

# THE BABEL PROBLEM

## Will Creating a Common Language Improve Media-mix Planning?

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The children of Noe traveled far along the Tigris River into the land of Sennar.

There they settled at a place they called Babylon and said, *“Come, let us make a city and a tower, the top whereof may reach to heaven so that others will celebrate us.”* But this offended God who confounded their tongue so they could not understand one another, and the tower was left unfinished.



That’s where media is today. A Tower of Babel. Progress confounded by a hundred tongues. TV speaks *ratings*, Print talks *readership*, Internet hawks *page views*, Outdoor sings *showings*.

We’ve built many towers, but none of them tall.

Media planning is like the Tower of Babel. An “under construction” sign on a high-rise to heaven is a fine metaphor for our ambitions and failures. Sometimes “Babel” is a pretty good fit too.

## Must the Media World Learn Latin?

A lot of time and energy has been spent on the Babel problem. We call it “data harmonization.” Magazines are being pushed into talking *rating points* and *weekly reach*. The Internet is debating *reach and frequency*. Outdoor is attempting *GRP's*. But is creating a common media language really the answer to better planning?

Perhaps. But then tell me, children of Noe, what is that language to be, Television?



Today Television is the mother tongue. When we focus on data harmonization we're really saying every medium should talk like television. But other media, old and new, are not like television. The Internet's bewildering attempt at branding makes the point. And other media, not Television are changing the media world.

It seems foolish at this late date to make them all learn Latin.

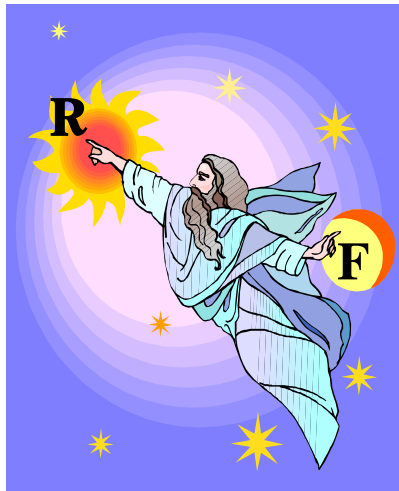
## Too Narrow A Bed

The Television planning model is a narrow bed for other media. TV targets poorly, *young/old*, *male/female*. Print, Radio, Yellow Pages, Direct Mail, the Internet, all target consumers far better. Imposing Television's blunt demography on other media, as we do now in the name of media-mix, doesn't help us plan better.

Television's planning model is national. Newspapers, Radio, Yellow Pages, Outdoor, Spot and Cable television are local. Many of these media can be planned with great geographic precision. Location has far greater targeting leverage than age and sex. More than half of \$100,000 plus income households live in fewer than 10% of US counties. Try and get that kind of income selectivity with age and sex demos.

### Reach & Frequency

*Reach & frequency* is not the *Yin & Yang* of media. It is a mass media measurement and not the governing principle.



TV works by serendipity; the chance meeting of a relevant message and a ready consumer. TV needs reach because it doesn't target "ready consumers" very well. Media that target better need reach less.

The Yellow Pages is not a reach medium and it doesn't have to be. Interactive media can focus on response. That's why the Internet's current obsession with reach curves seems misplaced. The Internet is not Television. The surest way to kill it is to act as if it is.

Think about Direct Response. If 500,000 replies deliver \$10 million in sales, what do you care what the reach is? There are better measures.

### **Audience Versus Sales**

*Audience* is the biggest limitation of the TV model. Television focuses us on message delivery and ignores consumer response, simply because TV doesn't know what happens after the message reaches the consumer. Other media do.

And that makes a fair point. Our TV-centric media thinking begins and ends with delivering the message. Audience is its measure. Audience is its goal. But the real goal is the sale and not many plans attempt to extrapolate up from exposure to sales in a reasoned way to show why the plan will work. They should.

Paul Gerhold, a friend and years wiser than most I know, suggests we turn it around. Start with sales, not audience as the media plan's goal and make response as well as audience, the media plan's measure.



It's an interesting idea to think of a media plan as a *sales-plan*. One that uses the goals and measurements for each medium that are most closely linked to sales. Then it's obvious how other media fit in. Direct Mail, Yellow Pages, the Internet, each can have fair claim

to the media budget based upon measures of response, not just exposure, reach and frequency.

Media planning is the Tower of Babel. Its many tongues include *ratings, message recall, persuasion, response* and *sales*. Different media can do different things. That's why we use them.

And that's why, sometimes, they need to speak funny.