

Ad Technology and New Research



Planning and Social Evolution

An Interview with Alan Izenman,
Senior Vice President, Digital

An Interview with Catherine Boera,
Senior Vice President, Director of Communications Planning



Alan Izenman

EDITORS' NOTE Alan Izenman has more than a decade of experience on both the publisher and agency side of the media business, working with companies like Traffix, Inc., a DR-focused company, as well as their owned and operated SEM company Sendtraffic, and affiliate marketing company, Rocket Profit. He brings his passion for helping marketers grow their business and optimize the lifetime value of customer relationships to every engagement.

How has Active been growing its product offering and what role has partnering with best-in-class technology, media, and start-up companies played in regard to that?

The product offering, especially digitally, has expanded exponentially. Over the past five years, we have doubled our revenues. From 2009 to 2010, we were up over 100 percent; from 2010 to 2011, we were up another 100 percent; and it has been about 50 percent from there on out.

We have been eliminating the financial risk of trying to build things from scratch in house by partnering with best-in-class partners both on the technology and the media side.

Based on this strategy, we're able to provide all of the cutting-edge, digital solutions that any top digital agency can provide outside of search, which we can provide but don't regularly include in our product offering. Given the way that data cuts the dynamic cash-based marketplace, it's hard to apply corporate trade to the search model.

Are there competitors to your model?

We're exceptionally ahead of the pack. While there are other corporate trade or barter companies that offer digital media, it's nowhere near the scope of the things we do.

For example, with online video, Online Campaign Ratings (OCR) was recently released by Nielsen but not many agencies or advertisers were buying on an OCR basis because it wasn't truly vetted out. We were one of the first large-scale buyers on an OCR basis for one of our packaged goods clients.

Video is an extremely big growth area for us. Three years ago, it was 23 percent of our revenue in digital and now it's 50 percent.

We also do collaborative planning on the digital side with many of our clients' agencies as we are able to allow the agency to accomplish much more with fewer resources. This arrangement works pretty well for all, especially the client.

Where is the market today with regard to mobile, and do you have to be cautious in terms of investing in that arena?

When it comes to investing in mobile for video and streaming audio, it's a no-brainer. This is a result of the unbelievable rate of adoption of tablets in the marketplace. Consumers mainly use these devices for watching video and streaming audio, so these are the places to make the bets.

When it comes to near field communication and WAP banners, I'm not currently bullish on those investments because WAP banners, for example, have a high click-through rate but the majority of that comes from people who don't realize they're clicking on it or who are just curious to see what will happen on their screen. I don't believe in the return on those yet.

But if you're trying to drive calls to a call center, I'm a big believer in click-to-call on phones because of the immediacy. I also appreciate the ability to handle payment transactions through your mobile phone, as well as mobile applications that provide an enhancement to the lives of your customers; this simplifies their experience with your brand, and engages them. ●



Catherine Boera

EDITORS' NOTE Catherine Boera brings 15 years of strategic communication planning experience in traditional and digital media to Active. Her expertise runs the communication gamut – consumer, digital, social, and experiential – and a wide array of clients including Ford Motor Company, Chiquita, and AT&T.

Would you provide an overview of your efforts at Active?

I head the Strategic Planning team and we focus on helping our clients who need assistance developing their communication strategy to better reach their consumers.

Our offering varies; we provide full planning and research for some clients. For others, we work with their agency to provide supplemental research or insights, or help with new tools where they might not yet have the expertise.

In those specific cases, are you seen as a partner to those agencies?

We're seen as a resource to the client and the agency. There are a number of agencies I'm working with now who don't have social or digital expertise. We provide research and insight and, in turn, help them gain knowledge since it's not an area of competency for them. We share the goal of providing the best results to the client and since we offer unique services, it works really well.

How far has social progressed in terms of overall planning?

Just as we look at the traditional media, digital and PR as communication touch points, social is just another avenue to engage the consumer.

There is still a lot of learning and work to be done in the area. Most companies have to realize that social is a dialogue; it provides an opportunity to have back and forth communication with an audience in a seamless and scalable way that has not been available before.

Companies have preconceived notions about what they think consumers want from a brand. Social allows them to learn from their consumers and provides a way for consumers to voice their opinion about a particular brand, and share their experience with the brand and their social sphere.

They also need to be aware of the difference between earned social and paid social: earned social involves your social discussion on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and gives you the ability to have a dialogue without a great deal of expense. Paid social is growing significantly in terms of the dollars being applied to it because of the highly targeted environment it provides.

Finally, brands need to understand that supporting this function requires resources and buy-in from management. In order for it to be successful, it really can't be an add-on to someone's job, and some industries are further along than others in their approach. For example, the hospitality industry is making investments to answer the demands of travelers. Other industries, such as package goods, have a range of involvement and investment.

How do your clients best apply your expertise in media research?

Media strategy has historically been guided by consumer research. The growth of digital platforms has fueled the increase of the amount and accuracy of available consumer data. Improvements in tools to synthesize the data are forcing planners and buyers to become research experts.

Our expertise is in balancing the art and science of applying the insights gained from the data. The analytics that we receive from the digital world, when applied appropriately, allow us to buy the right media and optimize it as needed.

How do you imagine it will evolve in the future?

The data and the technology are going to move forward toward continuous customization for the consumer.

The power of making messages relevant to what is going on in a customer's life will change how we look at advertising. How quickly we get there depends on how fast people embrace available technology (i.e. Smart TVs) and how that technology evolves, including the supporting infrastructure. ●