In Lafayette, You Can Advertise Just About Anywhere in an Especially Crowded and Competitive Market

HERE TO ADVERTISE IS ONE OF THE TOUGhest decisions confronting business people today. It's certainly one of the most confusing, with an increasing range of options to choose from and mediums to evaluate.

Advertising budgets can include everything from sponsorship in the parish church bulletin to coupons on the back of cash register receipts. Other methods are more traditional: newspapers (daily and weekly), television (network and cable), billboards (large and small), radio (AM and FM) and direct mail, among others.

"There certainly are a great many variety of ways to spend, or I might say, waste money on advertising," says Lyle Scott, advertising director for the Acadia edition of The Morning Advocate. "The competition for advertising dollars is getting more intense and people are going to have to become more sophisticated in their plans.

"As businesses continue to be bombarded with new and different choices, they have to refine and better plan their advertising strategies. They are trying anything, and now they're more cautious and a little more savvy," says Scott, who was an account executive at The Daily Advertiser from 1979 to 1987. "I think the businesses themselves are going to have to become more sophisticated in their budgets.

Gail Ardoin, media director at The Graham Group, sees this trend strengthening, as advertising dollars become limited and options expand. "It is getting competitive as to where you place your money and advertisers now have more limited dollars to spend," she says. "Now those dollars have to be concentrated on your choosing. There has to be more strategic planning. You have to zero in and target a whole lot more than before. It's hard doing mass advertising.

PROBABLY THE HOTTEST NEWCOMER ON THE SCENE is Cable Time, which a year ago began selling spots on 12 Lafayette Cable TV networks, as well as others in area communities. "I see cable advertising as a really big comer because local broadcast media have priced themselves beyond the availability of most business budgets," says Scott.

These commercial messages are relatively economical because cable is basically funded by subscribers, unlike network television or radio, which are completely dependent on advertising revenues. "You're [cable TV stations] paying for the programming, not the advertiser," explains Shanna Higginbotham, Cable Time account executive.

Advertising rates run from a high of $7 for a 30-second spot on Lafayette Cable to a low of $4, depending on frequency and networks. This compares to roughly $15 minimum in radio. For the price of one commercial on a local evening news broadcast on free television, an advertiser can run a hefty weekly package with ESPN or Cable News Network, according to Higginbotham. Business was brisk even before the Persian Gulf War put CNN in the spotlight, she adds.

BY MARCELLE TESSIER

"We didn't know exactly who we would impact the most when we started. I think we've really impacted just about everybody," says Higginbotham. "We've taken away a little bit of money, not a lot. It kind of gave another niche to take away from everybody."

While some advertisers do rely solely on cable, a better option is to use a mix of mediums, says David Gest, Cable Time manager. "You're fooling yourself and your client to go into there and say I can fill all your advertising needs," he says. Gest prefers to act as a consultant when advising clients. "What that does is put a higher degree of confidence in you as someone who knows advertising.

Gest's advice varies, depending on the nature of the business, and he thinks the Lafayette market can support a wide variety of advertising venues.

"Realistically, I think the economy strengthening, there's plenty around for everybody," he says. "Yes, there are some people who are going to suffer. I think some people need to re-analyze their pricing structure.

"Probably the hardest hit by cable's strong entry in the field is radio. "I would have to think it has probably affected radio budgets more than television," says Ardoin. "They have a specific niche. Some are struggling more than others."

While KMDL-FM is not in the struggling category, its management is still feeling the pinch. "Some of the dollars that might have gone into radio are being diverted into cable TV," says Ernie Alexander, KMDL owner/manager. It appears that there are more local advertisers on cable TV today.

"But he's not sure how long that will last. "I see it more as a fad. I think it is the small person's way of being on TV," says Alexander. "Quite frankly, I think that some people are experimenting with cable TV right now."

"It is getting more competitive. I see cable as being more cost-effective method of advertising, particularly if you know the market you want to reach."

THE PRINT MEDIUM HAS TYPICALLY BEEN MORE generic in its appeal, being largely a mainstay of advertising budgets. "I think newspaper advertising is going to pretty much be catch as catch can," says Alexander. "Our biggest competitor, as far as share of the advertising dollar, is print, their TV."

"There will continue to be a place in advertising circles for both electronic and print media, but the competition within those circles will stiffen. Says Alexander, "I think the media that has the dominance now will continue that dominance."

Larry Sides, of Sides & Associates, agrees that the basics are here to stay, with increased competition. "I don't think you'll see the daily newspaper making changes," he says. "Every one of the major media forms still has its basic attributes and you can't take that away from them."

But over the past several years, three other weeklies have also folded in Lafayette. Pulse and Club Paradise were casualties of that period. One that recently fell by the wayside was Target, a feisty and sometimes controversial publication. By its own reckoning, the newspaper spent more than $200,000 in the past seven months without ever returning any profit.

"What you see is constant changes as people try new media and some of those new ones fail," says Sides.

"In terms of who is going to lose, I would say the alternative publications that come into being will have a difficult time. It's going to be difficult for them to become a major force," Sides says. "It would be a rough time for anything involved in media because of all the things going on."

With each exit, though, there seems to be another entry into the medium of print communication. The newest weekly, Acadiana Free Press, debuted last
month, with an announced circulation of 44,000. The newspaper, which is delivered free by mail, bills itself as positive and upbeat.

The influx of more advertising forms is not novel to Acadiana, but Lafayette seems to be particularly busy. This affinity for the Lafayette market is puzzling, especially considering how many have tried unsuccessfully to break into it.

“There’s a perception of the Lafayette market that there’s a lot of money here, and to some extent, there is,” says Scott. “The reception to the Morning Advocate has been overwhelming. We’ve been welcomed into the market graciously. We’ve exceeded both projected circulation and advertising revenues.”

But even well-established giants of Lafayette advertising will have to remain on their toes to stay ahead of the pack, according to Sides. “I would think anyone who’s had a dominant position in the past is already suffering some losses as a result of the widespread media options,” says Sides. “Nobody’s doing as well as they were 20 years ago.”

Nevertheless, many of the old standards in the Lafayette market will continue to remain viable advertising choices. “They’re always there and they’re dependable, and they always provide value in the specific use,” says Sides.

The bottom line is that even with the improving economy, businesses only have a finite amount of dollars to spend on advertising. Says Sides, “I think everybody’s taking money away from everybody.”