FREQUENCY WORKS BEST FOR BRANDS WITH HIGH RECALL/HIGH PERSUASION ADS

Much of the discussion about effective frequency, recency/continuity and other forms of TV ad scheduling deals with this issue on a highly theoretical level. Although lip service is given to the many other variables that may affect the outcome, they are often dismissed or ignored while one pundit or another espouses the particular philosophy they favor. For example, in the July/August 1997 **Journal of Advertising Research**, Professor John Philip Jones of Syracuse University, whose book, **When Ads Work**, rekindled the debate, continued to press his case in favor of continuity as opposed to flighting and stated unequivocally that a "media strategy of three exposures before purchase should only be used in the most exceptional circumstances." By this he was referring to a fairly short pre-purchase interval, not the whole ad campaign extending for 52 weeks or longer. But beyond this fairly well accepted advice, Jones offered few guidelines for marketers in various situations to consider.

Writing in the same issue of the **Journal of Advertising Research**, Kenneth A. Longman cited 1990-92 data from Nielsen's now-defunct national household TV Meter/UPC Scanner Panel (the same source used by Jones) to show the short term effects of various levels of TV ad exposure for 50-70 large packaged goods brands per year. Here, however, Longman provided separate compilations for brands with effective and ineffective ad campaigns as found by commercial recall and attitude change studies. The former (about 70% of the brands studied) showed significant share of sales gains among audiences, relative to those not exposed, after a single household exposure one week prior to making a purchase decision. The latter (30% of the brands) showed no gain or, in some cases, a loss in share of market among households exposed a single time one week before shopping.

As with all scanner panel studies, Longman's analysis of the short term share-of-market gains for major packaged goods brands following TV ad exposure is an impressive testament to the power of television advertising. The basic data are summarized in the table that follows, which shows that the average brand had a 31% higher share of sales (131 index) among those households exposed to one commercial one week before purchase, over homes that were not exposed to any ads. Not surprisingly, additional frequency during the same pre-purchase week produced somewhat higher share-of-market increments, rising to 46% with few more exposures.

The same table presents corresponding breakdowns for brands with effective rather than ineffective commercials and shows what most ad managers should instinctively know. If your advertising is not compelling to those who see it, there is little benefit in repeating these exposures to "pound the message home." A small gain does indeed occur, but as Longman pointed out, "When it comes to ineffective advertising, it is better to cancel the media schedule and wait until you have an effective commercial."

This theoretical distinction goes to the crux of the so-called "recency" or "continuity" concept, which in practical terms calls for maximizing one-time reach rather than sacrificing reach to hit some segments of the advertiser's "audience" two, three or more times. In all cases the

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time frame context is as short as possible—usually one or, at best two weeks—rather than extended periods so commonly used in media planning. Hard core recency advocates state that an advertiser who optimizes one-time reach 52 weeks a year gets his/her message to more prospects just before a purchase decision than an advertiser garnering the same annual GRPs, but using them in only 24 weekly flights with higher frequency rates per flight.

We see merit in the recency argument, though it cannot be adopted as an "always applicable" strategy. A large number of variables must be weighed, most notably:

1. Is this the beginning, middle or end of the ad campaign? Are most consumers already familiar with the message or is it a brand new proposition for most of them?
2. How effective is the advertiser's message? How big a pool of executions is available?
3. What demographic target is involved? Are you targeting young, well educated consumers or older, more brand loyal segments?
4. How many brands are competing in your category? Are you the leader or a hind-runner? Will rival labels erode your sales gains when their ads appear?
5. What about the impact of other media employed by your brand and rival marketers?
6. What is the effect of promotional activities, coupons/price-offs, etc., on share-of-market gains?

Finally, there are media practicalities to be considered. For one thing, conventional media audience data present a vastly inflated picture of ad or commercial exposure. If, for example, you buy 75 target group GRPs per week in TV, only 45-50 of these points represent actual ad exposure (in the room when commercial ran and paying at least some attention). As a result, a large percentage of your one-time-only "ad exposures" actually are phantoms. Then there is the question of cost efficiency. Is it true that your budget will buy the same number of GRPs whether you disperse your buys across many networks (to maximize reach) or whether you concentrate on fewer networks? Will the former strategy result in higher CPMs, thereby negating the theoretical advertising effectiveness benefits?

The underlying impetus in this discussion is that most people long for a magic formula, substituting an all-encompassing recency credo for the now outdated effective frequency concept, without thinking out each specific situation and considering all of the relevant variables. Chief among these is the question of total campaign versus short term effects. What happens across flights? If you reach a consumer only once in week one, and then reach him again in week three and week six, how much "wear-out" of ad impact takes place during the non-exposure weeks (weeks two, four or five)? Is this more of a problem at the outset of a campaign and for certain demographics only?

Until disciplined, well thought-out, scanner-style studies are initiated to test the results of various scheduling strategies while accounting for the key variables, media planners will not know what questions to ask of the new "optimization" models that are being offered them. Striving for maximum one-time reach for every plan even within a client's network/program type preference guidelines isn't much better than trying to maximize effective frequency for every schedule. The best answer usually falls somewhere between these extremes, but exactly where (and why) remains up for debate.

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MAJOR PACKAGED GOODS BRANDS INDEX OF PURCHASE RESPONSE BY FREQUENCY OF TV AD EXPOSURE IN WEEK PRIOR TO BUYING DECISION

NO. OF H.H. EXPOSURES IN WEEK PRIOR TO PURCHASE	ALL BRANDS	POSITIVE AD IMPACT BRANDS[1]	ZERO/NEGATIVE AD IMPACT BRANDS[1]
None	100	100	100
1	131	151	91
2	140	160	98
3	139	159	98
4	146	166	105

[1]*Based on ad recall/attitude change studies.*

Source: "If Not Effective Frequency, Then What?," Kenneth A. Longman, Journal of Advertising Research, *July-August 1997.*