

## PROGRAM ENVIRONMENT AND ITS EFFECTS ON COMMERCIAL IMPACT

We are frequently asked whether the question of program environment affecting commercial impact has been definitively answered and, if so, where is the research to guide advertisers in making relevant decisions? The assumption is that deeply involving program environments benefit advertisers by keeping more of their viewers attentive, and therefore potentially exposed to the advertiser's ad message. In some cases there may be an added plus—a positive or enhancing mood that the show brings to the commercial when the two viewing experiences are particularly compatible. But if so, how do you quantify these relationships?

Attempts to investigate the effects of program environment go back to the mid-1950s and, as a rule, the early studies dealt with specials or shows associated with a single sponsor. In some cases, the results were highly favorable, indicating a positive rub-off benefit to the advertiser.

As for regular series fare, most of the 1960s and 1970s research designs employed the mass-of-data approach, using commercial recall as the primary benchmark. Typical of these was a fall 1968 Hooper telephone coincidental study conducted in two waves. One determined whether primetime viewers were watching program content or commercials when the interviewer called; the other asked viewers whether they could name the last brand advertised on the show they were just watching. These claims were verified (or rejected) based on independent monitoring of the commercials that actually appeared in the telecasts under study.

Hooper's findings were tabulated by primetime showtype and are summarized in the first table. As can be seen, although general dramas attained the highest commercial exposure levels (percent of program viewers also watching during commercials), they did not deliver higher brand name recall scores. The latter distinction went to mystery dramas and feature films, while comedy-varieties and westerns came in a close second (see first table).

Similar showtype analyses by Burke and Gallup & Robinson proved equally inconclusive. Indeed, a 1974-77 mass-of-data compilation by G&R found virtually no difference in average commercial recall scores for six out of the seven major genres tabulated (see second table).

The problem with the mass-of-data approach is the lack of comparability between one showtype and another in terms of viewer demographics and the nature of commercials. To definitively ascertain whether program content ("environment") produces a benefit for commercials, major variables must be held constant. In an ideal study, the demographics of the audience, the exposure "situation" and the commercials themselves should be identical for all the environments measured.

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*Program Environment And Its Effects On Commercial Impact Continued*

## HOW PRIMETIME NETWORK SHOWS PERFORMED IN COMMERCIAL EXPOSURE AND LAST BRAND SEEN RECALL

Fall 1968

SHOWTYPE	COMM'L. EXPOSURE <sup>1</sup>	LAST BRAND RECALL <sup>2</sup>
General Dramas	87%	16%
General Varieties	81	15
Mystery Dramas	79	20
Feature Films	79	20
Comedy Varieties	77	19
Westerns	77	19
Suspense Dramas	76	17
Sitcoms	74	17
Adventures/Sci-Fi Shows	71	14

<sup>1</sup>Telephone coincidental study conducted between October 28–November 23, 1968. Sample size was approximately 4,700 homes who were watching ABC/CBS/NBC shows during commercials when the interviewer called.

<sup>2</sup>Telephone coincidental study conducted between September 15–October 19, 1968. Sample size was 34,600 persons aged 12+ who were watching ABC/CBS/NBC shows when the interviewer called.

Source: Hooper National Television Index.

## INDEX OF RECALL SCORES FOR ADULT PRIMETIME VIEWERS BY PROGRAM TYPE

	1967-70	1974-77
Medical Dramas	138	102
Detective Shows	111	100
Sitcoms	106	107
Movies	102	100
Fantasies/Sci-Fi Shows	—	98
Comedy Varieties	94	102
Westerns	87	—
Musical Varieties	85	90

Note: All-show average=100.

Source: Gallup & Robinson.

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*Program Environment And Its Effects On Commercial Impact Continued*

An experiment designed to meet these requirements by Victor Principe and Gary F. Soldow was reviewed in the April 1981 issue of **The Journal of Advertising Research**. Eighty-seven people were invited to special videotape screenings of a TV show. Respondents were divided into three groups. The first saw a highly involving episode of the one-hour police drama, *Baretta*, while the second group watched a frivolous episode of the sitcom, *The Brady Bunch*. In both cases, the program contained identical food, household cleaner and car commercials. A third “control” group saw only the commercials.

These findings contradicted the widely accepted theory that highly involving programs—usually dramas—have a positive rub-off effect on commercials. Adults who watched *The Brady Bunch* scored 85% higher than those exposed to *Baretta* in brand name recall and 94% higher in sales recall. However, the Principe/Soldow study was based on extremely small samples (29 persons per cell) and was conducted in a laboratory setting instead of a normal at-home viewing situation. The latter objection is particularly valid, since people who are recruited to participate in a study and are exposed to a program in unnatural conditions (screening rooms, mall intercepts, etc.) may respond differently than would be the case when watching in the privacy of their homes.

Another investigation, which explored the effects of forced viewing situations, as well as the larger issue of the impact, if any, of program environment, was described by David Lloyd, Assistant Professor of Marketing at Boston College, and Kevin J. Clancy, Chairman of the research firm Yankelovich-Clancy-Schulman, Inc. (and also a professor at Boston College).

In this project, a sample of 470 female household heads was recruited in a midwestern market and invited to a central research facility to view and comment upon a TV show. The total sample was divided into four demographically matched segments, each assigned to watch a different one-hour drama. Two of these were believed to be highly involving shows, while the others were low in involvement (based on independent research by Television Audience Assessment). Before viewing, respondents filled out a questionnaire indicating their brand preferences for the product categories under study.

Each program contained four identical commercials (plus others) embedded in regular breaks. After viewing the show, the sample once again completed a questionnaire concerning their reactions to the program (attentiveness, liking, etc.), commercial recall and their brand preferences for the categories involved. The last question was a repeat of the pre-exposure questionnaire and provided the vital pre-/post-attitude change measure, producing differences that might be attributed to the program viewing situation.

The results of the study support the hypothesis that program content produces a positive effect on advertising. As indicated in the next table, viewers who rated the show highly in terms of involvement were more likely to recall its commercials and be more motivated by them.

More recent surveys continue to reveal surprising variability or lack of the same when attempting to correlate the effects of program content with ad recall. For example, Zenith Media's *U.S. Persistence Study*, conducted in December 1999, noted that aided recall of commercials by primetime movie viewers was 13% above the norm, but otherwise did not find major variations by genre (see second table that follows).

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*Program Environment And Its Effects On Commercial Impact Continued*

## VIEWER RESPONSE BY PROGRAM INVOLVEMENT

	PROGRAM INVOLVEMENT		
	LOW	AVERAGE	HIGH
Unaided Recall	18.4%	21.0%	22.2%
Aided Recall	34.0	48.0	54.0
Copy Point Credibility	24.0	37.0	41.0
Purchase Interest	13.2	15.7	18.0
Pre-/Post-Behavioral Change	6.4	12.6	14.4

*Note: Four-commercial average.*

*Source: CPMs vs. CPIMs: Implications for Media Planning Based on New Evidence Regarding Television Program Environment Effects, Lloyd and Clancy, September 1990.*

## RELATIVE INDICES OF LAST POD COMMERCIAL AIDED RECALL

December 1999



*Source: U.S. Persistence Study, Zenith Media.*

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*Program Environment And Its Effects On Commercial Impact Continued*

As this review indicates, there are perplexing inconsistencies in the findings that are in large part a function of varying study designs and executions. There is a general tendency in the data that favors “high involvement” fare (often dramas, and sometimes movies), however, this is hardly a firm foundation for formula-seekers to stand on. Certainly, it would be convenient if the research showed that dramas always out-pulled sitcoms, reality shows or other genres in ad impact, or vice versa, yet this is not the case. Nor is it reasonable to assume that even if dramas were a superior advertising environment on a consistent basis, this would apply equally to all dramas. To be sure, a typical drama is probably more likely to “deliver” its audience to the beginning of a commercial break than a typical sitcom by a margin of 5-10%, but even if this results in a commensurately higher ad recall level for the drama, this does not necessarily mean that its audience is more inclined to accept the advertiser’s claims.

In our opinion, a far more fruitful avenue for exploration regarding the ruboff of program content effects on commercials is to consider the mindset relationships generated by their respective viewing experiences. If these are in sync (e.g. a medical product ad appearing in *Grey’s Anatomy*), so much the better; however, we doubt that *Grey’s Anatomy*’s audience is more inclined to accept just any advertiser’s sales pitch than viewers of *The Simpsons*, just because they saw it on *Grey’s Anatomy*.

