

Getting reaction: Icon Media's direct response marketing gives call to action for consumers.

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Nancy Lazkani knows how to get a response from people, a direct and quantifiable response that is.

She's CEO of Van Nuys-based Icon Media Direct, Inc. The firm specializes in direct response marketing, ad campaigns that drive consumers to toll-free telephone numbers, web sites or retail locations where sales can be tracked immediately.

The firm does media planning and media buying for short-form television ads that last 30- to 60-seconds, long-form spots, also known as infomercials that can last 30 minutes or more, and print media.

The ads are calls to action for consumers. Think: Billy Mays demonstrating the wonders of OxiClean and encouraging television viewers to get off their couch and call the toll-free number at the bottom of the screen.

In fact, Lazkani promotes OxiClean. She also helped boost sales and brand awareness of the Cordless Swivel Sweeper, Debbie Meyer GreenBags, Craftsman RoboGrip pliers, Proactiv Solution and the Tap Light to name just a few.

"What makes direct response marketing unique is that it's an accountable measure to what's going on at the retail level, online and with telesales," says Lazkani, who founded Icon Media Direct in 2000. "If we're moving the needle up we're doing our job. If not, we re-tool the campaign."

Lazkani, a 25-year marketing industry veteran, says infomercials and other forms of direct response marketing often get a bad rap in the advertising world. But she swears by the model for one simple reason: it works.

She got her start in the business as a media buyer for boutique advertising and marketing agencies. She says the experience allowed her to wear many hats, and in the early 1990s she accepted a job working with infomercials.

Lazkani was intrigued by the concept because the drawn-out commercials got results. But she also had to contend with the fact that some people frowned upon the industry.

"Direct response marketing in the 1990s was sort of like the black sheep of ad agencies," says Lazkani. "So I've had to overcome a lot of those barriers about being proud of the industry."

She went on to work with Williams Worldwide Television, heading-up a short-form advertising division of the company. Lazkani grew the division into a \$50 million business within four years.

She then started a direct response marketing arm of Focus Media, successfully launching products for Sears and other major retailers, and growing the division from \$0 to \$26 million in billings in two years.

"Working with Focus Media was almost like starting my own company within a company," says Lazkani. "It was a stepping stone to build my own confidence."

She launched her own firm in 1997, but had a falling out with the partners. In 2000, she opened Icon Media Direct in a temporary office space, using all of the money she had in savings and credit cards.

One of her first clients was Orange Glo International, a small family-owned business. The brand now encompasses OxiClean, Kaboom and other household goods. And Church & Dwight Co. Inc. purchased the company and brands in 2006.

Within six months of launching Icon Media Direct, Lazkani was billing \$15 million in media buys, about 10 percent of which was gross revenue for the firm. In 2006 she had grown the business to \$89 million in billings; 2007, \$120 million; 2008, \$130 million; and she's on track to bill \$140 million-\$150 million in 2009.

Icon now has a sprawling office complex in Van Nuys and 76 employees. The firm does media planning, media buying, online media, campaign management and public relations and marketing.

"That's how I started ... on a hope and a prayer," says Lazkani, who is also a mother of two. "And I had a lot of help from others."

When Church & Dwight purchased OxiClean, they also purchased the product's direct response marketing program, says Kierie Courtney, senior manager of direct marketing for Church & Dwight.

"Nancy was there from the beginning and I view her team as an extension of my team," says Courtney. "She is a wealth of knowledge."

Courtney says direct response marketing is incredibly powerful. OxiClean recently experienced a significant shift in results over three weeks. Icon Media Direct quickly identified an 18 percent shift in the industry and the ad campaign was modified immediately.

A weight-loss product called Fullbar used to only be sold at tradeshow and other events. But company officials decided to use direct response television marketing to reach a broader audience.

"Nancy has been buying media for us and took us under her wing to help with our marketing strategy and goals," says Joel Appel, CEO of Fullbar. "Sales went crazy and every retailer wanted to carry it."

Direct response marketing also taught the company that many consumers go straight to the website, but the majority purchase Fullbars in stores. Fullbar is now in Wal-Mart, Costco, Walgreens and a host of other national retailers.

Lazkani says another perk of the job is helping entrepreneurs achieve success. "This model tells you if you're on the right track, in real-time," she says. "In a down economy we're flourishing and I think it's because of the accountability."

Spotlight

Icon Media Direct

Year Founded: 2000

Revenues in 2006: \$89 million in billings (The company's gross revenue is approx. 10 percent of billings)

Revenues in 2007: \$120 million in billings

Revenues in 2008: \$130 million in billings

Employees in 2009: 76

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