COMMERCIAL POSITIONING VARIABLES

As advertisers and ad agencies seek new ways to retain program viewers and minimize zapping during commercials, their interest has focused on better positioning within breaks. This flies in the face of traditional time selling practice, which calls for "fair" rotation of all ads within a pod, so as to give each buyer a fair share of the preferred positions. Still, if demand for preferential treatment mounts, the networks may comply, albeit with hefty CPM premiums or, possibly, with new combinations of shorter "uncluttered" breaks and longer pods. The former might contain a single 60-second message or two 30-second ads, and would satisfy advertisers concerned about the negative effects of clutter-induced dial switching "avoidance."

But what does the research tell us? To date, evaluations of the relative value of commercial positions has focused almost entirely on primetime, where there is the least ad clutter. Broadly speaking, such research has taken two forms, the first and most numerous of which are ad recall studies. The accompanying table summarizes these findings, indexing their commercial recall findings (relative to the all-commercial average) by position in break. As can be seen, the sole unaided recall study—Nielsen/CAB's 2000 near coincidental research—did not jibe exactly with the patterns noted in the three much older aided/verified recall studies. While the first and second positions scored well above par when viewers were offered no reminders or cues to stimulate their memories, the aided recall methodology was much less sensitive to positioning factors.

It is also worth noting that recent IAG Research comments that DVR user ad recall is higher for commercials that air at the end of the break. This might be explained by a commercial zapper's need for a cue to stop fast-forwarding through a break when the program reappears, and heightened attentiveness to the screen as they anticipate the show resuming. Another theory is that when the "play" button is hit, the DVR often resumes from the beginning of the 30- or 60-second interval on the screen, which may include the last commercial leading up to the program.

Others have utilized TiVo's DVR panel to isolate the "best" pod positioning for advertisers. A report by MagnaGlobal noted that the average ad loses 59% of a network's program audience in a DVR-recorded program played at a later date, but those commercials in the first ("A") position lose only 49%. Interestingly, when the same agency examined live DVR viewing, it found that audience retention rates for "A" position commercials were about the same as for other commercials in the same break.

Finally, special tallies of Nielsen's ratings on a commercial-by-commercial basis have not found the degree of in-pod sensitivity that media researchers expected. Typically, most commercials were found to lose about the same proportion of program viewers when they appeared.

It has long been assumed that the first and, to a lesser extent, the last commercial in a typical five-ad primetime break are the best places for an advertiser to be seen, but as our analysis indicates, there isn't a lot of solid evidence to support this. Most of the ad recall methodologies are not designed specifically to explore this issue; rather, they were developed for ad impact testing. As we have noted elsewhere in this volume, more precise mechanical indicators, like Nielsen's peoplemeters, do not really measure "viewing" as an advertiser defines it. Instead,

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they offer a way to gauge dial switching avoidance. On average, such tallies involve only 6-8% of the audience, which is hardly indicative of variations in *total* viewership.

Other issues also complicate an analysis of positioning variables. One is the paucity of data concerning dayparts other than primetime, where breaks tend to be more cluttered. And, even in primetime, there is virtually no information on cable channels, which routinely air six or more commercials per break, plus promotional announcements. Finally, it stands to reason that there are demographic and mindset variables (such as ad receptivity) about which we can only speculate.

Obviously much more research is needed to provide some meaningful answers on commercial positioning. Our best estimate is that the first ad in a break has the best chance to garner at least some viewer exposure before those who are so inclined switch channels. How much more? Perhaps 10-15%. As for the last commercial, it depends a lot on the length of the break, the appeal of the programming, the daypart, demographics and attention spans of the viewers. Considering all of these factors, it's probably a wash.

PRIMETIME COMMERCIAL AWARENESS BY POSITION IN BREAK

	UNAIDED AD RECALL[1]	AIDED AD RECALL[2]
Number Of Studies	**1**	**3**
Position In Break		
First	125	98
Second	116	98
Third	84	101
Fourth	67	104
Fifth	104	104

[1]*CAB/Nielsen near-coincidental, April 2000.*
[2]*BBDO (1969), G&R (1974-77), Burke (1972-81).*