this form. Also, all users have a certain freedom of choice as to whether they want to use this or that channel. This is both different in public space.

AS We are currently in the midst of the campaigns for the Bundestag elections. Do you see any connections or differences between economic and political content in the case of out-of-home advertising?

PS It is the same principle that applies here. The reason why in Germany additional advertising space is created during the election campaign is simple: because it works. It works through sheer mass! It is enough to show the respective candidates to the voters as often as possible. Even if people like to mock the meaningless, hollow slogans next to the candidates' portraits: The primary aim is to make the candidates visible and thus likeable and known. The message really is secondary here.