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THE INSIDE LINE ON WIRELESS MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

Mobilizing Globally Means Thinking Locally
by Steve Smith , Thursday, July 31, 2008

MOBILE MYTHOLOGY SUGGESTS THAT ALL Europe and Asia are far, far ahead of the U.S. in their mobile technology and media evolution. International case studies hold up examples of sophisticated marketing programs that seem years ahead of familiar mobile campaigns here. Like most mythologies, this one has a grain of truth that we tend to extrapolate into broad maxims and conventional wisdom.

But as increasingly border-less brands start deploying programs internationally, mobile mythology could lead to costly misfires. Even a cursory look at M:Metrics monthly benchmarks of international mobile data uptake shows some vast difference among geographic neighbors. In April, 10.2% of UK mobile customers played a downloaded game, compared to 4.4% in France. Likewise, the level of tolerance and/or exposure to the dominant form of mobile marketing, SMS messaging, is wildly varied. In Spain, 72.5% of users received an SMS ad of some kind in April, while only 28.5% of Germans did.



"People make blanket statements that Europe is more sophisticated -- but without any data," says Michael Foschetti, managing director, interactive and mobile, Mobisix, a mobile marketing strategy firm. "There is a range within Europe in technology and [ad] receptivity. There are big differences, especially on receptivity." Mobisix recently aggregated and analyzed worldwide data on receptivity to advertising, phone penetration, usage levels, and feature use and came up with some fascinating, counterintuitive insights about local nuance.

The Mobisix research confirms some old canards, of course. "The U.S. is the least advanced and the least receptive," says Foschetti. When it comes to SMS advertising, less than 20% of us report receiving one, according to M:Metrics. But other pieces are less obvious. For instance, technological sophistication does not translate into advertising receptivity, Mobisix argues. Much of Mexico, Southern Latin America and Brazil are the least developed in mobile technology adoption -- but they are far and away more accepting of mobile advertising. Japan, in fact, is not that high on the mobile adoption scale and its acceptance of ads on handsets is only average. Most of the Eastern and far northern European nations have very high mobile adoption rates but

are only about as ad-tolerant as Japan. Italy and Hong Kong represent the global sweet spot, high levels of technical sophistication and acceptance of the ad model.

The numbers have clear implications for global mobile media planning. Global is actually very local. Latin America and Italy could be very promising areas for aggressive marketing campaigns that might backfire in the U.S. or France. "Market segmentation must be a top priority," says Foschetti. "We believe receptivity trumps technology adoption by a significant factor."

Which is to say also that mobile platforms are shaped as much by cultural environment as they are by technology. Technology adoption (Web, TV, radio, mobile) may be inevitable globally, but the shape they take is quite local. Anthropologists have known this for a long time, and a handful of us in the digital world banged this same drum a decade ago during the rise of the Internet. Technologies (and the media layered onto them) succeed in a market only when the culture finds a proper way to configure it. Marketers really need to understand how a local segment uses mobile and look beyond mere penetration rates and network speeds. This takes trial and error and real brand strategy -- not just "getting into mobile."

But it gets even more complicated than that. Once your brand figures out how to leverage mobile within a given context, then you need to layer onto that local equation what level of permission an individual brand has here. Is it trusted with a user's phone number, address, or buying habits in this environment? That, too, can be variable.

I am a big believer in the notion that mobile platforms will teach us things about the one-to-one marketing process and even about our brand's real health in the market that other platforms can't. If this is an intimate medium that will be permission-based at every turn, then here is where the "relationship" between brands and their customers really get tested. Giving up your cell phone number is materially different from giving up your email. Agreeing to take regular SMS messages from a corporate entity is a different calculation from signing up for another email newsletter.

Brand managers have to determine whether their brand strength can carry the program for different populations in a global campaign. Mobile programs like Sprite's "The Yard" community can flourish elsewhere and fall flat, as it did, in the U.S. For the life of me, I can't understand why anyone wants to be part of a Sprite online community. But what do I know? I am just an American -- who doesn't much like green and yellow anyway.

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Contributing writer Steve Smith is a lapsed academic who saw the light, bolted the University and spent the last decade as a digital media critic and consultant. He is chair and programmer of OMMA Mobile and OMMA Behavioral conferences from Mediapost and is the Digital Media Editor at Media Industry Newsletter (MIN) from Access Intelligence. Contact him at popeyesmith@comcast.net.

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