

REGENCY VS. BLINKING SCHEDULES: WHICH ATTAINS AD AWARENESS FASTER?

In the 1970s and 1980s, a lot of media planners and their clients bought into the so-called effective frequency concept, without really thinking out the ramifications. Today many tout the recency theory and again, some of its advocates don't really understand its true implications.

Putting it in simple terms, effective frequency assumed that a TV viewer reached only once in a monthly time frame probably had little value to a marketer because such minimal exposure was "ineffective." On the opposite end, those reached 6+ times were deemed to be "overstimulated," hence redundantly exposed to a wasteful extent. So it was determined that the ideal four-week frequency was somewhere between 2-6 exposures (no one knew the exact number) and planners were urged to maximize reach at this level of frequency.

Then along came the recency folks who argued that the time frame should be shifted to a week, rather than a month, so that consumers were exposed to ad campaigns in "closer proximity" to their next buying decision. Recency advocates further argued that a single weekly exposure had value to the advertiser and that all successive exposures in a one-week interval were redundant, resulting in declining ratios of effectiveness. Their solution: forget flighting and buy every week ad schedules that would maximize one-time reach, not "excessive" (2+) frequency.

Unfortunately, neither of these rigid concepts drew distinctions between the type of product or service advertised, the relative degree of competition and ad spending in each category and the purchase cycle of the products/services. Also ignored were the kind of consumers targeted by the advertiser (do younger, better educated targets need the same levels of reach/frequency as older, lower income consumers?).

But the most glaring weakness in the effective frequency and the recency theories concerned audience definitions. Both accepted the findings of conventional TV rating surveys as equivalent to ad exposure, meaning a viewer who watched an average minute (program content and/or ads) of a program carrying the advertiser's ads was considered "reached" by the ad campaign even though this was clearly not always the case.

Instead of standing up for themselves, the effective frequency planners offered no defense for their theory and most jumped ship, adopting the recency concept. But now, five or six years later, many are having second thoughts. This is especially true of those who are tracking advertising impact studies, particularly for TV. As commercial clutter rises and zapping increases, the typical TV ad message is registering lower and lower ad awareness/recall levels. Is it still valid to assume that one "exposure" per week—or more precisely, "opportunity to see" (OTS)—is enough to make a sale for the advertiser?

To demonstrate how the recency concept compares with effective frequency in real world terms, we have created a hypothetical case for Brand X, which can afford to buy 4,628 target

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GRPs on network TV (on-air and/or cable) per year. This brand has adopted the recency theory and is running 89 GRPs weekly, which attain a 65% weekly reach. In line with the recency idea, most of this reach is at the one frequency level (2+ times being considered “redundant”).

Since there are newly raised concerns about the ability of single airings of TV commercials to capture the attention of audiences, Brand X’s media planners have contrasted their current weekly recency schedule with an every other week “blinking” alternative, which by virtue of 50% more GRPs per week, seeks to maximize reach at the 3+ exposure level. In both cases, the media planners have laid out the two schedules’ reach, using conventional audience data that assume that average minute program/ad content viewership equals “reach.”

As shown in the first column of the first table, the recency and blinking schedules attain virtually the same one-week reach (65% and 70%, respectively). However, 50 reach points out of 65 are at the one frequency level for the recency schedule, while the blinking schedule, with twice the GRPs, concentrates far more of its reach at the 3-4+ frequency range (27 points versus a mere five points for the recency plan).

The second column represents an attempt by the planners to account for actual ad exposure, which is defined as “noting” or “watching” the advertiser’s commercial. While immediate, unaided recall studies reveal that only 2% of the persons who just watched a TV show can name a brand advertised in the last break without any cuing or memory aid, the planners for Brand X have been far more generous, using a 30% aided recall factor per commercial “exposure.” So in the case of a single exposure (program viewing), 30% of the audience was credited with actually seeing the commercial. Therefore the recency schedule’s 50% reach at the one frequency level was reduced to only a 15% ad reach (50% reach x 30% ad recall).

At the two-time level the process becomes more complicated, for it is then necessary to estimate what portion of the audience saw one or both commercial airings. If there was no duplication—a highly unlikely prospect—60% of the 2 frequency audience would be reached by Brand X’s ads, however a more rational calculation computes the random probability of exposure ($A+B$ minus $A \times B$) as 51%, then reduces this estimate slightly to make the process less random. This lowers the estimated ad reach to 48% of those who were “reached” two times. The process is repeated at the 3 and 4+ times levels, and the same sort of calculations are made for the 50% higher GRP “blinking” schedule.

The resulting contrasts should not be surprising. Benefiting from its higher frequency levels, the blinking schedule delivers considerably more *one-week ad reach* than the recency schedule (35% versus 24%).

The second table carries this analogy a step further by estimating the cumulative GRP reach and ad reach buildup for both schedules over an eight-week interval. As usual, conventional media audience curves indicate that both schedules attain nearly universal reach over this two-month period (column two); however their actual ad reach develops more modestly. Even if we account for a moderate ad awareness decay in the hiatus weeks for the blinking

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schedule, it attains its ad reach more quickly than the recency schedule—especially in the first week—and both come out about the same (64-65%) over eight weeks.

So which is the best way to go? Various considerations may include competitive brand and scheduling activities, promotional tie-ins, whether Brand X's ad campaign is new or at a mature stage, merchandising aspects and whatever ad impact research the brand managers have in their possession. Put all of these into the equation, together with a realistic idea of ad (not TV program) reach, and a media planner has many things to consider. Under some conditions recency may be better, under others higher frequency flighting may prevail. But please, let us think it out in the context of the brand's specific goals and not approach it formulaically. There are many ways for a planner to go; there is not just one single, uniformly correct approach to media scheduling.

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AVERAGE WEEKLY REACH FOR RECENCY AND “BLINKING” SCHEDULES

I. RECENCY SCHEDULE (89 GRPs)

FREQUENCY OF EXPOSURE	% REACH	% WHO ACTUALLY VIEW COMM'L. 1+ TIMES	% AD REACH
1	50	30	15
2	10	48	5
3	3	60	2
4+	2	70	2
<i>Total Pop.</i>	<i>65</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>24</i>

II. BLINKING SCHEDULE (178 GRPs)

FREQUENCY OF EXPOSURE	% REACH	% WHO ACTUALLY VIEW COMM'L. 1+ TIMES	% AD REACH
1	27	30	8
2	16	48	8
3	10	60	6
4+	17	77	13
<i>Total Pop.</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>35</i>

☐ Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.

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EIGHT-WEEK REACH BUILD-UP FOR RECENCY AND “BLINKING” SCHEDULES AT EQUAL GRPs

	RECENCY SCHEDULE			BLINKING SCHEDULE		
	GRPs	REACH	AD REACH	GRPs	REACH	AD REACH
Wk. 1	89	65	24	178	70	35
2	178	83	33	—	—	—
3	267	90	43	356	92	48
4	356	94	51	—	—	—
5	445	96	56	534	95	57
6	534	97	60	—	—	—
7	623	98	63	712	97	64
8	712	98	65	—	—	—

Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.

