

# **Ad Agencies' Strategic Plan to Combat the Internet Crisis: A Study of Their Deliberations and Actions**

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*By disrupting their business model and their approach to advertising, the Internet has created a crisis for ad agencies. While changes in communication technologies continue to affect agencies, they do not necessarily pose a threat. The most serious threats come from media companies and audiences. Using content analysis, the study attempts to provide insights into the strategic planning process used by ad agencies. The Internet has transformed the industry by making precision and accuracy in audience targeting possible, but it has also intensified the competition ad agencies face from newcomers. The highest competitive threat comes from niches that specialize in social media, and not from advertisers who do their own ads in-house. The study suggests, having successfully embraced digital advertising, agencies are at a crossroad. They can choose to specialize in niches such as social media and/or opt to broaden their market by becoming a one-stop shop for all other marketing services.*

*Keywords: ad agencies' planning process, precision and accuracy in targeting, social media advertising, digital advertising, one-stop marketing services*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The impact of Internet-related communication technologies has long been acknowledged (e.g., Durkin and Lawlor, 2001; Kassaye, 1999). Ad agencies have been hit hard by the disruption because they did not see the changes coming (Manning, 2020). They are also threatened by the changing practices and priorities of Google, Meta, and other access providers. These platforms have made it easy to run ads (Quora, n.d.) They have simplified the process, making it practically self-serve, and automated (Graham, 2023). Data on the target market is no problem. A former ad agency executive describes the changes made possible by the platforms as follows: "In my position in marketing for a startup, I run ads on the Facebook platform. I don't need an agency to figure out who I should be targeting, to buy the media to reach them, and to distribute my message." (Quora n.d.). Still, the most serious threat comes from the power of audiences to choose the contents they access, the specific choice they make once they access a content, and most importantly, their ultimate control on the ads they watch or decide not to watch (Lewis, 2017; Quora, n.d.; Graham, 2023).

Although they face a future that is drastically different from the past, agencies are cautious but positive about the potential it presents (e.g., Goldman, 2024). Aside from occasional difficulties (such as the decline in business during the 2020 pandemic or the increase in demand for their services after the December 2007 to June 2009 recession), their revenue has been climbing. It has grown by 2.4% between 2022 and 2023 alone. According to IBIS, their revenue "has been growing at a CAGR of 2.7% over the past five years and

is expected to total \$70.1 billion in 2024, when revenue will jump by an estimated 1.9% and profit will inch toward 6.6%.”

How did they overcome the crisis? What did their strategic planning process involve? Beyond generalities, we know so little about the specifics of how agencies have been affected by the crisis, let alone what they did to overcome it.

Based on data collected from forty ad agencies and ad-related consulting services in the Western United States (out of 435 plus companies), the study attempts to delve into their experiences and reactions, gaining insights into their deliberations, and strategic planning processes. It also examines the functional areas agencies see growing, declining, or even dying. (Hereafter, we will refer to ad agencies and ad-related consulting services as ad agencies or agencies.)

## **THE IMPACT OF THE NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES**

Primarily, the Internet has changed the way organizations advertise, making it easier to precisely target households and individuals. What is more, Internet-related communication technologies have also made it easier to provide follow-ups on campaigns, thus allowing a better measure of the effectiveness of the tactics and strategies deployed. In some cases, the target audience’s response can be measured right away.

The disruption has not just been the driving force behind innovations in digital communication, it has also become the future of advertising. The Internet has had the most impact in the evolution of the current digital advertising and digital marketing environment.

Often, they buy from multiple sources, including data brokers who track the online activities of individuals and/or households for the explicit benefit of advertisers (e.g., <https://www.exactdata.com>). In fact, gather data on who does what online. (Typically, the online security service provider will let their subscribers know that some companies are selling their personal data. For instance, Norton informs its customers on a regular basis which companies are tracking them.) Fast Company lists the 120 or companies engaged in buying and selling personal data of individuals and households (<https://www.fastcompany.com>).

Because it has become easier to synchronize emails, mobile phones, online orders, internet searches, and all other website visits, companies can track and follow anyone with an online account and/or mobile phone. Highly targeted households and/or individuals are likely to be tracked by multiple outfits. The profiles developed about them are based on behavior data, analytics, and algorithms. Even Web3.0 may not stop this practice, giving users their privacy (<https://www.pewresearch.org> > internet > 2019/11/15).

Households or individuals may minimize the availability of having their personal data for sale by asking for an opt out. Alternately, they may ask their online security service provider to do the same on their behalf—for an additional fee. To keep the data availability limited, the request must be renewed every 90 days.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

Following the strategic marketing management approach, we will examine the nature of the crisis, discuss the evolving expectations of advertisers vis-à-vis the changes in socio-cultural factors and Internet-related technologies, and examine the deliberations and actions of agencies. The data analysis will be driven by a structured approach starting with the problems and culminating in solutions and/or strategies to overcome or minimize the crisis.

The study is based on data gathered from forty ad agencies in the Western United States using open-ended questions. (There are 435 plus agencies and consulting services directly involved in the sector.)

To gain insights into the crisis and their deliberations, we asked agencies about the impact of Internet-related technologies, advertisers’ expectations and demands, and their own experience with the technology. Also, we gathered information about their strategic planning process and the actions they have taken or intend to take to overcome the crisis. To narrow the focus of this study, we will examine only the competitive threats posed by newcomers and the changes brought about by Internet-related communication technologies. We will use Columbia University’s guidelines for content analysis to determine the validity

and reliability of the methodology (<https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/research/population-health-methods/content-analysis>).

### **Validity and Reliability of AI: The Search for Proxy Measures**

We will use ChatGPT, the artificial intelligence (AI) app (version 3), to analyze the open-ended questions.

#### *Reasons for Using AI*

The use of the app met all three *validity* criteria typically deployed in content-analysis-based studies: (1) closeness of the categories, (2) relationship between the data and the conclusions reached (thereby enabling the study to discuss the implications of the results), and (3) generalizability of the results to a concept or theory.

#### *Validity*

The summaries show a clear and unambiguous relationship to the questions asked, thereby providing *face validity* to the use of the app. In other words, the summaries provided by the app relate to the questions asked and the responses generated. Further support for the approach comes from the step-by-careful step procedure followed in moving from questions/responses to the strategic planning process (concept) used to mitigate or overcome the crisis.

#### *Reliability*

In terms of satisfying the three criteria associated with reliability— stability, reproducibility, and accuracy—the approach was judged satisfactory because the use of the app satisfies the reliability test in that it minimizes or even eliminates the problems associated with (1) reproducibility, (2) stability, and (3) accuracy. (One additional advantage is the fact that, compared to the traditional approach (e.g., Berelson, 1952), the app takes less time to conduct an analysis.)

#### *Generalizability*

Although limited to agencies in one state, the results appear generalizable to other agencies both in terms of the issues raised and the solutions pursued. The use of AI has minimized or even eliminated human bias in determining the “closeness of the categories.” As expected, the data and the conclusions (shown in the summaries) are aligned, affirming the robustness of the approach.

## **AD AGENCIES’ HISTORICAL AND PROFESSIONAL ADVANTAGES**

The advertising industry has gone through major changes in the last 150 years. All along, agencies have either introduced the changes or have successfully adopted them, transitioning from one technology to another. They have done so from print to broadcast. Nevertheless, advertisers were ahead of agencies in adopting Internet-related technologies. Even then, agencies’ adoption of the innovation has been characterized by crisis, at least initially (<https://www.ana.net/content/show/id/79185>).

The timeline in the adoption of the Internet shows that advertisers were first to embrace the technology. Because agencies were slow in adopting the Internet, Proctor & Gamble (P&G), Target and other advertisers were quick in urging agencies to use the innovative technologies associated with the Internet (Kassaye, 1999). Interestingly, agencies have managed to reverse this trend (e.g., <https://www.ibisworld.com>).

The combination of technological revolution and socio-cultural forces such as the shift in the demographic composition of the nation seem to have created a threat to agencies. In the past, agencies excelled in the use of print and broadcast media; however, the new communication technologies required different sets of skills and expertise. Industry data suggest that the newcomers (e.g., web-developers, consultants, in-house experts, boutiques, and so on) have been quick to leverage their skills, filling the gap

in market demand for Internet-related services. At first, agencies had little chance to leapfrog the competition. The results of this study suggest that agencies no longer feel this way.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Primarily, advertisers were interested in adopting the Internet to reach more households, especially younger cohorts. With the population of younger individuals projected to surpass that of Baby-boomers, advertisers' interest in the new communication technologies was predictable. In the current nexus, for example, Gen-Y (Millennials) and Gen-Z, are the ideal target market(s) because of their growing purchasing power.

Advertisers as well as agencies recognize that generational preferences allow for more effective targeting and engagement. Certainly, the outcome very much depends on the platform of choice and its appeal to each cohort- Gen-X, Gen-Y, or Gen-Z.

To appraise the strategic planning process undertaken by agencies to overcome the crisis, the study examines agencies' response and actions to the following *three concerns*:

- (1) Clients' demand for Internet-related expertise and the growing popularity of Internet-related innovations such as digital markets, social media, and so on.
- (2) The impact of Internet-related technologies on agencies' competitiveness, and the competitive challenge from newcomers as well as advertisers' in-house 'agencies,'
- (3) The search for media vehicles that connect better or best with different cohorts such as Millennials and Gen-Zs.

### Newcomers and Other Competitive Challenges

The Internet has become a change agent beyond compare. Principally, its importance and significance has grown over the years. Consequently, the fact that the Internet has been adopted by advertisers and agencies alike should not come as a surprise: it has made connecting with the younger cohorts not only possible but easier. In the current environment, for instance, almost all millennials are using the Internet (<https://targetinternet.com/resources>).

As shown in Table 1, agencies attribute their desire to adopt Internet-related communication technologies to *four* distinct factors: *constant competition* (89.8%), *the need to stay relevant* (88.6%), *clients' demand* (84.5%), and *the need for differentiation* (82.7%).

**TABLE 1  
REASONS FOR MAKING CHANGES**

| The Specifics in the Competitive Challenges | Reasons Attributed for Change in Percent |
|---|--|
| Constant competition                        | 89.8%                                    |
| Adapting to tech                            | 88.6%                                    |
| Client demands                              | 84.5%                                    |
| Differentiation crucial                     | 82.7%                                    |

The Internet has now become something that agencies see in the rearview mirror. In contrast to their reserved and limited actions during the introduction and growth stage of the technology, agencies are heavily invested in Internet-related innovations. Notably, though, they no longer limit themselves to advertising. They have broadened their expertise to include digital marketing and other marketing services.

The most compelling reason for welcoming the Internet is the competitive encroachment from newcomers (see Table 1). A rank-ordering of the reasons suggests that agencies give competition the

highest rank, followed by the desire not to fall behind. Close to 90 percent of agencies see competition as the most pressing problem. Agencies want to stay relevant. Interestingly, demand from clients is third in rank. The fourth rank goes to advantages associated with creating differentiation. This is intriguing. Why do agencies see Internet-related technologies as key in creating differentiation? And why do these technologies still serve as distinguishing factor, especially when the newcomers already excel in using Internet technologies? Have they not become the baseline for advertisers' expectations?

Overall, agencies are taking notice of the changes in the ecosystem such as advertisers' effort to leverage the Internet to connect with customers, advertisers' concern about budget allocation, the popularity of websites in brand-related activities, and the growing significance of social media platforms to reach and influence younger consumers. (See the summary below for details.)

#### *The Role and Significance of the Internet*

- There has been a significant shift in budget allocation from traditional marketing methods to online advertising and internet-related initiatives.
- Companies across industries have fully embraced the internet as a vital component of their marketing strategy.
- They are using digital experts and specialists to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape.

The technology has transformed how companies connect with consumers, gather insights, and promote their products or services. To connect with audiences, companies now use websites, social media, blogs, podcasts, and so on.

#### *Agencies' Perception of the Newcomers*

In contrast to their limited involvement, they see the newcomers as more involved in the use of the latest communication technologies. If we follow this logic, the newcomers pose the most threat (see Table 1). The specifics in their outlook about *the competitive challenges* in general are as follows:

- The advertising industry is characterized by constant competition among agencies striving to differentiate themselves from competitors.
- Adapting to rapidly evolving technologies and digital trends creates a significant challenge for advertising professionals and agencies.
- Meeting the diverse and evolving demands of clients is essential to maintaining a competitive edge in the industry.
- While agencies seek to differentiate themselves, they often face the reality that no information is entirely proprietary, and competitors can quickly replicate strategies.
- Successfully addressing these competitive challenges is critical for long-term success in the advertising sector.

#### *Competition From In-House Advertising Efforts*

The competitive challenges presented by the newcomers appear in Table 2. As shown in the Table, some factors are more critical than others. Adweek survey results suggest that the share of in-house advertising is still growing (<https://www.ana.net/content/show/id/79185>). The share of "in-house shops," has grown from 78 percent in 2019 to 82 percent in 2014.

**TABLE 2**  
**THE ATTRIBUTES AND LIABILITIES IN ADVERTISERS' IN-HOUSE EFFORTS**

| Major Questions                                    | Reasons Given          | Percent who Agreed |
|--|------------------------|--------------------|
| How effective are their ads?                       | Limited effectiveness  | 74.2%              |
| How much of a threat?                              | Competitive threat low | 73.3%              |
| What constraints do they face?<br>Economic/Budget? | Budget constraints     | 81.9%              |
| Their creative Potential?                          | Low creative potential | 85.7%              |

*Advertisers Doing Their Own Ads*

Contrary to expectations, agencies do not see the in-house effort of advertisers much of a competitive threat. A rank-ordering of the highlights in their reasons include the following: (1) 89.1 percent feel that these in-house agencies face budget constraints' (2) 85.5 percent see them as having limited creative potential; (3) 77.4 percent see them as having limited expertise; (4) 74.2 percent of agencies feel that they have limited effectiveness, and (5) 73.3 percent of agencies feel that they present low competitive threat. The summary of the findings related to in-house advertising is as follows:

- Advertisers who choose to create their own advertisements often face limitations in terms of effectiveness compared to agencies.
- While there is some competitive threat posed by advertisers producing their own ads, it is not considered significant.
- Budget constraints can hinder the creative potential of advertisers attempting to manage their own advertising campaigns.
- Despite these challenges, advertisers may find success based on their knowledge and insights into their specific products or services.
- However, they usually lack the bandwidth and resources that agencies can provide, which can impact the overall reach and impact of their campaigns.

**OTHER CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE: NEW AND DIFFERENT TECHNOLOGIES**

Compared to print and even traditional broadcast media, the Internet and Internet-associated media allow advertisers to easily measure the effectiveness of their campaigns (see Tables 3 and 4). Here is a summary of the changes in how agencies use the Internet:

- Advertising agencies are constantly adapting to the ever-changing landscape of the internet, including its role in information gathering and dissemination.
- Agencies are actively exploring real-time adaptability to stay ahead of emerging consumer trends.
- The internet has enabled agencies to immerse themselves in the digital lifestyles of consumers, providing valuable insights for crafting effective campaigns.
- Agencies are leveraging the internet's capabilities to monitor consumer behavior, gather data, and respond dynamically to market shifts.
- Continuous changes in internet usage patterns necessitate ongoing adaptation and innovation by agencies to remain competitive.

Table 3 shows the five reasons for adopting the innovative technologies associated with the Internet are the following:

1. Everything is digital: the popularity of digital markets: most young adults use social media (91.2%).
2. Collaborations critical: Agencies collaborate with marketing teams (89.4%).
3. Integrated approach: They integrate their digital strategies with their social media strategies (88.5%).
4. Niching is important: Agencies that specialize in niches pose a competitive threat (75%).
5. Decisions in real-time: Partnerships and real-time decisions are important (75%).

**TABLE 3**  
**MAJOR CHANGES: AGENCIES THEN AND NOW**

| Factors Favoring Adopting the New Communication Technologies | Compelling Reasons for Change in Percent |
|--|--|
| Integration of digital/social media                          | <b>88.5%</b>                             |
| More partnerships & real-time decisions                      | 75%                                      |
| Specialized agencies emerging                                | 75%                                      |
| Focus on digital and social                                  | <b>91.2%</b>                             |
| Collaboration with marketing teams                           | 89.4%                                    |

**Declining Interest in Traditional Media**

The effectiveness of traditional media is in doubt. The immediate challenge for agencies appears to be using the innovative technologies to connect with various generation cohorts- Gen-X, Gen-Y, and Gen-Z. Millennials and Gen-Zs are pursued the most by advertisers because of their sheer size (with a combined population of 140 million plus individuals) and their growing purchasing power (<https://review.content-science.com/millennial-content-consumption-fact-sheet>).

*Importance of Traditional Broadcast Media*

- Traditional broadcast media, including television and radio, continue to hold significance in the advertising industry.
- These platforms are essential for *reputation building* and brand recognition.
- Traditional broadcast media’s diverse viewership and reach make it a valuable advertising medium for reaching broad audiences.
- Niche service offerings, such as local and global broadcasts, remain relevant and influential.
- Despite the rise of digital channels, traditional broadcast media retain their role in the advertising mix.

**TABLE 4**  
**REASONS FOR USING PRINT, BROADCAST AND DIGITAL MEDIA**

| Major Questions               | Reasons Given                   | Percent who Agreed |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Print Media                   | Reduced reliance on print       | 81.7%              |
| Dynamic Ads                   | Print used for dynamic ads      | 50%                |
| Connected TV                  | Broadcast media less favored    | 79.3%              |
| Digital Media—audio and video | Digital dominates               | 92.6%              |
| Spending on Print Media       | Still relevant for some markets | 70.8%              |

(Using Print Media for Dynamic Ads While Reducing Reliance on Print Media)

*Advertising Agencies Use of Print Media*

Although print now receives less ad spending budget, it is still critical for some advertisers. According to agencies, the reasons for using print are as follows:

- Print media has seen a reduction in its significance as a cornerstone of advertising campaigns, with a decreasing reliance on traditional print advertising.
- However, print media, particularly magazines, continue to be used for creating dynamic and visually appealing advertisements that engage with consumers effectively.
- Broadcast media, while still relevant, have faced challenges as clients are often hesitant to allocate substantial budgets to the sector.
- Overall, digital advertising has gained prominence and is now the dominant force in advertising campaigns, outpacing traditional print and broadcast media.
- Print spending still exists but is not as central to advertising campaigns and/or strategies as it once was.

**CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

We can be certain that the current communication technology will be outdated and replaced by other technologies. It is just a matter of time. It is also important agencies understand that socio-cultural and demographic factors (including the number of individuals in a household) tend to impact advertisers’ objectives of reaching –and influencing each person.

The Internet is important in the ad-making industry. The potential for the sector growth has drawn newcomers. The stream-lined, automated, and straightforward ad execution formats offered by social media companies threaten to take market share away from ad agencies (<https://digitalmedianinja.com/blog/social-media-data-mining/>). Audiences also have more power to control what they access, and most importantly, whether they avoid ads and/or decide to watch them.

The study suggests that to stay relevant ad agencies must continue adapting to the changes in communication technologies. In the new media landscape, digital media have now become the norm, determining the type of information households access or use (<https://www.forbes.com/home-improvement/internet/streaming-stats/>).

The fact that ad agencies have started to grow, reversing the trend suggests that they have managed to overcome the crisis (<https://www.ibisworld.com/industry-statistics/number-of-businesses/advertising-agencies-united-states/>).



As Table 2 shows, agencies seem to have robust plans to regain their market share. They also have an excellent understanding of the competitive threats they face both in terms of tasks and functions that advertisers are interested in and what the innovations offer.

The findings urge ad agencies to be on the look-out for changes in communication technologies in general and especially the intersection of technology and socio-cultural factors. Agencies must constantly monitor all the relevant uncontrollable factors in the marketing environment to see which major trends are likely to influence audiences' media habits and tendencies. They must also be keen on assessing the willingness of advertisers to try innovative technologies and engage in experimental campaigns. Just as important is staying current about audiences' reasons for watching only certain ads or avoiding ads entirely.

#### *The Study's Contribution to the Field*

Given the dearth of studies about the Internet crisis, this study provides a better understanding of the disruption, shining light on the strategic planning process and the competitive threats analysis ad agencies use to overcome the disruption. To that end, the study has examined the changes adopted by agencies.

Another important contribution is the use of AI for content analysis. As opposed to the typical use of the app to conduct an analysis of external data, the analysis was confined to data gathered for the purpose of this study. In so doing, the research method deployed in the study minimizes or even eliminates the typical problems associated with content analysis such as coding, data gathering and interpretation. Moreover, the generative AI app makes it possible to do the analysis in a much shorter time, raising the prospect of combining the data gathering with immediate analysis—all in real time.

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