

HOW CONSUMERS RESPOND TO COMMERCIALS: POSITIVE/NEGATIVE EVALUATIONS AND THE HEAVY VIEWER EFFECT, PAST AND PRESENT

For many years, Bruzzone Research Company (BRC) has conducted consumer awareness studies of TV ad campaigns that are quite different from those done by standard copytesters. Instead of recruiting people to screen programs and then questioning them about the commercials contained therein, BRC contacts samples of consumers, shows them a storyboard-like replica of an ad along with a rough script and then asks whether they have seen that particular commercial before. This is followed by questions about the respondent's interest level in the ad and/or product message, their perceptions of the ad, their ability to correctly identify the advertised brand, its likability and related factors. By focusing on the ad rather than on a hyped one-time program screening, BRC believes that it obtains a more realistic picture of an ad campaign's total penetration into the marketplace—a view we happen to share.

And now to the findings. Twenty odd years ago, when BRC was conducting its surveys by mail ballots, approximately three out of five persons who returned their questionnaires claimed that they had seen the average TV commercial measured. Of these, 45% (or 73% of those who recalled seeing the ad) correctly named the brand and 11% (or 17% of those who recalled exposure) stated that they were very interested in the commercial and/or its message. As shown in the following table, BRC's mail questionnaire norms for 1992-2001 reveal a dramatic loss of awareness for the typical commercial tested. Currently, only 30% of BRC's mail respondents claim to have seen the average commercial—a decline of more than 50% over the norms that applied two decades ago.

The good news—if there is any—to be gleaned from this now-and-then comparison, is that approximately the same proportion of people who recall exposure correctly identified the advertiser's brand (73% in 1979 vs. 64% currently). Moreover, the percentage of people remembering exposure who rated themselves as “very interested” in the commercial actually rose from 17% in the 1979 norms to 18% at present (see next table).

The implications of these findings are fairly obvious. The general loss in ad awareness that has been noted over this 20+-year interval is dramatic, and reflects the declining media values attained by the typical advertiser's current TV expenditures. In short, since ad spending has not kept pace with audience attrition, advertisers are generating less reach and frequency per dollar with their TV campaigns than before. So quite naturally their ad awareness, particularly for specific commercial executions, has declined alarmingly. However, the fact that the same proportion of people who currently recall seeing the ads correctly identify the brands, while relatively higher proportions of current-recallers claim interest in what the commercials now have to say, suggests that TV ads remain effective selling instruments.

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BRC AVERAGE TV COMMERCIAL RECOGNITION, CORRECT ID AND INTEREST LEVEL NORMS

	1979 NORMS ¹	2001 NORMS ¹
Recognized Commercial	62%	34%
Correctly Identified Brand	45	22
Interest In Commercial		
Very	11	6
Somewhat	30	17

Note: The above-cited percentages are based on mail surveys from all respondents, whether or not they recognized the average commercial. However, when viewed on a relative plane, using the percentage who recognized the commercial as a base, we see that the correct brand ID ratios for the two periods are similar (73% for 1979, 69% for 1992-01).

¹All data are for a number of years prior to the dates indicated.

²Source: 2001 data are from BRC; 1979 norms are from The Case For Testing Commercials By Mail, Donald E. Bruzzone's presentation to the 25th Annual Conference of the Advertising Research Foundation, 10/23/79.

How do people rate commercials? Over the years, BRC has developed normative findings using a number of positive and negative attributes. For example, in its current mail studies, 36% of those who recall seeing a typical TV ad considered it “amusing” and 24% rated it as “clever.” These levels are more than twice those prevailing for the same attributes 20 years earlier. On the other hand, today’s commercials rate well below their 1970s counterparts as “convincing” or “informative” messages. This suggests that the light, funny and breezy—some might say superficial—stylings of many recent commercials that have been adopted as a means of making them more appealing to a population with reduced attention spans are not necessarily more motivating than the somewhat more doctrinaire treatments of the past. A comparison of BRC’s 1979 and 2001 norms for 11 positive and 7 negative attributes appears in the next table.

One of the most interesting findings in our analysis of BRC’s data concerns the distinctions that are drawn between heavy and light viewers. According to the company’s recent norms for mall-intercept studies, persons who watch 3+ hours of TV daily are 8-10% more likely to recall seeing an average commercial than those who watch fewer than three hours per day. This is hardly surprising. What is interesting however, is the strong tendency of heavy viewers to rate commercials more favorably than their lighter viewing counterparts. The last

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*How Consumers Respond To Commercials Continued***RATINGS OF VARIOUS COMMERCIAL ATTRIBUTES¹**

	1979 NORMS²	2001 NORMS²
Pro		
Amusing	14%	36%
Appealing	12	17
Clever	11	24
Convincing	14	5
Effective	18	17
Imaginative	8	21
Informative	19	8
Lively	7	8
Original	8	14
Well Done	13	15
Worth Remembering	12	10
Con		
Dull	10	7
Easy To Forget	9	11
Irritating	6	4
Phony	8	7
Pointless	5	9
Silly	9	13
Uninteresting	11	NA

Note: NA=data not available.

¹*By people who recall seeing an average TV commercial.*

²*All data are for a number of years prior to the dates indicated.*

☐ *Source: 2001 data are directly from BRC; 1979 norms are from The Case For Testing Commercials By Mail, Donald E. Bruzzone's presentation to the 25th Annual Conference of the Advertising Research Foundation, 10/23/79.*

table in this report summarizes BRC's profile of commercial attributes raters by sex, age, education and heavy-light TV viewing segments. Taking the positive attributes, heavy viewers were 12% more likely than all respondents to rate commercials as "amusing" (last column) while light viewers were 8% less likely than all respondents to render such an opinion. As one scans down the last two columns in the table, it is evident that heavy viewers are consistently more inclined to rate commercials positively and less inclined to be critical of them (see next table).

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How Consumers Respond To Commercials Continued

RELATIVE INDICES OF POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTE RATINGS^{1,2}

	SEX		AGE		EDUCATION		TV VIEWING FREQUENCY	
	MEN	WOMEN	< 35	35 +	COLL. GRAD.	NOT COLL. GRAD.	<3 HRS. DAILY	3+ HRS. DAILY
Positive Evaluations								
Amusing	108	92	91	106	117	92	92	112
Appealing	100	100	108	93	109	93	94	110
Believable	94	106	104	98	90	111	88	117
Clever	110	90	92	106	122	90	93	110
Convincing	89	111	119	87	75	113	93	110
Effective	102	99	105	97	106	97	100	99
Fast Moving	101	99	114	95	105	99	101	99
Imaginative	110	90	92	105	121	89	91	113
Informative	91	109	113	93	97	105	102	98
Lively	101	99	111	90	113	94	97	104
Original	110	90	100	98	119	91	93	111
True To Life	89	112	117	92	83	114	89	118
Warm	90	110	102	98	100	104	97	104
Well Done	105	95	99	100	104	99	92	112
Worth Remembering	93	107	109	91	83	106	92	112
Negative Evaluations								
Confusing	94	112	86	112	116	86	116	94
Dull	112	89	112	92	115	92	108	89
Easy To Forget	111	90	97	103	123	92	105	92
Irritating	100	100	100	100	140	80	120	80
Phoney	116	84	100	103	131	88	113	81
Pointless	117	83	87	110	132	87	107	90
Seen A Lot	95	105	136	84	93	108	97	105
Silly	106	94	99	99	124	89	104	94
Worn Out	113	88	119	94	113	100	106	88

¹By adults who recognized an average TV commercial.

²Norms based on Bruzzone database for the past nine years.

☐ Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.'s calculations from data supplied by Bruzzone Research Co.

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How Consumers Respond To Commercials Continued

While some of BRC's findings may be related to demographics (i.e. heavy viewers tend to be older and less educated than light viewers), we suspect that something else is afoot in the statistical comparisons. As Marshall McLuhan put it in the 1960s, "the medium is the message," and this may be why heavy viewers respond so positively to TV commercials. Putting it in the simplest terms, they prefer this form of communication; accordingly, heavy viewers find commercials more palatable (or less objectionable) than more discriminating light viewers. This has been borne out to some extent by Simmons viewer diary studies (1966-1994) that showed that the heaviest viewers not only outviewed the lightest by a 10-to-1 margin, but they were also more fully attentive to program content while doing so.

Advertisers traditionally make a conscious effort to redirect "redundant" media weight away from the heavy viewer segments to garner more exposure among lighter viewers. Thus far we have seen little evidence that this strategy, even if successful (and cost effective), produces meaningful results. Bruzzone Research Company's data suggest—and that's all we're making of it at this point—that heavy viewers may be more desirable advertising targets for TV ad campaigns than is commonly recognized.

