

WHEN SCIENCE MEETS ART

Does data or creative distinguish the best of today’s B2B campaigns or – like Leonardo da Vinci demonstrated – does true genius emerge from combining art and science? **Lucy Fisher** investigates

As we go online in our droves, reading reviews, comparing offers and considering purchases, we are building up to the ultimate click that confirms payment. And with the growth of digital marketing channels and web analytics offerings, never before have marketers been able to track the behaviour of their customers and prospects throughout the buying process with such accuracy.

Many marketing professionals claim that this rise in available data has meant the world of advertising, which was historically focused on creative campaigns, has become a more scientific field. And those who work within it need to have ‘right-brain’ as well as ‘left-brain’ skills. “Content is critical, but it’s the data that helps us to drive relevance, which tells us when customers or prospects want to receive information, and via which channels,” claims Richard Evans, director of marketing, EMEA at marketing automation specialist Silverpop.

The job of a B2B marketer might well be more straightforward, if it weren’t for the fact there is simply so much data to keep track of. It’s making sense of it all that counts – and it takes both quantitative and qualitative analytic skills. So, has this rise in web analytics – an element of marketing that is no doubt here to stay – really led to a relative decline in the importance of the visual image or that creative spark?

The rise of science

The data advocates go as far to say that it’s the data rather than any creative flair that actually inspires campaigns in today’s world. “Without question, data is the most important component of marketing today,” says Nick Washbourne, business development director at B2B data owner Market Location. “It drives absolutely everything, providing a window onto the individual customer, ensuring that every single instance of communication and contact is timely, relevant and engaging. Crucially, data, if used correctly, can inspire not only the strategy behind this engagement but the creative execution as well.”

The fact that B2B marketers now have an abundance of tools to measure the impact of campaigns is very positive.

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NICK WASHBOURNE
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR
MARKET LOCATION

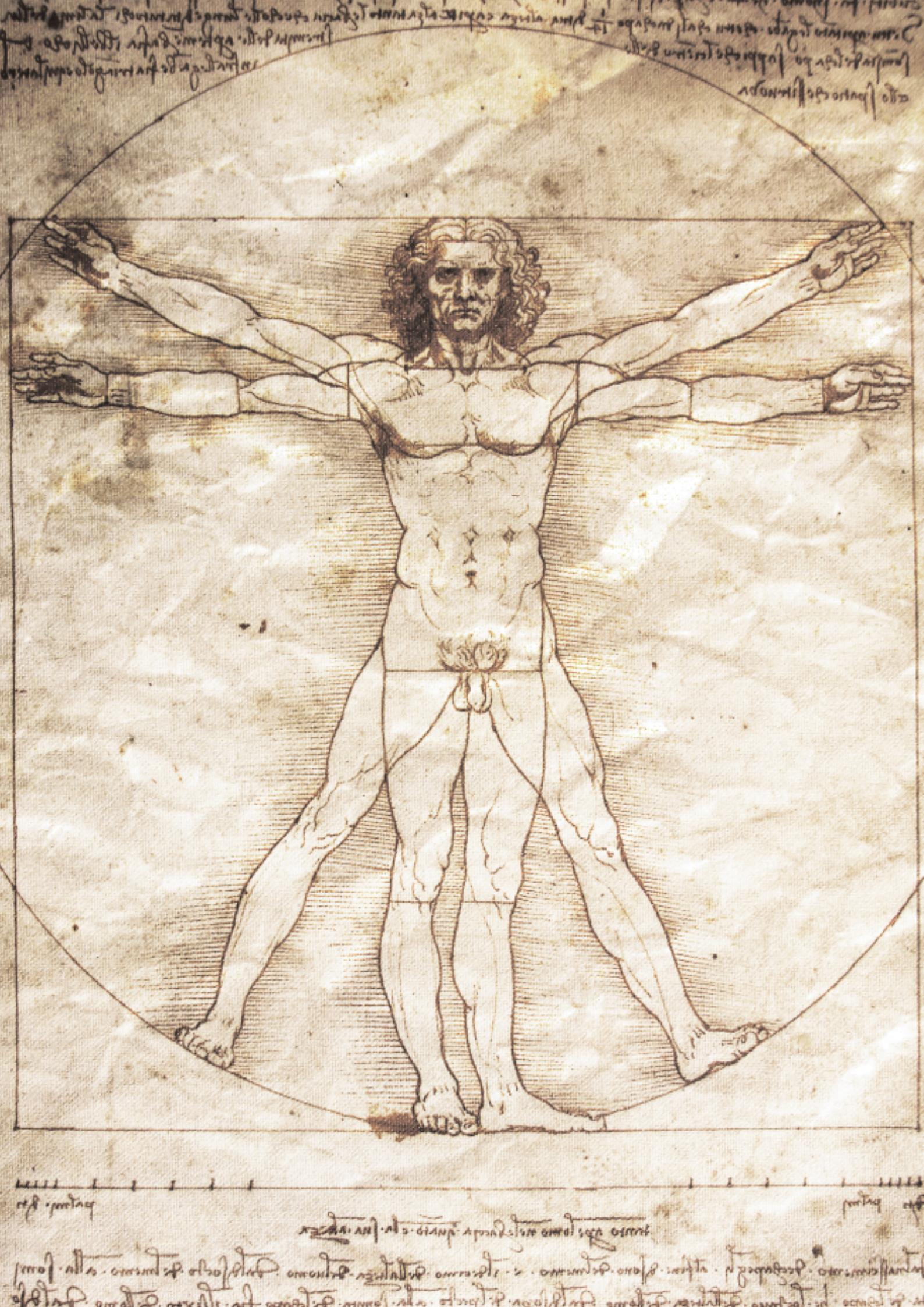
A chief marketing officer can accurately forecast ROI and so marketers no longer have to struggle to prove their worth to sales or finance. As a consequence they are now less likely to be considered the ‘colouring-in’ department.

“It is now possible to say, ‘We created X amount of pounds in opportunities with that £1 million you gave me to spend’,” says Stuart Wheldon, client services director at marketing automation specialist, Eloqua. “You can tie DM, email, social and search to the numbers of qualified leads created and the amount of business closed. It’s not just about guessing how many eyeballs saw an ad.”

Technological limits

In this digital world, however, it’s important not to be blinded by the amount of stats or technology, and forget the importance of a great idea and engaging content. Scot McKee, managing director of agency Birddog, stresses the importance of appealing to your target audience with a compelling offer. McKee says that all too frequently marketers don’t understand how to get the most out of the technology anyway. Moreover, he believes that if marketing becomes too much about data and automation there will be a backlash. “What we need is a way of being creative using digital channels,” he says.

And as creatives grapple with the best ways of presenting offers on these new, instantaneous platforms, such as social media or mobile devices, it is important



for B2B marketers not to rely too much on new technologies such as demand generation or marketing automation platforms. These are certainly helpful, for tying disparate data sources together for instance, but they do not represent a solution to all marketing dilemmas, merely a set of tools to aid data analysis and reduce the manual workload.

“Demand generation technologies are being heralded as the great white hope, but I’m not sure that they are,” adds McKee. “With these tools, you’re being forced to do what the software says. It’s fairly prescriptive. The demand generation platform providers are not influencing outcomes as much as they say they are. They don’t satisfy the customer need to engage with a good concept.”

A need for co-existence

Richard Lees, chairman at data marketing services company DBG, says the answer is data and creative have to co-exist. Otherwise, you could have the best possible information on your customers but end up sending them an uninspiring offer that fails to lead to a purchase.

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JAMES TREZONA
MANAGING DIRECTOR
MASON ZIMBLER

“Awareness of data can challenge the unmeasurable aspects of creative, but it doesn’t replace the need for good creative,” he points out.

So marketing is not all about micro segmentation analysis and generating more reports. The need for ideas, however old-fashioned it may sound, still exists. “Data and targeting is technical; eventually we’ll all get there and the thing that really makes the difference will be persuasion,” says Rob Morrice, managing director at agency IAS B2B. Persuasion, he says, is about creativity, which there has been a horrible lack of in B2B. “You never bored anybody into buying anything,” he jokes.

Admittedly, it can be more difficult to be creative in a B2B setting, where marketers may be fearful of their

campaigns being perceived as flippant or dangerously polarising. But that’s no excuse to shy away from the job in hand. “Creativity needs more relevance in B2B marketing,” says Morrice. “Often with B2B purchases, even at the highest level, there’s not much to choose between them. But a lot of clients call the logic tune; they resist creativity although it’s what will make the difference.”

Data needs personality

Even when we’re at work, we’re still human. Although it’s crucial to pick the right message when you are appealing to a niche or tightly defined group of prospects, as is often the case in B2B, personality counts too.

James Trezona, managing director of agency Mason Zimble believes that ‘a position of courage’ is rare in B2B, which often cannot count on the safety of numbers. But with the rise in web analytics we might see this changing for the better. “Until now, B2B hasn’t had the data available to be able to say ‘70 per cent will love it, 30 per cent might hate it’. Now it’s possible to create a rich picture on which to build your proposition,” he says.

Trezona believes the assumption that targeted data equals successful campaigns is a misconception and a gross oversimplification. “A well-targeted but poorly messaged campaign multiplies the damage done to the brand and the sales funnel,” he says. “You are increasingly able to target people at key stages of their decision making. Therefore it is more important to resonate.” He adds that if your science is right but your messaging isn’t right, suddenly targeting is a bad thing. Mobile, for example, is a very personal channel. B2B marketers don’t want to get their messaging wrong on this, the most private of channels.

The multiplier effect

Put simply, data can enable you to be more creative, and creativity allows you to get the most out of your data. Trezona describes this as ‘the multiplier effect’. If either the data or creative are bad, the campaign will fail. It’s not one or the other that we need, it’s both. “It’s not science plus art equals results, it’s more science times art, so a zero for either means campaign failure,” he says.

Yes, something bland and forgettable may work through repetition, but good marketing is about relationships, and digital or otherwise, today’s audiences are less forgiving than ever of companies that get it wrong. B2B marketers should offer a joined-up experience throughout the sales cycle. The onus is on us, and both data and creative are key.

Marketing skills gap

With the rise in data, what has the impact been on the marketing department and the prospects of those within it?

According to Adrian Gregory, chair of the Institute of Direct Marketing (IDM)’s Data Council, marketers need to know how to manage the permissions side of data, and understand the laws around opt-in and opt-out. “Increasingly there’s a real skill in managing permissions, so that customers want to opt-in. It’s about asking the right questions,” he says. “More companies are looking to employ staff who understand data and can use it creatively. I think that somebody who comes with data skills would now have an opportunity to get the top job.”

Gregory adds that he’s also seeing the creation of a new role – that of a data steward. This is an important role that bridges the gap between IT and marketing. It’s about data governance – not just quality of data, but the management of people, process and technology. You could see people moving from such a role to the role of marketing technology director or marketing director, he says.

Mark Blayney Stuart, head of research at the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) agrees that the explosion of data has been fantastically useful for marketers.

Stuart points out, however, that it has also thrown up some challenges, as well as opportunities, particularly when it comes to presenting compelling propositions via digital channels, such as mobile, and managing the legal side of marketing to stay on the right side of data protection laws. “The CIM now runs 11 digital courses because that’s where the trend is going,” he says. “And digital encompasses a lot of data.”

Blayney adds, “Data is enabling companies to be more creative. There is more access to what people really think. But there is a need for legal knowledge, too. There is a real skills gap here and also a real opportunity for marketers to build their careers if they invest in this kind of knowledge.”