



Chris Grannell is a brand and marketing consultant based in Melbourne. He recently moved to Australia from London where he advised a number of major European organisations. He welcomes any feedback on this article and can be emailed at chris.grannell@swatmarketing.com.au

With our love of big media and crazy stunts, our pursuit of promotion rather than product, our fragmented specialities, silos and separated budgets, the marketing industry has become very formalised in its approach. **Chris Grannell** says without media neutral planning, marketing's very effectiveness is under threat.

Media neutral planning

Media neutral planning (or MNP) holds that the type of media (as well as its content) needs to be considered as part of the planning process. In other words, there is a stage before the strategic planning of, say, a specific poster campaign or a TVC where the choice of channel itself is to be considered.

Seem fairly obvious? Perhaps, but certainly not the normal way of doing things in the marketing world.

Imagine the following scenario: if you found that your doctor had already decided to recommend antibiotics before examining you, you would be worried. Worse still, if you found that you couldn't see a general practitioner at all – but had to choose between an array of specialists before you even had a diagnosis – you'd be horrified.

The abstract notion of solution neutrality (from which MNP derives) is a basic principle of scientific endeavour, theoretical problem-solving or critical decision-making. Here, the process that produces the solution is not biased, prejudiced or predisposed towards any particular outcome. And yet in the marketing world the opposite happens with disturbing frequency. Practitioners follow the

same formulas year in year out; agencies recommend their favourite solution; metrics and terminology assume that this season's mix will be more-or-less the same as last season's; budgets are assigned to channels before creative is even considered.

Of course, this isn't universal – nor is MNP completely revolutionary – since many marketing people (both clients and agencies) have for many years understood the logic of an approach that is not bound to a particular delivery means. But the way that we go about our business – right down to the language we use and the assumptions we unconsciously make on a daily basis – is conspiring against all of our best intentions.

When a group of leading international marketers formed the Media Neutral Planning Best Practice Group to debate this issue recently (www.mnpbestpracticegroup.com), they concluded that “failure to include all corporate functions and communication channels in planning sub-optimises performance”.

Although tempting, it's impossible to pin the 'blame' for our lack of MNP onto any specific group, since our tendency for media-biased planning stems from a web of interconnected causes. And many of these

have more to do with history and habit than with laziness or anything more sinister. I categorise these reasons into two groups: structural and vested interest.

Firstly, structural. Marketing strategy is compartmentalised and agencies are pigeonholed. Marketing students are encouraged to consider each of a number of boxes in turn: direct marketing, sales promotion, POS, above-the-line and so on. While such terminology has its uses when used descriptively, it is dangerous when it becomes prescriptive – as it can when client-side marketers are organised (and, more specifically, funded) by discipline.

The other danger is vested interest. In tightly regulated professions like law or government, participants who stand to gain from a particular outcome may be required to excuse themselves during decision-making. This is not the case within the marketing industry – nor do I believe it should be – but it does illustrate that the reduction of bias is important.

The TVC, for instance, not only wins awards, it is also expensive and, for good reason, is an attractive solution for the agency that produces it. It is therefore a lucrative move for the same agency to recommend this particular media as a pre-

ferred solution. But such examples of vested interest aren't necessarily the result of agency greed. Frequently they are a matter of survival. We live in a world where agencies are largely remunerated through production rather than planning, with the result that each is expected to recoup its costs through delivery rather than strategy. This in turn encourages each agency to develop an in-built bias to maximise the proportion of its favourite speciality in the final mix.

Putting MNP into practice requires that both clients and agencies put habits and assumptions to one side. It demands that all involved adopt a critical stance towards already-existing silos, and that we choose our language carefully when we explore aspirations and goals.

This starts with the client, who is responsible for ensuring that the media neutral brief is framed in non media-specific objectives for the brand, its customers or the brand-owner. Simon Ward, a director of Brodeur Worldwide, and one of the contributors to the MNP Best Practice Group, suggests that those commissioning marketing services, “...should provide their agency partners with a flexible yet detailed brief that is not simply an external expression of internal budgeting decisions,

THE ABSTRACT NOTION OF SOLUTION NEUTRALITY (FROM WHICH MEDIA NEUTRAL PLANNING DERIVES) IS A BASIC PRINCIPLE OF SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOUR, THEORETICAL PROBLEM-SOLVING OR CRITICAL DECISION-MAKING. HERE, THE PROCESS THAT PRODUCES THE SOLUTION IS NOT BIASED, PREJUDICED OR PREDISPOSED TOWARDS ANY PARTICULAR OUTCOME

but which focuses on real requirements. These may include specific attitude shifts, perception changes, educational tasks, etc., but do not specify the medium through which these changes will take place."

On the agency side, an acceptance of the logic of MNP implies a responsibility to work within this framework; which may mean being prepared to dispense with the old 'lead agency' mentality in certain multiple-agency circumstances. It may also mean being prepared, where asked, to contribute neutral thinking prior to the means of delivery being considered. The popular notion that a creative idea will have a natural home in a particular media channel also needs to be rigorously tested against agreed objectives.

Of course in marketing – as in any industry – there is still plenty of room for specialists. It's important to understand that MNP doesn't mean that every agency has to plan across every media channel. Once a marketing client has decided upon a particular media channel, then they may justifiably choose an agency based on that agency's expertise within that specific medium.

If MNP is to change the way we plan, then it must also have implications for the way in which subsequent campaigns are assessed and future objectives set. But in practice, developing a plan that is structured in terms that are genuinely neutral between delivery channels isn't easy. While few marketing plans today would rely on OTS alone, for instance, it is important to remember that the very assessment criteria we use may contain hidden presumptions about the type of media involved.

Professor Angus Jenkinson, who chairs the Media Neutral Planning Best Practice Group, points out that, "Ten million mail packs or door drops are not considered to be advertising, but a single poster in a ladies' toilet is." He believes (and I agree) that our very assessment system has been coloured by the prejudices that have become the norm within our industry. For instance, we tend to measure radio through recall, DM through response, PR through awareness, websites through hits... and so on. And we are inclined to think this works the other way too, since we naturally assume that the best recall comes through advertising, the best response from DM, etc. It seems fairly clear that a comprehensive media neutral planning process

will ultimately require new tools and metrics that take us away from the grip of these misleading assumptions.

It is interesting to observe that a logical conclusion of the MNP approach is that all brand touch points or experiences need to be considered in the planning process. As soon as we define our marketing objectives in open-ended terms like 'increasing customer satisfaction', 'raising exclusivity' or 'delivering freshness', then the traditional range of paid-for media space is inadequate to capture the totality of means through which we might tackle such tasks.

The potential impact of broader touch points like store design, staff behaviour, POS, sponsorship or PR is well-known, and a successful MNP metric will be one that provides us with means of comparing such dynamic and ambient channels to conventional advertising techniques. For instance, juice bar brand Boost built its brand with enormous success through an integrated approach to POS graphics, store layout and the behaviour of its staff. Paid-for media has only joined the mix very recently.

In fact, within MNP-speak, the term 'media' clearly refers to a much broader definition than that traditionally used by media planners (i.e. those working exclusively within the confines of specific media assets like TV or newspapers). When we speak of 'media' in an MNP context, the word encompasses people, place, product (and quite possibly price), as well as promotion. In an attempt to clear up this confusion, the MNP Best Practice Group has suggested that a new term 'Open Planning' be used to describe the process – thus returning the word 'media' to those specialist planners from whence it came.

Whether such terminology will be widely adopted remains to be seen, but I think it is certainly worth considering.

MNP – or Open Planning – is still in its early development, and there is no fully comprehensive 'how to' guide at this stage. All of us are still feeling our way, and until a fully-fledged media neutral metric is adopted, intra-media comparison will be tricky and implementation won't be easy. But there are immediate advantages for those of us who acknowledge the benefits of an unbiased planning approach. Not least of these is an increased awareness of the traps and pitfalls that history and habit have laid for us and, one hopes, a greater willingness to challenge, experiment and consider new ways of working. But for those who successfully adopt MNP, the greatest reward of all awaits: increased effectiveness. ■