



Home Roundtable: Hearts and minds

November 01, 2014 by Gideon Fidelzeit , Be the first to comment

Myriad dedicated TV programs and social media channels have raised homeowners' expectations. Industry leaders gathered in New York City for this Spong-hosted roundtable to discuss how brands in the space are adapting to the savvier and emotionally invested consumer.

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Participants (alphabetical)

-Julie Batliner, MD, Spong

-Maggie Gallant, EVP, Rogers & Cowan

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- Chris Phillips, director of marketing, Apartment Therapy
- Emily Small, director of marketing services, MasterBrand Cabinets
- Mark Wagner, VP of brand and retail marketing, La-Z-Boy
- Bradford Walton, director of brand communications, The Home Depot
- Jason Winocour, partner, Hunter Public Relations

As seen on TV

Gideon Fidelzeid (*PRWeek*): *How has the brand-consumer relationship evolved in light of the explosion of TV programs devoted to the home?*

Julie Batliner (Spong): The impact of TV shows devoted to the home is very real. As we counsel clients, we make sure they understand how it's changing the way everyone dreams, plans, buys, and shares. Most of all, it's about positioning brands in the space as being able to take people through the entire homeowner journey. To do this, you must create content that helps all the way through the how-tos and the next home project.

Mark Wagner (La-Z-Boy): On home-improvement shows, everything seems so simple. Guys come in, rip your house up, and fix everything better than ever. It all happens in six weeks or less and it's perfect.

But when it comes to projects, a brand or retailer can't just talk about its products. It must provide solutions for homeowners so their projects can be achieved comfortably and realistically. When we do home design, we'll take on the role of the Property Brothers where we have just as much to do with the process as the products. The worst thing is when homeowners look back at a project and feel it didn't meet their aspirations and dreams.

Maggie Gallant (Rogers & Cowan): These TV shows are about empowerment. In the recent past, people would go into a store and buy the entire room set as is because they didn't have access to a designer. HGTV, along with so many brands now influenced by it, now offers that expertise. It empowers homeowners to make multiple decisions, go with different vendors in the same space, and it gives them permission to personalize. This also changes the consumer-brand relationship because the former has more information and can tell the latter more specifically what they want.

Jackie Hirschhaut (American Home Furnishings Alliance): This meteoric explosion of TV has made home furnishings a priority again. And it allows brands in the space to help customers through the shopping and design process, which, in turn, educates them on the broad variety of offerings from

such companies.

Emily Small (MasterBrand Cabinets): We've used this TV explosion to underscore the use of a designer in any kitchen remodel. Consumers now come armed with inspirational folders. They have ideas. They want to do things themselves. We encourage that, but there is still a key place to rely on a designer to make sure their ideas are workable and that everything will function properly once installed.

Jason Winocour (Hunter PR): Amid this proliferation of shows are ones that focus on the real-estate component. We're counseling clients to tap into the fact this post-recessionary consumer is all about value and ROI on a particular project.

Bradford Walton (Home Depot): These shows have given a level of transparency to the entire process. When consumers come in, they understand you can get new cabinets or reface the ones you have. They have points of view on insulation. They're walking into our stores educated.

The key for brands is turning that into an actionable plan for them. Home TV programs have upped the ante in terms of the conversations that need to happen, whether over social media, digitally, or in the stores.

Wagner (La-Z-Boy): Consumers now have confidence and are not afraid of all the components. As a retailer, it's exciting because you're able to satisfy them in more complete solutions. At the same time, they will engage with more of your services and expertise.

Gallant (Rogers & Cowan): People really connect to HGTV's on-air talent. These are actual contractors, electricians, and designers and people feel an emotional connection to these individuals and come back for more because they trust them. So if these individuals are talking about brands, they have a very captive audience.

Hirschhaut (Alliance): In these shows' early days, the "experts" would come in to tackle a project. Today, they will go out shopping with the homeowner and guide consumers as they make their selections. That is another great opportunity for brands in the space.

Print remains in the picture

Fidelzeit (PRWeek): *The beautiful, picture-heavy layouts of print would*

still seem to have a unique allure in this sector. Where does print rank in terms of importance for your efforts?

Batliner (Spong): Our research shows print still plays a critical role in that first stage of decision-making, the dreaming or pondering stage. Then, depending on the content within the publications, it has a key place during the actionable steps, as well.

Fidelzeid (PRWeek): *Is print more relevant in this particular space than others you work in?*

Batliner (Spong): Absolutely. In recent visits to media outlets in the space, we've heard some are doubling the number of pages dedicated to home because readers want it. Those visuals and the curated design are still in demand. People go to print to get ideas on what their style might be.

Winocour (Hunter): Even in today's mobile world and smartphones with bigger screens, they still don't come close to a two-page spread in an actual magazine. Even something on a Pinterest board doesn't have the same impact as a spread of a living room beautifully done in, say, *Architectural Digest*.

Small (MasterBrand): It's not just print media, either. Our full-line brochures are still broadly impactful because consumers want to see those big, beautiful pictures in print. You can have those photos online, but it's not the same. Moreover, so many people still take those physical images from a printed product with them as they go through the process.

Chris Phillips (Apartment Therapy): We see titles such as *House Beautiful* or *Dwell* as our big sisters in many ways. They've been creating beautiful, aspirational pictures for a long time. It's very complementary to what we do online. They show up at photo shoots with trailers full of accessories and stylists and we translate it online into something a little more do-it-yourself, a bit more approachable and conversational.

Wagner (La-Z-Boy): Media mix modeling we recently did underscored that print remains incredibly important in this space. Pages in a magazine still connect emotionally with consumers and remain a source of aspiration and inspiration.

Walton (Home Depot): In this space, print serves as an entrée into having a conversation. If you want to know more, websites and the online assets allow you to dive in deeper. I have two print magazines in my bag right now that I'll look at on the plane home. That's what inspires me.

Hirschhaut (Alliance): The home furnishings industry as a whole really depends on print more than anything else. And the great opportunity there is in the images. Provide great quality product images and it's a slam-dunk you'll get into publications. Taken a step further, if you can provide custom, individual images to certain publications, that's a great tool when magazines are vying for exclusivity.

Phillips (Apartment Therapy): Brands targeting Millennials are moving their media investments more and more online. There are things we can do online with social media that print magazines struggle to do. I view that as being complementary to print, though many of our readers, especially those in their 20s and 30s, do not subscribe to these magazines.

Hitting home



Sarah Dignan Whitman, VP at Wayfair Supply and AllModern, spoke with PRWeek managing editor Gideon Fidelzeid prior to the

roundtable about personalizing the online-shopping experience in the home space, marketing to Millennials, and accounting for the unique emotional connection consumers have for all things related to their abodes.

Below are some key takeaways:

•Proliferation of TV shows devoted to home

The home tends to be people's favorite place in the world. HGTV and similar networks have amplified that. The TV offerings have also raised the stakes in terms of content.

[You can't just focus] on creating a destination for people who know exactly

The content challenge

Fidelzeid (PRWeek): *Few sectors offer the endless content-creation possibilities the home sector does with its beautiful visuals and a rapt audience. With that creative bar so high, how does a brand stand out?*

Gallant (Rogers & Cowan):

The first thing we focus on is finding the right experts to put out there. You need credible, authentic individuals and content to get people excited because this is the most important and emotional investment many folks will make in their lives.

what they want. It is about creating a place where people can find new options and discover new things.

•Maximizing the online shopping experience

We focus on having really rich content. We try to include every conceivable detail you would ask about if you're in a store. We find customers are gravitating toward shopping experiences based more around selection and options than based around that in-person experience. So more people are coming around to the possibility of buying items for the home online.

•The emotional connection

It starts with the realization that the home space is different to almost any other category. That pursuit of something uniquely yours is paramount in this space. Content needs to do more than inform. It needs to inspire homeowners and give them the confidence to develop their own style.

•Trends to watch

DIY is only becoming more popular. The focus on the process of design and personalization is as high as it has ever been. In terms of style trends, more people are more comfortable with mixing and matching than ever before. The access to so much content, whether on TV, in print, or online, is a huge facilitator in that.

Click here for more from Whitman on marketing to Millennials in the home space, unique content collaborations, and a look at regional differences and similarities among homeowners.

Winocour (Hunter): Brands must realize people are now shopping for experiences first and then buying products to bring those experiences to life, not the other way around.

Batliner (Spong): Celebrity designers certainly build awareness and credibility, but consumers want real, organic content where they see "people like me" are doing something. That helps with shareability and pass-along value.

Hirschhaut (Alliance): Being a little different or quirky can also help heighten and call attention to products or design themes. It needn't all be down the straight and narrow.

Small (MasterBrand): We have two buckets of content – the ever-living that people can always refer to when doing any project and the more trend-focused content that keeps it fresh. For a brand such as ours, that balance is crucial.

Gallant (Rogers & Cowan): Every brand has a voice. Regardless of platform, you must stay true to that. It helps people feel comfortable with

your brand. It helps establish that relationship with them so they know they are engaging with your brand even as they look at different products of yours.

Walton (Home Depot): In the home space, people will tell you if you are giving them something they don't want. You need to provide content that will educate, be clear, and give people the tools to set their own expectations.

Phillips (Apartment Therapy): We have a very data-driven approach. Our editor-in-chief's desk looks more like a cockpit with multiple monitors on which he's getting data from different sources. In real time, we are learning what our readers want us to tell them about.

Small (MasterBrand): Throughout the purchase or project cycle, there is fun, excitement, anxiety, frustration, and, hopefully, it ends in smiles. Brand content must remain relevant in order to help consumers through the process and all the emotions that come.

Wagner (La-Z-Boy): It's equally important for brands to understand how their content engages the consumer, what they want that content to do, and how it triggers the behaviors they look for. The folks in analytics who really understand all that are crucial to helping facilitate a brand's content.

Whatever content we create, we want people to say, "Oh my God, that's La-Z-Boy?" And we do that by presenting our products in real-life modes and tapping into emotions. Those moments make it more than just furniture and they create that aspiration to go deeper into the brand.

A great way to empower consumers is to enable them to dress up your products in their own ways and share them. Some of our highest-traffic Pinterest content is people pinning rendered furniture.

Chasm or common ground

Fidelzeid (PRWeek): *Are the differences between what men and women look for in home purchases as wide as ever or have more similarities emerged?*

Winocour (Hunter): Men have definitely become more involved in home design, so there's more opportunity for collective decisions, which is also potentially more opportunity for conflict. Instead of picking one or two items,

10 or 12 are now being chosen. This gives brands a real ability to offer solutions and compromises both can be happy with.

Hirschhaut (Alliance): It's all about eclectic decorating today – and a lot of common ground can be found there. It's more than just the shift from buying a whole set; consumers are now being taught they need not buy everything at once. Invest in one or two quality pieces first and then come back at a later time for the next pieces.

Walton (Home Depot): Home TV shows have taught people it is OK to desire a narrative around your room. It has empowered people to curate their own rooms and talk their friends through all the choices they've made to make it their own. That sort of sentiment manifests in social media. And that helps people get even more invested in their homes.

Whether man or woman, this ability to customize had changed the value equation. People can pay a certain amount for any item, but they can now get it to look exactly how they want.

Phillips (Apartment Therapy): Historically, men have not felt that welcome by media in this space. That has completely changed. A third of our readers are men. We have a male founder. We've never really had a gender-specific approach. Especially among younger demographics, there are plenty of stay-at-home dads, as well as many men and women who work from home. That demographic is particularly interesting because when you work at home, it changes the dynamic of how you view your home. You're spending more time there than ever, so of course you want a bigger say in its design.

Gallant (Rogers & Cowan): To really get an interesting snapshot about men's and women's role in the process, *House Hunters* is a fascinating watch. You can no longer assume the woman is the one who will care about the bigger closet. It's amazing to see that one item in the house where the man will put his foot down and say, "I must have this." And sometimes that item is in the kitchen or bedroom, the last place you'd expect.

The fact women have much more purchasing ability than ever before has also changed this dynamic. The premium they place on function has risen dramatically.

Winocour (Hunter): An interesting thing to keep an eye on in the next couple of years is the movement toward smart homes. An increasingly popular term

is "techorating," as opposed to "decorating."

Will this be an area for collaboration between couples or an area of more conflict as couples seek to incorporate technology and decorating into a cohesive whole? Likely the former, as all consumers will surely see the benefits of technology in the home. However, conflict certainly could arise as it relates to how much couples want to push the envelope in terms of automation and technology. A home that's too gadget-filled loses its hearth feel.

Smart decisions

Fidelzeid (PRWeek): *The emotional relevance of the home has been established. Decisions around technology tend to be intellectual. As smart homes become more prevalent, where do you find the balance in your messaging?*

Small (MasterBrand): It's about how you define technology. It could be the pop-up USB port that you can plug all your items into. It could be integrated lighting that can be adjusted depending on your mood. Even tech decisions in the home are certainly personalized and, thus, emotional to that extent.

Walton (Home Depot): It's an interesting time for home technology. Where we are now is akin to where we were with smartphones maybe 10 years ago. There's so much we still don't know. What is certain, though, is it is changing what people expect from their homes, whether from a security standpoint or simply making their abodes more conducive to amazing gatherings.

Small (MasterBrand): There's almost a fear factor in terms of how much to invest because technology is changing so fast and what you buy now very well might be outdated in two years.

Winocour (Hunter): An early adopter in a core piece of technology spent \$200. If it didn't fly, well, they're out \$200. However, an early adopter in technology for the home could be a much more costly mistake.

Phillips (Apartment Therapy): This summer our readership was lit on fire by an app with which you could control your air conditioner. There are some music systems you can control from your phone. Our readers love the idea of coming home and having the temperature set and the music going. So many offerings will be coming out for Christmas and Q1 2015 for customers to get excited about.

Walton (Home Depot): This all goes back to customization. Very early adopters to smart homes had to buy a house fully wired 10 years ago or so. Today, your technology can be customized just like your furniture, your cabinets, and so on.

Batliner (Spong): How much is too much with technology? It's when it stops being simple. Brands such as Trane and American Standard use the app Nexia, which is a full home intelligence system that not only allows you to control the front door or check in on your pets while you're out, but it sends information straight to your dealer to say something is wrong. It's high-tech at it's finest, but it's simple. When it stops being simple, people won't use it.

Phillips (Apartment Therapy): It also must be practical. I've seen an app that tells you how many eggs are left in your refrigerator. That's simply not a big enough problem to need an app to solve. However, the ColorSnap Studio app, which allows you to match paint colors and, thus, find exactly the one you want, is great as it makes a potentially complicated decision easier.

Wagner (La-Z-Boy): It is very much about how user-friendly the technology is. Is it truly delivering a benefit or has it become cumbersome? So much of what we think about is apps on a phone, but the automation or technologies inherent, underneath, or somehow out of view in a particular product that make it more functional are equally, if not more, exciting.

Click here for more from this roundtable, including a look at how consumer social-media use has evolved throughout the entire home-purchase cycle, as well as some telling customer feedback stories.



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