Is Data Killing Creativity?

Are data insights helping to push more innovative, thought-provoking marketing? Or is something getting lost in the process?
Data analytics and insights are an integral part of the modern marketing program. But what impact is the data-driven campaign having on the creative process? Are data insights helping push more innovative, stimulating marketing? Or is something getting lost in the process?

To take a pulse on how those in the trenches view and resolve the challenge, we posed the following question to several leading industry thought leaders:

How does the use of data and analytics impact creativity in marketing campaigns — positively or negatively?

Specifically, we were interested in learning where they see data and analytics as having the most positive impact, as well as where the dangers lie. What can marketers do to avoid data analytics overwhelming creative?

The trick, to borrow a turn of phrase from Vivek Bapat, SVP, global head of marketing strategy and thought leadership at SAP, is not to “get lost in the numbers” and “get caught up in analysis-paralysis.”

And to not forget, as John Slocum, audience platform product management director at MediaMath, reminds, “Creative advertising is designed to evoke excitement, lust, envy, love, sadness, laughter, and many other emotions.”

The nine respondents weighing in on the discussion include CMOs, data scientists, CEOs, and creatives. Along with providing big picture insights to the data-creativity question, also offered are actionable insights to ensure your data gathering efforts are aiding in promoting creativity, not wiping it off the campaign trail.
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Chief growth officer  
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Vivek Bapat  
SVP, global head of marketing strategy and thought leadership  
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Businesses love to capitalize on market imperfections. Today’s gap between the data haves and have-nots is the widest it’s ever been. So the current arms race to embed data, analytics, and artificial intelligence is a wonderful opportunity to drive growth. But we can already begin to see that as every company builds data and programmatic capabilities, this corporate drug is starting to lose its efficacy. The marketplace will level out rapidly, regaining its equilibrium and reducing any competitive advantage.

Brands that solely follow this efficiency paradigm will quickly find themselves on a downward spiral as customers disengage from prescriptive, lifeless content. We’ve already seen that the technical constraints of mobile phone screens and limited voice commands has had a reductive impact on visual, tactile, and aural expression of brands. Memes; “Swipe left”; “OK, Google.” It’s neither Balzac nor Picasso.

Only outstanding creativity can provide a robust enough foil to the logic of the machine. It comes back to the necessity for powerful ideas. Imagination, emotions, the random vivacity of life — these are the things that truly persuade people to engage and buy. To be successful, these need to begin in the world of consumers, not the corporation. Only ideas rooted in culture can emotionally connect and engage people, and far better than those that are derived as the result of logic. They provide depth, texture, and interest in place of precision, order, and process.

Of course, there is hope and green shoots: The creative rise of text language or emojis is a refreshing way to overcome digital constraints. Crowdsourcing and user-generated content can be refreshing and inspirational. But outsourcing idea generation to your consumer is not a long-term growth strategy.

By all means, sharpen and connect the pipeline; but snub creativity at your peril.

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Marketing is no longer about what brands want to say about themselves — it’s about what customers say to others about their experiences with brands. Since experiences define the brand, marketers need to stop thinking of marketing campaigns as transactional and as having discrete stops and starts. Rather, they need to think of campaigns as continuous, always-on journeys they take with their customers.

Data is traditionally used for deeper insights to better segment and reach customers — this is the science of marketing. The better use of data is to augment and infuse it with creativity to create inspiring journeys — that is the art of marketing.

On average, marketers use 12 different tools to collect, manage, and deploy marketing data — and some marketers use more than 30 different tools on a regular basis. With the plethora of data sources available, it’s easy to get lost in the numbers. Often, teams get so mired in data, they get caught up in analysis-paralysis.

Fortunately, with advances in AI and machine learning, marketers can not only obtain precise inputs on an individual’s past preferences, but also predict “in-the-moment” desires. This means marketers will need to go from a macro segmentation campaign model to personalized, micro segmentation campaign models across a wide variety of channels. Therefore, creative thinking, emotion, point of view, storytelling, and human connections will need to be redefined to create a new social contract with the audience.

“The better use of data is to augment and infuse it with human creativity to create inspiring journeys — that is the art of marketing”

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Being data-driven can quickly lead to being data-obsessed. The now infamous story of hyper-personalized ads for expecting mothers leading to targeting pregnant teens is a cautionary tale of the result of removing the human element.

That isn’t to say the creative process should run unfettered, but analytics plus creative equals exponential value when data is applied at the beginning of the process as inspiration, and then captured as measurement to feed the next cycle. To unleash that potential:

**Integrate non-traditional data into the structured data**
Companies get tripped up trying to add qualitative data into their processes because it doesn't fit nicely into existing models. A bias toward structured data means missed opportunities.

Marketing is about empathy and stirring customer emotions — that comes from more than data. To overcome that bias, find ways to quantify the qualitative. Additionally, add capabilities to your marketing stack that let you turn non-structured data into measurable insights.

**Break down organizational silos**
Too often, strategist and analyst work independently with requests being pitched over the fence. Bring analysts into the planning process, improving insights with better understanding of assumptions and hypotheses. Similarly, have creative teams work iteratively during analysis to refocus analysts on the most valuable findings. A side benefit of this process is cross-pollination of skills and building of mutual respect.

**Make the process repeatable**
Every company or agency I’ve worked with that succeeds in data-driven creativity is dogmatic in its approach. Following the same sequence of steps ensures consistent data sources are considered, the balance of creative and quantitative is maintained, and more time is spent on insight to action than on data quality and analysis.

Overall, creative brings a cohesive story to data-driven marketing, providing messaging that can be personalized to smaller audiences. Use data to inspire creative and creativity to direct better analytics.
Advertising is theater. Often, it’s a smaller stage and shorter production. But like theater, creative advertising is designed to evoke excitement, lust, envy, love, sadness, laughter, and many other emotions. Theater productions are commonly dreamed, inspired, conceived and performed by artists with knowledge of the human condition, drawing upon experience, observation and familiarity to connect with audiences. Theater feedback is swift, candid, and direct. Creative advertising feedback is the same, and most readily available via data and analytics.

Data and analytics guide creativity in marketing analytics. Audience personas reveal audience interests, behaviors, and demographics. Audience conversion and activity data are used to predict propensity. Data might be the canvas or stage to which creativity is applied. Data steers creativity, grounds it, and gives it focus.

Like creating a space for innovation in tech, creativity in marketing requires the freedom to take chances, to be wrong, and to pivot. Data helps us do this faster. There is no formula for inspiration, but knowledge of a space can help us fill that space with meaningful experiences. Knowledge of an audience can help us connect. Knowledge of response is feedback on the process. Freedom to respond to that feedback breeds creativity.

Caution: Data can’t tell us everything. It can’t replace common sense, taste, or creativity. A passionate response can be either good or bad for a campaign. As marketers, sometimes we take risks that data doesn’t support. Choose risks, but choose them wisely. Just be sure to watch your (feed) back.
Data and analytics can have overwhelmingly positive impacts on marketing campaigns. Negative impacts typically result from inexperience or misunderstanding, rather than a reflection of the true relationship between data and creativity. In reality, the ability to A/B test the performance of different creative campaigns means that creative teams can better understand what resonates with their target audience and then constantly iterate for better, more engaging campaigns.

Starting a campaign design with a clear intention to optimize based on data, and sharing initial key performance indicator goals with your creative team, empowers them to design with laser focus. Your initial revision cycles will be shortened and conversely, your first run more effective.

As soon as you establish a consistent pattern of optimization and data-driven design, you’ll have an ever-increasing (and improving) library of insights upon which to build future campaigns.

Establishing clear and definitive goals for a campaign before design and copy is essential for a data-driven marketing campaign. It’s easy to say “we need to announce a feature” or “let’s send a newsletter” without methodically outlining where campaign traffic will go, what the CTA is for the reader, or from a broader perspective, what success means to your brand. Does success mean an impressive number of landing page views, or is it product activation? Brand awareness is a great goal, but it’s key to determine early on which KPIs matter for your organization.

Other dangers lie in putting the full burden of success on creative, when there are other factors that contribute to your brand’s campaign performance. For instance, if you’re measuring click-throughs from an email to a landing page, there are more factors that could influence how much or how little readers engage. In the mobile-driven world of today, your end user may be in transit and not want to click through embedded links while on the go.

Avoid the trap of giving one campaign the responsibility to serve many masters; instead, maintain a focused message to achieve realistic goals.

Set one main KPI for each channel in your campaign. For example, the goal for an email drip campaign could be engagement rate, while the goal for a landing page could be completing a lead magnet form. With one clear objective per channel, your creative team can focus on making designs that get results.

To avoid overwhelming your creative team with data, it’s important to establish one clear objective for a campaign.

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"To avoid overwhelming your creative team with data, it’s important to establish one clear objective for a campaign."
Data is extremely important in helping brand marketers identify key business opportunities. Yet sometimes we get lost in the myriad of data we’re provided and fall short from developing the most out-of-the-box ideas for our brands. Sure, data helps marketers understand the potential as it relates to the target audience’s behavior, brand susceptibility, and effectiveness of reach. But does it impact the creative process? Absolutely.

In the old days, you would be asked to join a creative brainstorm and it was all about “let’s put ideas on the wall to see what sticks.” The challenge was clear: come up with something that was fun, unique, creative, and engaging that would efficiently showcase the product and get people talking around the water cooler the next morning. Now, creative brainstorms start with insights, data, and numbers that naturally sway the creative juices to point toward something that the data will accept. It changes the creative approach from “sky’s the limit” to “what will work.”

But it’s not as gloomy a picture as one would imagine. The data, when used correctly, can also be a great opportunity. Marketers need to separate creative concepting and data into two separate meetings.

First, brainstorm and allow all creative ideas to percolate. Let people ideate around the expected, the off the wall, the never been done before. Once you have a good list of ideas, bring in the data as an overlay and see what remains, effectively providing you with a win-win concept that fulfills your creative juices and hits the numbers. So dream big, and back it up with numbers. ■

“Creative brainstorms start with insights, data, and numbers that naturally sway the creative juices to point toward something that the data will accept”

Sandy Rubinstein
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Done right, data and analytics act like a road map for design and give marketers a more personalized, relevant message platform. Creative should act as a lens through which prospects see that message to guide their eye to the most impactful, relevant statements and benefits. The two should complement each other, with data helping select the message presented and creative drawing the eye to that message.

The biggest danger with this formula is when the equilibrium between data and design is off balance. If creative takes center stage, the data points that could attract a prospect may be entirely hidden within the piece, making it ineffective. Creative is fantastic, but it doesn’t do anything if the messaging isn’t there to sell the product.

If there are too many data points, the piece can go into big brother territory and be a major turn-off to any prospect. When data is overused, such as arbitrarily using the prospect’s name in the piece, the piece may seem impersonal instead of handcrafted or exclusive.

The best thing a team can do to avoid an imbalance is create a hierarchy of data points and focus on two or three to feature within the creative to make sure the piece isn’t overwhelmed by data. Then, place those message points where they can make the most impact — sidebars, bullet points, and images are all great places to start.

This ensures that data is highlighted by the creative without overwhelming the piece.
Data and analytics are a touchy thing in the marketing world, and there is a definite sweet spot for their use. On the positive, campaigns now have a solid way to measure their short-term efficacy. Creative is now being held to an objective standard instead of it “feeling” right.

Data also allows many iterations of creative to be tested with a small sample to ascertain where the majority of your advertising dollars should be responsibly spent. Data has forced marketers and creatives to be more responsible. Now there is an indicator of success of more than just “impression count” and top-line revenue.

This is where it can get dangerous, though. Data is only as powerful as the person translating it. Take for example my conversation with a marketer of a very large brand (which happens to be severely declining). She was adamant about the fact that Facebook advertising isn’t very good.

I drilled into the detail and came to find out she believed in only attributing one day of sales after someone clicked a Facebook ad. As in the person had 24 hours from the first time he or she was introduced to the brand to convert, or the brand didn’t attribute that as a return on its spend.

This is frankly ludicrous, because with their average cart being around $150, we knew their purchase cycle was around two months. This means it takes the average person from the first impression about two months to actually buy. So the “data” was telling them they were making no money on Facebook, but that’s only because the person looking at the data didn’t know what he was doing.

So data can be very powerful, but make sure you are looking at it the right way, and always leave room for benefits and aspects the data doesn’t cover.
Data and analytics are probably the most significant tools available to marketers today. Marketing is all about connecting with people and fostering meaningful relationships. As the digital noise becomes louder, marketers turn to creativity to cut through that noise. Decisions to interact or abandon, to buy or bounce, are made based on the digital experience offered on sites and therefore, the understanding and optimization of these experiences have become crucial for a brand’s success.

In previous years, marketers could measure the effect of their creativity by simply watching the reaction of the audience. This direct dialogue with their customers enabled them to shape the next campaign and initiative.

In today’s digital era, analytics step in as the missing piece of our online dialogue. With the right data and analytics, we can see how the audience is reacting to our platforms and campaigns and get the feedback we need to understand if we are doing things right or wrong. Understanding the customer is the key to planning and executing optimizations, and this is unlocked with data that can reveal not only what a customer is doing online, but how and why.

Not all data is smart data, however. Having to go through endless dashboards is not only time consuming, but also overwhelming. When data and analytics are delivered not as stats, but as actionable insights, they become a powerful tool to success. We use artificial intelligence and machine learning to understand exactly what is happening and why on a digital platform, and communicate it to marketing teams as visual information everyone on their team can understand and act on. Information is only valuable if you know what to do with it in order to reach your goals, and if it can fuel your creativity and drive results.

By digitally listening to your audience, you can create captivating online campaigns that will connect to people, create meaningful relationships, and bring in the ROI expected of today’s marketers. So be creative. Just be ready to optimize based on the digital feedback you receive.

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