

COMMERCIAL CLUTTER ON RADIO: A NEGATIVE FOR ADVERTISERS

It has long been recognized in television that increased commercial clutter—particularly per “pod” or break—has a negative effect on advertising impact. Depending on the methodology utilized, notably the extent of prompting or cuing offered the respondent, advertisers in breaks containing 5-10 commercials pay an ad recall penalty of 20-35%, relative to those whose messages run in pods with five or fewer announcements. Although the radio industry has not conducted many studies that directly relate the effects of clutter on ad recall, evidence suggests that the same pitfalls apply; radio ad clutter poses a problem for stations and advertisers alike.

A series of studies conducted by Paragon Media Strategies demonstrates this point. The latest, a February 2005 sampling of 401 weekday radio listeners, found that 45% of the respondents believed that commercial clutter was higher than five years ago, 22% felt that it was the same and 12% believed that it had declined. As shown in Table I, the perception that stations are airing more ads than they used to was more or less uniform across all age groups, which is not surprising, since increased clutter seems to be accepted as fact on various genres of radio outlets.

It's also not a surprise that most of those who felt that ad clutter was on the rise indicated that this had affected the way they listened to radio. Table II takes this segment (about a third of the total sample) and notes both decreased overall radio listening and heightened dial switching. In the latter case, younger listeners seemed more affected than older listeners. The implications are obvious. Commercial exposure and attentiveness probably suffer as more and more ads are aired per break. But how does one quantify these negative effects?

On this score, Paragon Media Strategies presents an additional bit of evidence to guide us. Paragon asks listeners about their typical dial switching behavior during commercial breaks with varying commercial loads. As shown in Table III, a six-study average for the period 1991-2005 shows that 9% claim they don't wait for the first commercial, but instead immediately switch to another station as a break begins; 18% switch after one message; 26% after two; 17% after three; and 7% after four. Interestingly, 21% contend that they never switch. When this last group is broken down by age, older listeners (45-64) seem least inclined to avoid commercials, whereas younger audiences were most likely to dial switch.

Some researchers have attempted to be more specific. Bridge Ratings, for example, estimated the listener “attrition” rate for stations in eight markets during typical six-spot breaks. Taking only regular listeners who rated the station a “favorite,” Bridge calculated that 20% of the average break's going-in audience was lost (turned off or to another station) at the end of the first ad message, another 18% was lost by the end of the second, and 15% after the third. By the conclusion of the break (after all six spots aired) only 20% of the initial audience remained.

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This level of attrition may be overstated (wouldn't tune-outs be offset by people tuning in to avoid commercials on other stations?); however, directionally, the findings make sense. Undoubtedly as one goes deeper into a break, listener avoidance in any form must increase. Taking an entire break as a frame of reference and assuming that advertiser spots are rotated equally into each in-break position, it is obvious that ad impact per spot will be higher for messages in shorter breaks and lower for those in longer breaks.

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TABLE I

LISTENER PERCEPTIONS OF TRENDS IN COMMERCIAL CLUTTER RELATIVE TO FIVE YEARS AGO

February 2005

	MORE	LESS	SAME	DON'T KNOW
All Persons 15–64	45%	22%	12%	21%
Age				
15–24	43	17	19	20
25–34	44	23	9	24
35–44	38	29	10	26
45–54	55	18	10	17
55–64	45	25	10	20

Source: Paragon Media Strategies; study of 401 persons aged 15–64 who listen to radio on an average weekday.

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TABLE II

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR AMONG THOSE WHO CLAIM INCREASED COMMERCIAL CLUTTER ON RADIO HAS AFFECTED THEIR LISTENING HABITS

February 2005

	LISTENING LESS TO RADIO	SPEND MORE TIME FLIPPING THROUGH RADIO STATIONS
All Persons 15–64	45%	82%
Age		
15–24	85 ¹	85
25–34	58	92
35–44	53	94
45–54	59	83
55–64	64	64

Note: These findings apply to approximately one-third of the total sample aged 15–64.

¹*Caution: small sample base.*

Source: Paragon Media Strategies; study of 401 persons aged 15–64 who listen to radio on an average weekday.

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TABLE III

NUMBER OF COMM'LS. IN BREAK TYPICALLY LISTENED TO BEFORE SWITCHING TO ANOTHER STATION

	SWITCH BEFORE 1 ST COMM'L.	SWITCH AFTER				NEVER SWITCH
		1 AD	2 ADS	3 ADS	4 ADS	
1991	7%	24%	28%	15%	7%	18%
1994	8	13	33	24	5	16
1996	7	20	30	17	6	17
1999	6	16	25	15	10	28
2003	13	14	20	16	7	22
2005	13	20	21	12	7	25
Six-study Avg.¹	9	18	26	17	7	21

Note: Percentages do not add to 100% due to "don't know" responses.

¹*Media Dynamics Inc.'s calculations.*

Source: Paragon Media Strategies; studies of persons aged 15-64 who listen to radio on an average weekday.

