

COMMERCIAL IMPACT BY LENGTH OF MESSAGE

Over the years various copytesting companies and other researchers have explored the relative impact of longer and shorter TV messages upon their viewers. Well into the 1960s, the standard in-program TV ad unit was the :60, often presented in a stand alone “sponsor’s break.” In addition, network affiliates sold 10- and 20-second commercial units in the station ID breaks that were mandated every half-hour so the channels could identify themselves to the public.

By the late-1950s and increasingly into the early-1960s, multi-brand network advertisers began to share 60-second messages among two brands, utilizing “piggy-backed” 30-second units with a short segue from one to the other (“and also from General Foods...”) as a cost saving expedient. The early ad impact studies noted that such :30s garnered 75-80% of the copy point recall of the :60s, yet cost the brands only half as much in time charges.

The introduction of individual 30-second units in the mid-1960s and their rapid adoption as TV’s standard commercial length was fueled by numerous ad recall studies that, like those for the earlier “piggy-backed” announcements, showed :30s to have better than half of the recall of :60s, making them highly cost efficient units. As a rule, unaided recall studies, which did not assist the respondent in remembering the ad message with product class or other reminder cues (e.g. “did you see a cake mix commercial in last night’s telecast of *Here’s Lucy*?”) produced much greater disparity between :60s and :30s. A 1968 Hooper telephone coincidental survey found :30s garnered only 62% of the brand name recall of :60s. On the other hand, typical Burke day-after recall scores that used cues to jog the respondent’s memory, found that :30s performed at 80-85% of the level of :60s in verified copy point recall.

The introduction of 15-second units—primarily on network TV—in the 1990s represented yet another attempt by advertisers to regain a measure of cost efficiency in the light of rising ad rates. As with :60s vs. :30s in the 1960s and 1970s, researchers reported that :15s earned ad recall scores that were about 75% as high as :30s. The networks’ willingness to sell :15s at half the rate of :30s caused an apparent CPM edge that many advertisers found attractive. Soon :15s represented 35% of all network commercial announcements. However, at this point further testing revealed that many ad messages did not work as effectively in this shorter length, and subsequently the percentage of :15s being used stabilized, leaving :30s as TV’s standard ad unit.

The following table summarizes a large number of study findings on ad recall by commercial length between 1960 and 2000. As can be seen, virtually all of these are aided recall designs, however, three of the four studies utilizing unaided recall produced generally sharper distinctions than their aided counterparts. For example, the 2000 CAB/Nielsen study of primetime viewers noted that the average :15 induced correct brand name recall that was only half as high as levels generated by :30s. Clearly, this differential is a function of the

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rapid memory loss suffered by most ad messages within minutes of being seen (at least on a conscious level), and just as clearly it points to a potential deficiency in the selling prowess of :15s relative to longer units that advertisers with complicated messages or image shaping campaigns should consider.

RELATIVE INDICES OF TV COMMERCIAL RECALL BY LENGTH OF AD MESSAGE 1960–2000

DATE	RECALL METHOD	COMPANY	COMMERCIAL LENGTH				
			:60	:30	:20	:15	:10
1960-63	UR	Audits & Surveys	120	100	—	—	—
1961-66	AR	BBDO	151	100	—	—	—
1962-66	AR	Gallup & Robinson	122	100	44	—	56
1965-66	AR	Gallup & Robinson	146	120	—	—	—
1965-70	AR	BBDO	105	100	—	—	—
1968	UR	Hooper	162	100	—	—	—
1968-69	AR	Life Magazine	171	100	—	—	—
1969	UR	Starch	140	100	80	—	58
1969-71	AR	Burke	114	100	—	—	—
1972-79	AR	Burke	116	100	—	—	—
1972-81	AR	Burke	120	100	—	—	—
1975-82	AR	ASI	122	100	—	—	57
1978	AR	Gallup & Robinson	145	100	—	—	—
1979-88	AR	Gallup & Robinson	125	100	—	80	—
1985	AR	Gallup & Robinson	145	100	—	—	60
1988	AR	Burke	113	100	—	82	—
1985-90	AR	ARS	—	100	—	76	—
1999	AR	Zenith Media	140	100	—	79	52
2000	UR	CAB/Nielsen	—	100	—	48	—

Note: 30-second recall=100; AR=Aided Recall; UR=Unaided Recall.

☐ *Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.'s compilation.*