

MEDIA Matters

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AUDIENCE SURVEYS: ARE THE NUMBERS REAL?

We live in the era of the data processors, where having information about media audiences in minute detail is the dominant interest among media sellers and agency media departments, not whether it is accurate. Incredibly, accuracy is simply assumed. After all, some lofty industry-sponsored entity must have validated these studies, right?

Wrong!

The fact is that not one of the audience surveys in common use for any of the major media has been validated for accuracy as any reasonable person might define it. To be sure, various "auditing" mechanisms are in place to certify that the surveys do what they claim to be doing, but this is not the kind of validation we are talking about. It's all well and good to review the sampling design, statistical weighting, editing and other procedures used by a syndicated audience survey to determine if the published findings are reflective of its methodology. But this tells us nothing about their accuracy.

The current situation—where access to reams of data trumps concerns about validity—has been developing for some time. It is due to the computerization of the media function, but also reflects the consolidation of agencies into multi-shop media buying conglomerates and the decline in person-power per account, plus the assumption of a dominant and largely unchallenged role by the media in dictating how the research firms operate.

It was not always this way.

When TV first made its appearance, there was great concern about the definition of "viewing" and whether Nielsen's meterized set usage panel was providing an accurate reading. A massive advertiser-initiated telephone coincidental study, comparing its results to the meters for household tuning patterns, put this to rest.

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◆ Audience Surveys (from page 1)

The telephone coincidental method, which asked people whether their sets had been on just before the call, and, if so, what ad was on, was soon anointed as the “gold standard” for TV rating validation. In addition, the networks funded a number of studies via the CONTAM committee, which tracked household set usage, mostly in primetime, relative to Nielsen’s meter results.

Invariably, these studies found comparable levels as far as total TV usage was concerned. However, in the 1980s many of us began to push for show-specific validation. In response, the networks funded a much larger sampling and conducted such a study. However, the findings never saw the light of day—the obvious implication being that significant differences must have been found between the telephone and meter studies. This, of course, was an issue no one wished to deal with, and since then there have been no serious attempts to validate the TV ratings.

Similar trends apply to magazine, newspaper and radio audience surveys. In the 1960s, the agencies were heavily involved in validation studies and the media, for the most part, went along with this. As with television, however, the agencies have paid less and less attention to validation since then, and have focused primarily on data manipulation, ease of access and incessant demands for more information, particularly in the product usage area for print media.

All of this means that when an agency tells one of its clients that a projected network TV buy “delivers” a 70% monthly reach against a given target group, with an average frequency of 3.5 “exposures,” it has no idea what the actual audience to such an ad campaign will really be. It is small comfort to note that the GRPs and reach estimates that form the basis of this anticipated delivery are now based on “commercial ratings.” Why? Because the rating service can’t really tell us with any certainty that people it counts as part of the average commercial’s audience really watched, or if they even stayed in the room. Add to this questions about the composition of the sample—do light viewers really participate in such studies proportionate to their representation in the population?—and one suspects that the numbers may be substantially inflated.

Similar questions apply to the new PPM ratings for radio. For example, what kind of person agrees to wear or carry a PPM around all day, week after week? Are such people “typical?” And, more importantly, is being within electronic “earshot” of a radio station’s signal the equivalent of listening?

And let’s not forget other media, notably magazines and the Internet. Are we really confident that we understand why the “through-the-book” and “recent reading” methodologies produce such huge differentials for magazines? How much of a visual reminder is needed in online issue-specific research to get the most accurate readership claims for varying types of publications? And for the Internet, how representative are the panels that are recruited?

If all of the talk about accountability really meant something, shouldn’t advertisers be demanding greater involvement by their agencies in validating the all-so-important audience surveys? If so, network TV might be a good place to start. □

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THE IMPACT OF AD SIZE ON INTERNET ADVERTISING

There is a growing body of evidence from Dynamic Logic, Nielsen and others that enables advertisers to evaluate Internet display ads for their potential awareness and click-through rates. Bearing in mind that there are exceptions to any average-based axiom, Internet ads do appear to function more or less like those in print media when it comes to the impact of size and, to a lesser extent, the shape of the ad.

We have reviewed a good deal of information from a variety of sources and developed a mass-of-data analysis that compares the relationship of ad awareness and click-through rates for a number of common Internet display ad units. As can be seen, half page and large rectangles far exceeded the norm in both awareness and click-through rates, while the worst results were attained by full banner and half banner ads.

It should be noted that the data our estimates are based on did not reflect the performance of the same advertisers for each type of ad unit. Therefore, it is entirely possible that the mix of ad campaigns from one size unit to another may have played a role in the outcome and might not apply to individual advertisers, at least not to the same degree. Finally, it's important to note the CPM factor. Although using a larger ad unit may raise awareness by 50%, if the cost per viewer rises by 100%, this may cancel out any advantage gained. □

INDICES OF AD AWARENESS AND CLICK-THROUGH-RATES PER EXPOSURE BY INTERNET AD SIZES¹

	AD AWARENESS	CLICK-THROUGH-RATE
Half Page (300x600)	155	210
Large Rectangle (336x280)	150	165
Medium Rectangle (300x250)	115	125
Wide Skyscraper (160x600)	105	105
Skyscraper (120x600)	95	90
Rectangle (180x150)	90	85
Leaderboard (728x90)	80	75
Full Banner (468x60)	75	65
Half Banner (234x60)	50	25
All Ads	100	100

¹() Pixel dimensions.

Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.

INTERNET ADVERTISING 2.0: Time for a New Media Mix?

This report challenges agencies and their clients to optimize their media dollars, while also urging Internet ad sellers to create platforms that allow advertisers to use their medium more effectively. **Internet Advertising 2.0** will test the way you think about the Internet as an advertising medium.

Drawing upon data from many sources, including Nielsen, MRI, Experian and Dynamic Logic, as well as Media Dynamics, Inc.'s own projections, **Internet Advertising 2.0** provides an up-to-date analysis of the Internet's performance relative to traditional media in terms anyone can understand: ad spending, reach, CPMs and audience profiles, and relevant indicators of advertising impact.

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Internet Advertising 2.0 is now available in ebook format at the list price of \$425. *Media Matters customers can save \$50 when they enter promo code IA2050 by 10/31/09.* A descriptive chapter-by-chapter outline and secure online ordering are available at www.MediaDynamicsInc.com or by calling 973-542-8188.