Rethinking Audience Strategy for an Unpredictable Consumer

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Younger consumers are changing retail by blending online viral trends with in-store shopping.

During an ADWEEK House Cannes Lions panel co-hosted with GroundTruth, Will Lee, CEO of ADWEEK, sat down with Rosie O'Meara, CEO of GroundTruth, and Katie Comerford, president of commerce and transformation at Horizon Media, to discuss mapping the future path to purchase.

Managing sudden product virality

Brands adapt instantly when items go viral. For SharkNinja, which launches hundreds of items every year, the hurdle is securing shelf space in consumers' kitchens.

When helping the brand launch a new slushy machine, Horizon Media looked to balance the product's appeal across audiences. "It was about to be summer, so we went after the frosé sentiment—you know, everybody loves frosé. But what else could you do, knowing Gen Z are not huge drinkers, unlike millennials," Comeford explained. "So, we went in both routes to make sure we were personalizing, but driving that virality

to win that limited counter space.”

To navigate sudden spikes in popularity, marketers use real-time behavioral signals to guide shoppers. Comerford stated the goal is to “ride that virality and get the shopper to where they want to shop and not dictate where they’re going to get the product.”

This requires leveraging retail inventory feeds to avoid consumer frustration. As Comerford explained, tracking stock “allows us to direct the customer where the product’s available.”

The return to physical stores

Younger buyers frequently shop in physical spaces despite the growth of digital platforms like TikTok Shop. Malls and beauty retailers see large groups of teens wanting to test products in person. As Comerford explained, “I think there’s a demand to try products in-person and not just trust, ‘I’m gonna buy it online, and I’ll get it shipped to me.’”

GroundTruth tracks real-world movement because, as O’Meara stated, “where you go in the physical world, we have always believed, is who you really are as a consumer.”

Following its acquisition by ZeroToOne.AI, GroundTruth uses a large predictive behavioral model. O’Meara explained, “With 90% accuracy, we can understand what you are likely to do next, when you’re likely to do it, and also what you’re not likely to do next, which also eliminates waste.”

Physical retail continues to play an important role for younger shoppers. “We’re seeing that a majority of purchases still happen in store, and that includes Gen Z for sure,” O’Meara noted.

AI reshapes targeting and search strategy

Alongside a broader shift toward business outcomes, marketers are using AI models to dissect vague household CRM data to “make household level data, user level data, or person level data, so that they can better target, reach, and engage with those customers,” O’Meara explained.

Concurrently, the rise of AI search requires new strategies. Comerford highlighted that “with Reddit being a huge source of that information, there’s limited control over what the answer engines are going to pick up and say about your brand,” shifting media focus toward answer engine optimization.

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