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The Hot Topics Driving Interactive for Autos



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Jumpstart Automotive Media's VP of product development recaps the big concerns auto marketers expressed during last week's Driving Interactive Summit.

When I was asked to moderate a panel on "Hot Topics" at the Driving Interactive '07 event in Dearborn, Mich., I thought to myself, there's really no beginning or end to a conversation about hot topics these days. No matter what I covered, there would clearly be major subjects that would be passed over. Let's face it, there's only so much you can cram into an hour.

So let me start by mentioning what *wasn't* covered on this panel. I assure you that you'll be shocked at some of the abandoned topics:

- Mobile marketing (which I had to cut because we ran out of time!)
- Google's purchase of DoubleClick
- Ad networks' role in automotive
- Behavioral targeting
- Consumer-generated media
- Online ad exchanges
- Late creative (which was discussed in a later panel)
- Search engine marketing
- Interactive TV/VOD
- ... and the list goes on and on.

What we did cover, however, proved to be highly engaging and informative. Panelists Kevin Brown, senior partner and managing director at Ford Motor Media; Mary Carpenter, president of strategy and operations at GM Planworks and Robin Cooper, VP of advertising and business development at KBB.com provided enlightening feedback and banter about some vital topics affecting the automotive business today and in the future.

Funnel fever

For the first topic, we decided to take a dive right into the proverbial "purchase funnel," a term that is readily used and abused by automotive marketers and publishers alike. The panelists agreed that the funnel creates a linear notion of the automotive shopping path that isn't necessarily a reality anymore, but that can still be an effective tool to frame and demonstrate the varying levels of consideration in the auto shopping process.

Cooper alluded to "blowing up the funnel," highlighting the fact that 79 percent of KBB.com visitors have not yet made a make/model decision.

Tier 2: a significant shift

If you're in any way involved with automotive online advertising, you've certainly been exposed to much of

the hype about the burgeoning budgets of Tier 2 advertisers (a.k.a. regional dealer associations). Well, believe the hype, because it's truly a reality, and it's coming down on all aspects of the digital medium.

Now that Tier 2 marketers have realized the need to go digital, the management and complexity that goes into the execution of online marketing plans for typically 50 to 200+ regions (depending on the advertiser) is something most publishers, marketers and their agencies are unequipped to handle today.

Cooper commented that the advent of Tier 2 media buys on KBB.com created an operational nightmare, and that their ad operations department exhibited a 7000 percent increase in workload due to this infusion of new marketers.

Brown stated that it's difficult to manage the current growth of Tier 1 media that exists, let alone Tier 2. He noted that Ford's regional budgets will increase by at least four times in the next year.

Shallow pool

When discussing the search for talent in the digital advertising medium, Carpenter made it clear that it's difficult to train and maintain employees in this highly competitive environment. GM Planworks is committed to various levels and degrees of training, and Carpenter states that training is an absolute necessity given the complexities of the digital medium.

Brown joked that in Detroit it's a continuous three-way battle for good people between the agencies representing Ford, Daimler-Chrysler and General Motors.

Cooper maintains that there is such a shortage of quality candidates that the amount of time it takes to find, recruit and ultimately woo a candidate is extremely taxing on their business.

Pontiac, part II

The always intriguing Second Life proved to be a topic of great interest among our panel, especially for Carpenter. GM's Pontiac brand launched a land mass on Second Life in the fourth quarter of 2006 called Motorati Island. Carpenter commented that Pontiac's Second Life experience has been positive to date, and represents the kind of progressive thinking that the Pontiac brand traditionally maintains.

Brown called Pontiac's move "very smart," and remarked that this type of innovative thinking won't necessarily turn their business around, but is an opportunity to be a first-mover presence in an untapped area.

To close the discussion, each panelist was asked what is the hottest topic affecting their business today.

Cooper simply stated, "Tier 2."

Brown mentioned the idea of engagement and the impact it will have on all future marketing initiatives, regardless of the medium.

Carpenter finds that technology solutions and hiring enough of the right people are the greatest challenges for GM Planworks today. The ability to create technology solutions that will enable them to be more efficient as a company was another of her primary concerns. Carpenter was also resolute about the fact that GM Planworks is hiring, and is looking for people to fill a variety of positions.

Though the conversation went over an hour, we probably could have spend more than three hours discussing the complexities of all these issues. The panelists were candid and informative, which made for an excellent panel.

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