



TO quote from one of the articles of *Business World*, "You could call it the T word in advertising today. Stick around any meeting involving advertisers, agencies and the media, and sooner or later, the word crops up. The word Transparency, short for the whole question of all agencies dealing with their clients and the media. Agencies are accused of making substantial savings in media buying which are not passed to the clients, thus earning for more than their legitimate 15 per cent conversion." Few are promising to invite clients to auditing of books.

Media audit is still carried individually, in part by different agencies in different ways e.g. by ratings according to billing / launches / successful campaigns / type of clients etc. So the need of the hour is to give a shape and direction to all these useful efforts carried out by different groups. And like any job it can be started by giving a proper name, may be "Media Audit".

Media Audit is a feature of good advertising management practice. Media audit can be defined as a tool comprising of how well media management team and equipment are performing. In essence, media audit is a process of detecting waste of resources and media damage that can be avoided in any media related activity.

It is not surprising to see the increase in interest in audit during the time of economic recession (There is a school of thought which considers audit as a "cost without benefit").

Media audit is not a totally new concept but it is a brand new practice. While the trend will be to increase auditing efforts, the challenge will be to maximize the value of these audit programme. Today in India few (or none) agencies, professionals and professional bodies are in a position to claim the ability to perform media audit. Few of these might be in the process of developing and refining the scope and content of any media audit.

The professionals / agencies / client will have noticeably different perception of what on media audit should comprise, who should carry it out, and how the results should be made use of. These role players will / might soon be joined by one more, namely the consumer. That will add new dimensions to the expectations from the practice of media audit.

If one compares a media audit with a financial audit, both are:

- an activity of verification of records
- a comparison of outputs with expectations
- an assessment of avoidable errors and waste

The financial audit is mostly a "Post-Mortem" activity where the faults in the system are located. It provides a check on the activities audited.

The media audit is a "Pro-Active" activity which apart from faults, weak areas in the system are identified and measures undertaken for improving overall



Illustration by SHYAMAL BANERJEE

Make Room for Media Audit

productivity of the media department as well as the agency.

Designing and implementing audit programme

In agencies managing a large number of accounts, it is preferable to appoint an audit programme manager who does not carry out audits but is responsible for providing a focused and cost effective audit programme. A level of independence from the auditing activity itself will help

to ensure the credibility of the scheme (both externally and internally), focus on management needs and avoid conflicts of interest.

Management commitment

To ensure the focus of an audit or audit programme it is extremely important to gain the support and 'buy-in' of senior management and commitment. Without this level of support, the audit will be conducted in

almost a vacuum, with the audit process and team lacking credibility and authority. There is also the danger that the audit findings will not be acted upon which, at best, could result in a poor progress but at best could result in personal or company liability.

Media audit express this thinking. A management tool comprising a systematic documented, periodic and objective evaluation of how well media team,

packages and research data are performing with the aim of safeguarding the client interest.

Following are the reasons why any agency might start media audit program:

- A desire often at Board or CEO level to obtain assurance that the company is adequately managing its media responsibility.

- Lower or middle management initiatives to improve their performance

- The result of an media problem or incident, or in response to a desire to anticipate and avoid potential problems.

Setting the media audit objective

Establishing firm media audit objective is key to a successful media audit program.

The following point to be considered when establishing media audit objectives. - Media briefs and objective

- Information needs
- Client/agency culture
- Practical constraints
- Agency/client/account size

Typical information needs might include

- Liabilities (past, present and future)
- Comparison with best practice
- Areas where improvement is needed

Typically the media audit objective will change over time. This will allow the audit programme to be adopted to meet the evolving needs and also the priorities in improving standard of performance.

When media audit will tend to concentrate on the identification of problems. However, subsequent audit will increase in sophistication, moving towards verifications and effectiveness of media systems. Evolving from finding problems to confirming the absence of problems as the audits, performance improves.

Establishing the scope of the audit programme

There can be difference in methods for establishing the audit scope but most appropriate method will be determined

by the audit programme objective: Organisational scope— Agency as a whole

- Branch office individually
- Client specific
- Account specific

A media audit program may be classified into different type of audits like Management audit; HR system; commitment / professionalism among employees; technical audits; packages; data; operation; buying; and innovation.

Reporting of audit findings and audit follow-up

The audit should clearly identify these findings which are based upon subjective opinion / professional judgment and those which are based upon direct observation. And if there are too many recommendations it will be useful that they are prioritised in the report.

At the end of the audit, the auditor might assist the management to develop an action plan to - implement action

- reporting progress
- monitoring progress

Future trends

Developments in the audits can be pushed ahead by the more proactive agencies. This will help in:

- Increased sophistication of the audit program
- Tightening of professional standards
- Quantification
- Increased openness.

Hope the Indian agencies will take a lead and by the turn of the century Media Audit will have its own place in the Indian advertising world.

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QUESTIONS

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