



What Is Hegelian Dialectic?

By Carl Langrock
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This is the first in a series on ideas, tools and processes for buying direct response media. My goal is to give you a new view for turning trends to your advantage. As a vendor to a broad section of buying groups, I have the advantage of seeing how different teams move the ball. To kick off this series, I want to start with an idea that seems to have nothing to do with media. The idea speaks to how we might use new information to develop better outcomes.



This may be the only column in Electronic Retailer magazine that begins with a brief on the Hegelian Dialectic. When it was introduced in the 19th century, Georg Hegel sparked a revolution in thought process. The revolution was so powerful that his dialectic underlies most political discourse in the world today (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delphi_method). I want to help you apply his dialectic to benefit your business. It's easy. It's fun. It's short.

THE TRIANGLE

Dialectic is a practice of arriving at truth through an exchange of ideas. In short, the Hegelian Dialectic is distilled to a triangle: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The thesis is an initial statement of how things work. The antithesis is a contradictory view. The synthesis is a new view resolving the contradictions between the two prior views. I find this process very useful in solving real world problems or in getting to the next step in a negotiation (that's what the Delphi method is about). If you look for them, you might find examples of the dialectic all around you. Did you ever hear a media buyer have a conversation like...

Buyer: This schedule isn't working. You need to bring the rate down.

Rep: We're at the bottom of the rate card. I can't go any lower.

Synthesis: If we broaden a rotation, move some spots around, change a daypart, add some bonus units, it will work.

Together: Ahhh!

OK. So what does all this western philosophy stuff have to do with you and me? Think of it this way:

Thesis: Traditional direct response. The goal is to generate leads or sales, at the most efficient cost, through an immediate call to action.

Antithesis: Traditional brand advertising. The goal is to build sales by building brand recognition, as well as by reaching a targeted audience frequently enough to be effective.

Synthesis: Combine the tools of DR and brand advertising. Place campaigns that generate sales and build the brand efficiently, with an immediately measurable ROI.

Together: Ahhh!

Are worlds colliding? Is this madness? Does it produce a monster? Can it work? Does a lizard sell car insurance?

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

I used to be the media research guy at a large brand agency. Back then, I wrote white papers explaining the basis for effective frequency, why it worked and how we modeled it. During my research, I uncovered an article that was an antithesis to effective frequency. I don't remember the author's name, but the article was timeless. His point: Effective frequency is humbug! Some people are ready to take action after a single exposure. Some people are never ready to take action. And why does three always seem to be the magic number for effective frequency? Is it one for the money, two for the show, three to get ready...? Should the magic number be four? Why isn't it two... or seven?

...if the goal is to build the brand, using traditional reach targeting can add some efficiency in planning a plateau. Does it work? Are packaged goods companies buying more DR than ever before?

Now that I'm in a different role, I take the counter-position. Direct response buys, not based on the reach/frequency theory, build brand recognition efficiently. They have the added benefit of immediately measurable ROI. How do we know this? How did Ron Popeil become a household word?

Here's where Hegel comes in. Perhaps the best method for buying is a synthesis of the two approaches. In a pure DR buy, you might keep buying as long as the cost per action is acceptable. But maybe, if the goal is to build the brand, using traditional reach targeting can add some efficiency in planning a plateau. Does it work? Are packaged goods companies buying more DR than ever before?

What if we turn it around? Can testing programs based on demo ratings help us roll out more efficiently? Is there a correlation between demographics and buying behavior? What if you overlay qualitative research from MRI, Scarborough or Claritas? Can traditional reach/frequency models of commercial wear-out help you plan creative changes? Does it work? A lot of successful brands are built this way. And some are running through DR shops.

Adding these tools to the DR buying discipline has a lot to offer. And leveraging these tools can lead to tremendous growth. And that brings me back to the "trends" I mentioned earlier.

I've seen many articles on new school DR, old school DR and hybrid DR. Now it's time for a pop quiz: Who are the top direct response advertisers? Magic Bullet and Tempur-Pedic? Enzyte, Total Gym and Proactiv Solution? Or how about Dell, Ditech, Geico or P&G?

Big brand advertisers, those that traditionally build their brands through targeted reach and frequency campaigns, are buying direct response. And lots of it. And it's working. So they're buying more. That's good for the agencies that have these big brand clients. But their presence has driven up media costs substantially. That's bad for many traditional DR shops.

The interesting thing is many of the people buying DR time for those big brand advertisers have a traditional direct response pedigree. They've synthesized the tools of brand advertising with the DR discipline to show results for their large brand clients.

What's your road to growth? Can the tools of hybrid direct response help your business? What other new tools are available for traditional direct response agencies? That's what I'll talk about in future columns, with the help of other experts in both traditional DR and brand advertising.

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