

ADVERTISING

The Ad World's Message For 2005: Stealth

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O consumer, where art thou? The search for the increasingly elusive shopper, buyer and browser will drive marketers in 2005. But whether the ad world's strategies are nimble enough to capture them remains an open question.

If marketers learned one key point over the past year, it is that reaching consumers by traditional means -- TV, magazines and newspapers -- is getting harder.

American spenders are moving targets. They are seeking information from a broader range of sources than ever and, in the process, filtering out messages that don't resonate or speak to their specific needs.

Advertisers are trying to crack the code of this new reality, even as they mourn the days when network television advertising and other time-honored alternatives were simple, plug-and-play choices. Here are the five areas that Madison Avenue will most likely grapple with in 2005.

Going Wireless

Increasingly, the consumer's best friend -- the thing he or she interacts with most -- is a portable gadget. Such things as the BlackBerry, iPod and cellphone are intimate, techy devices that have the potential to catch on-the-go consumers at the perfect moment for them to make a buying decision. Or to annoy the heck out of them. [General Electric](#) Co.'s NBC Universal is already broadcasting about 18 to 20 video news reports designed especially for cellphones to certain [Sprint](#) Corp. customers, and it is planning to extend to entertainment broadcasts. Another opportunity: American teens are moving closer to their overseas peers in using cellphones for things like picture sharing and text messaging.



As the mobile phone becomes more of a multitasker -- to surf the Web, watch TV and get text information -- distinctions between various media platforms start to blur. Marketers used to allocating separate

Drug makers may shy away from TV ads like this spot for Vioxx and explore more low-key pitches.

budgets to print, television and the Internet may have to think differently. They also may also seek marketing deals with controllers of electronic devices and designers of software that help consumers organize their electronic media and entertainment choices.

The Collection Box

With old-fashioned metrics such as newspaper circulation and TV ratings coming under increased scrutiny, marketers are seeking new ways to gather data on the audiences for their promotions. And finally, after years of unfulfilled promise, the TV set-top box is getting ready for prime time.

Media buyers believe set-top boxes have the potential to give more-exact audience measurements than ever before -- better than consumer panels and sample groups. A hot spot in advertising circles these days is addressable cable technology, a mouthful that can deliver messages tailored to specific zip codes and neighborhoods. As couch potatoes use their cable boxes to watch on-demand movies, for instance, these habits can be monitored, too.

Although advertisers fear the growth of digital video recorders and the potential for consumers to skip commercials, set-top boxes are a way to keep track of who is zapping ads -- and perhaps figure ways to get them to stop.

Getting to Know You...

With audiences more fragmented and jaded than ever, marketers need to cozy up to consumers in individual situations, with ads that are tailored for particular individuals, not the world at large. Mass marketing isn't going away, but one-to-one marketing is becoming a Madison Avenue obsession.

But the key to this technique is gathering personal information, which raises sticky questions about personal privacy. [Eli Lilly](#) & Co. came under fire about three years ago after it mistakenly gave out confidential information about nearly 700 patients who had signed up for a Prozac medication reminder service. Another such incident could put this issue back in the spotlight and generate calls for new protections.

A Bitter Pill

As recent problems with painkillers such as [Merck](#) & Co.'s Vioxx and [Pfizer](#) Inc.'s Celebrex show, the pharmaceutical ad boom is in danger of going off its meds. Direct-to-consumer advertising of drugs is still in its relative infancy, and consumers already are chafing at ads featuring cartoon characters, rhymes and jingles that seem to sell medicine as if it were pizza or soda. Pharmaceutical manufacturers may begin to pursue subtler approaches. Already, Pfizer has retained William Morris Agency to explore possible opportunities in movies and TV shows.

The Opt-In Option

Marketing maneuvers that engage, rather than intrude, are starting to stand out. A well-received example this year was [Target](#) Corp.'s preholiday effort in which customers registered to get wake-up calls on "Black Friday" from one of a number of kooky characters.

If marketers can get consumers to expend energy by engaging them before they get a sales pitch, then the battle is three-quarters won. In the months ahead, look for more "invitational"

commercials that ask consumers to click to a Web site, send a text message or e-mail, offer an opinion, or follow up in some other manner that prompts involvement. These moves can be tracked, and the information they provide filed away for future reference.