

## DO VIEWERS PAY MORE ATTENTION WHEN THEY WATCH ALL BY THEMSELVES?

Conventional wisdom holds that people who watch TV all by themselves, thus choosing a particular show to see, are considerably more attentive than those watching with others. Yet there is precious little evidence to back this assumption up.

A study conducted in the fall of 1996 by Statistical Research, Inc. (SRI) as part of its S\*M\*A\*R\*T initiative provides a welcome indicator of attentiveness, contrasting the solitary viewing experience with shared viewing situations. SRI conducted telephone interviews among 1,856 persons aged 12+ in four one-hour intervals spread across a full week. Respondents were asked whether they had been home during the hour selected and if so, whether they were in a room with a TV set on. In the latter case, each respondent was asked to estimate how many minutes during that hour s/he was in the room with a TV set and how many of those minutes his/her eyes were on the set or, if not, whether the sound could be heard. Finally, the interviewer asked who else was in the room.

As shown in the first table, on average, approximately two out of three persons aged 12+ in a room with a TV set on claimed to have their eyes on the set while present; in contrast about three out of ten could hear the sound but weren't watching and 4-5% were neither watching nor listening. Late prime "viewers" (10-11pm) tended to be more attentive to program content than morning "viewers" (9-10am), displaying a 12-point lead in the "eyes-on" column.

With these overall findings in mind, the second table focuses on the "eyes-on" percentages for solitary viewers versus those in accompanied viewing situations. Interestingly, the eyes-on disparity was virtually non-existent during the evening hours (7-8pm and 10-11pm), with solitary viewers rating themselves only a few points more attentive. However, the margins favoring solitary viewers were considerably higher during the morning and afternoon hours.

Limiting itself to one daypart, a winter 2004 study of adults aged 18-64, conducted by SRI/Knowledge Networks, noted that primetime viewers of on-air and cable shows were about 10% more attentive when they watched all by themselves than when accompanied by others. While this is a somewhat larger disparity—in favor of solitary viewers—than shown by the older SRI "eyes on" research, it is nevertheless of modest proportions.

The most logical explanation for the general lack of differentiation in the evening hours is the broader-based appeal of most TV fare at those times of day, making "consensus viewing" more likely when two or more persons are in the room with a TV set on at 8 or 10pm, than in the morning or afternoon time periods. Another factor is the composition of the audience. In the evenings, most family members are at home, hence an adult watching TV is more likely to be accompanied by another adult with presumably similar tastes in program fare.

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In the mornings, however, an adult is more apt to be accompanied by children or perhaps a very old person, and such people may have less interest in the program selected, which in turn causes them to engage in conversation and other attention-diverting activities.

In any event, SRI's study, albeit eight years old, casts some doubt on the time honored assumption that solitary viewers are always more attentive and, as a result, more likely to be exposed to ads. Indeed, for some products and especially new ad campaigns, the presence of another viewer may stimulate interaction, with one commenting to the other about the ad message and, in some cases, encouraging some sort of buying action ("let's try it").

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## ATTENTIVENESS OF PERSONS IN TV ROOM BY DAYPART<sup>1</sup>

	EYES ON SET	LISTENING ONLY	NEITHER EYES ON NOR LISTENING
9–10am	61%	33%	6%
3–4pm	68	30	2
7–8pm	68	27	5
10–11pm	73	25	2

<sup>1</sup>Percent of minutes that respondents aged 12+ were visually or aurally attentive.

☐ Source: Statistical Research, Inc., S\*M\*A\*R\*T, "How People Use Television VI," fall 1996.

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## ATTENTIVENESS OF PERSONS IN TV ROOM BY VIEWING ALONE OR WITH OTHERS IN THE ROOM BY DAYPART<sup>1</sup>

	VIEW ALONE		SOMEONE ELSE IN ROOM		% DIFFERENCE FOR EYES-ON
	% OF AUDIENCE <sup>2</sup>	% EYES ON SET	% OF AUDIENCE <sup>2</sup>	% EYES ON SET	
9-10am	59	66	41	54	-18
3-4pm	52	73	48	62	-15
7-8pm	43	71	57	68	-4
10-11pm	48	73	52	71	-3

<sup>1</sup>Persons aged 12+.

<sup>2</sup>Media Dynamics, Inc. estimates based on SRI report.

☐ Source: Statistical Research, Inc., S\*M\*A\*R\*T, "How People Use Television VI," fall 1996.

