Impeachment Could Mean Less Ad Space for Brands

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Impeachment is essentially the only constitutional remedy for a president that might represent an existential threat to the country. And it can play out in any number of scenarios.

Although it has been a relatively short time since the whistleblower charges, to a large extent we already know that we're in for a mind-numbing, omnichannel media blitz that will suck the oxygen from the room. These are table stakes for the Trump era, which in late September spent over $700,000 in five days asking Facebook users to join the "Official Impeachment Defense Task Force."

Even if this sounds over the top, we may want to buckle up anyway because we could just be getting started. Both Trump and congressional Democrats are about to find their footing on messaging and counternarratives. They are bound to up the ante on television, radio, social, programmatic, CTV and even smart speakers. As a result, brands and service providers that often depend on Q4 and building holiday momentum through paid media are about to face significant headwinds.

How long will the impeachment fever last?

The Clinton impeachment and subsequent trial ran from October 1998 to February 1999. If the past is prologue, this fight is supposed to play out over a similar four to five months.

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attention span.
That would be the expected timeline if we were talking about a traditional chief executive and a normal congressional process. However, the behavior of the president and Congress since before inauguration day pretty much guarantees a constitutional street fight that will drag on well past the nation’s attention span. News cycles will be saturated and the courts will delay. Impeachment could simply collide with the 2020 election. In fact, team Trump has already conflated the election with impeachment.

Brands will have to compete with politics for audience

If, as reported, impeachment is being timed as a referendum for the 2020 election, the cable news and Twitter feeds are going to blow up, and ad spending will go through the roof. Both Democrats and Republicans recognize this issue as a potentially galvanizing moment to pry loose wallets. Trump raised $15 million in the first 72 hours following the impeachment announcement and has already spent $2 million just on Facebook ads fighting impeachment. But that’s just a fraction of the reported $308 million Trump has raised this year and the $156 million his campaign has in cash on hand. Democratic candidates, while somewhat slower to respond, are also building up war chests on this issue.

It’s almost inevitable that brands—especially those in the second tier, direct-to-consumer and local franchises with smaller budgets—are going to get caught in the crossfire and get outbid on much of the important media real estate in Q4, regardless of whether it is linear TV, display or on social platforms.

During the holidays, which is precisely when consumer brands most need exposure to buyers, they’re likely to be priced out of top-tier media spots. Of course, a lack of media availability has been known to occur in the three months

leading up to presidential and key congressional elections in the past, but because of this early cash spike accruing because of Trump and the Democrats as well as the potential longevity of court battles over impeachment, brands could be facing a media squeeze that could drag on perpetually for a year with no end until consumers walk into the voting booth in November 2020.

Remember, it’s really about the economy

Some brands will be able to weather a yearlong political ad war, depending on their reliance on national reach and direct consumer access, but others may not. Brands will need to get creative about programmatic outreach to local markets and the precise consumers that represent their buying audience. That might mean postponing some of the big-brand development strategies of big-box stores with cost-effective media access.

Qualified reach through programmatic and addressable TV might become all-important in order to side-step the political furor of the cable wars and the consumer fatigue that will be created until this is all finally settled.

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