

## Kevin George: Unilever's Digital Media Strategy

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# Kevin George: Unilever's Digital Media Strategy

Unilever's U.S. vice president and general manager of its deodorants division discusses his company's approach to launching new products using a variety of new media channels.

by Andrea Rasmussen and Carolyn Ude

**T**his interview was conducted as part of the Marketing & Media Ecosystem 2010 study, a joint effort of the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA), and Booz Allen Hamilton.

In 2002, Unilever introduced the Axe line of deodorant body sprays, primarily with an Internet-based promotional campaign and very little television advertising. Within two years, Axe had become the number-one male deodorant. Can you detail the strategy you used to achieve such quick success?

**GEORGE:** First, we have changed our corporate culture to one that actively encourages taking risks. I repeatedly tell our brand teams, "Take some chances. It's very rare that we would put you in a position where your decisions could bring down the company." We've also embedded consumer insights deeply throughout the company. We have an internal initiative called "Consumer Nation," in which all employees (from the finance director to the supply chain assistant) are tasked with experiencing what the consumer experiences: trying a new organic deodorant, reading a teen magazine, or blogging with consumers. It is tracked and monitored, and whatever they learn is shared across the organization. This fosters a culture of learning, plus it is fun.

Second, we've done a great job of focusing on how to adapt and use digital media in marketing. We strive to build "digital brands." We start by defining the type of experience we want consumers to have with our brands, then determine the right media channels that deliver that experience. We find more and more that the digital channels such as online, interactive television, and mobile are the best solutions for creating that dialogue. The most important thing is that we don't let the technology drive the strategy. When you focus from the very beginning on creating a conversation about your brand among consumers, not just sending a message "brand to consumers," your approach is much more effective.

Third, we stay as close to the consumer as we can. Three years ago we embraced ethnography [studying people's behavior in the field] to generate insights. Observing what consumers actually do, rather than what they say they do, has made a huge difference. Talking to them about things other than the product and brand offers a much deeper understanding of who they are and what motivates them. We take advantage of digital tools as well. For example, we use Communispace to poll people online and get almost instantaneous consumer research.

**How has this digital strategy changed the way you work with advertising agencies?**

**GEORGE:** The role of the creative and media agencies

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has always been to be strategic, creative, and to act as our agent in the media marketplace, but more and more they are becoming partners in media and content creation. As a result, no one agency can do it all. Although Unilever works with many strong agencies, for a recent new variant launch on Axe we tried a different model. We hired a separate agency to act as the core integrator. This “conductor” agency managed the budget and time line and was wholly responsible for the execution of all aspects of the campaign. At first, it was politically challenging for our other agencies to work through the conductor agency, but it gave our brand teams one point of contact, which saved a great deal of time, strain, and complexity from our end. This is not the right approach all the time, but we gained a lot of learning about a different way of working.

#### In what ways has Unilever's relationship with media companies changed?

**GEORGE:** We are working much more closely with media companies across all channels. We insist on having a direct relationship with many companies, and provide them with a strategic brief on the brand idea for them to develop concepts against. In return, many media companies are incorporating our team at Unilever into their development process. Google is a great example of a media company that gets that. They'll get all of us in a room and say, “Tell us what you need” — and then they tweak tools accordingly. We work closely together and it is not about them selling more search terms, but co-developing solutions. Some media companies still see that increased level of interaction and collaboration as new — which is similar to the way that we, as a large consumer products company, felt about the nature of

our relationships with our retail customers such as Wal-Mart a few years ago. Five years ago we wouldn't want to share our product launch plans, but now we work with retail partners to develop an execution strategy two years before launch. That has changed with retail, and it is changing with media companies as well.

#### As you shift marketing dollars to nontraditional media, where effectiveness is often much more ambiguous, how do you measure success?

**GEORGE:** It's more of a migration of dollars to digital rather than a large shift away from “traditional.” Overall we need to do a better job of understanding the funnel through which people consume media. They use a portfolio of media to experience our brands, so a dramatic shift from one medium to another would be a mistake. Unilever has certain measures for determining success in a promotional campaign that are standard across brands, and many that are based on specific brand objectives. The digital space brings a lot of opportunity for real-time feedback, and we monitor most of our digital campaigns every week. In fact, some of the best analytics tools are free right now on the Web. The digital world allows the company to be more of a data-driven, learning culture, which allows us to instantly change campaigns as they are executed in the market. +

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## Resources

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Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (NYU Press, 2006): The founder and director of MIT's comparative media studies program rejects the idea that new media will replace old media. Instead, he says, the two will form twin pillars of a "convergence culture," in which the difference between channels becomes less and less obvious. [www.amazon.com/dp/0814742815/](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0814742815/)

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Geoffrey Precourt, editor, *CMO Thought Leaders: The Rise of the Strategic Marketer* (s+b Books, 2007): Interviews with 15 current and former marketing leaders at household name companies reveal how CMOs can become "growth champions," raising the bar of customer-centric strategy and practice. [www.strategy-business.com/cmoreader](http://www.strategy-business.com/cmoreader)

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Christopher Vollmer, John Frelinghuysen, and Randall Rothenberg, "The Future of Advertising Is Now," *s+b*, Summer 2006: The so-called digital revolution is in the mainstream, and the methods by which consumers absorb information and entertainment — and the ways they perceive, retain, and engage with brands and brand messages — have changed irrevocably. [www.strategy-business.com/article/06204](http://www.strategy-business.com/article/06204)

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Inside Digital Media Inc. Web site: Video and audio interviews with leading digital media thinkers. [www.insidedigitalmedia.com/](http://www.insidedigitalmedia.com/)

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Interactive Advertising Bureau Web site: Offers news analysis and guidelines relating to advertising on the Web, via e-mail or wireless technologies, or on interactive television. [www.iab.net/](http://www.iab.net/)

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