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Ken Gofton

Is the world digital's Whitstable's?

True story. A former colleague visiting Sydney, Australia had just polished off some local oysters in an Italian restaurant when the waiter came over. "How you like your oysters?" asked the waiter. "Very good," my friend replied, "but, to be honest, I would rather have had Whitstable's." "Vistables?" the puzzled waiter queried. "Why you no say? We got spinach, we got broccoli, we got beans..."

Which is a way of illustrating the fact that, right now, the world is a plate of the best Whitstable's to digital agencies, however baffled the rest of us may be by their business. And it's because we're baffled, while they have the expertise, that they're enjoying such rapid growth, excellent margins, and the takeover attentions of major communications groups.

A recent seminar on the sector, staged by management consultancy Results International, left me in no doubt that it is feeling very chipper at the moment. We all know that in time the meek will inherit the earth, but I'm afraid that – yet again – they're being pushed to the back of the queue, this time by the rampant digital agencies.

One senior agency executive screened a slide showing digital's increasing share of media spend, with a prediction that in time all other media will be wiped out.

Admittedly, he didn't commit himself to a timescale. Which is just as well, because it's total nonsense. Even if you were to use the dubious argument that eventually all radio and TV should be reclassified as digital media because of the way they are delivered, that still leaves

newspapers, magazines, direct mail, posters, field marketing, ambient media and goodness knows what else.

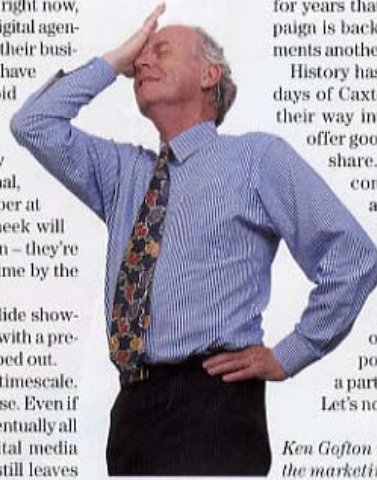
In fact, this speaker was effectively contradicted by another, who pointed out how the number of hits on a car manufacturer's website increased substantially whenever the company was running TV advertising.

Direct marketers will smile at this. It has been known for years that mailshot responses rise when the campaign is backed by TV or radio. One medium complements another. It's called integrated marketing.

History has demonstrated time and again, from the days of Caxton onwards, that new media can elbow their way into the marketplace. If they deliver, and offer good value, they may even take a substantial share. However, the needs of marketers and consumers are so diverse that there will always be a need for a range of media, traditional and modern.

Believe me, this is not an old grouch sticking his head in the sand. Digital is already important, and will become more so. Just keep it in perspective. One of the Results speakers made a telling point, that digital and direct marketing are a particularly potent combination.

Let's not put all our vistables in one basket.



Ken Gofton is a freelance journalist who has covered the marketing industry for over two decades

Letters

Bigger is not always better

Axion's buyout by two private equity groups (*Direct Response*, June, p5) was news that I think many in the industry may have seen coming. Some industry commentators may see yet another acquisition and further growth of one of the big data

players as another hurdle facing the smaller players, but I believe it has positive benefits. It opens up avenues for my business and allows us to grow and become more competitive.

These global players seem to believe bigger means stronger and better. I challenge this: such growth can be seen as a sign of weakness – the larger they grow, the more they lose touch with

client need and, some may argue, lose the ability to offer truly flexible and bespoke solutions.

Their perceived strength should not intimidate but encourage smaller organisations to tackle the competition head on and win by exploiting the weaknesses of the competition.

A client recently reinforced this view, saying that looking to one of the "big guns" for a data

solution can be frustrating. If the solution you require is outside its product remit, it cannot deliver.

The benefit of using a specialist bureau is the flexibility and consultative service that can be delivered to ensure the correct solution is applied to meet client needs. As they say, bigger is not always better!

Jason Lark, managing director, Celerity