

January 27, 2026

HOW ATTENTIVE ARE WE TO TV PROGRAM CONTENT VS. COMMERCIALS?

There's so much discussion about TV ad attentiveness that it is easy to forget that most of the TV content we consume consists of programs, not ads. Is the distinction important? We think so.

In the past, a number of observational studies noted that viewers were considerably more attentive to program content than commercials, which was hardly a surprise. But recent research using webcams, like that conducted by TVision, has provided new information that gives far more "granular" data on a second-by-second basis. For example, TVision defines a "program viewer" as anyone who was present in the room for ten minutes or more while the TV set was on prior to a commercial break. Only about 25% of such viewers have their eyes fixed on the screen during an average second when a commercial is on-screen; the rest have either left the room or are present but not looking at the screen at that particular moment. As a result, a typical program viewer sees only 25% of the average commercial's content. Naturally, there are all sorts of variations around this norm, by demographics, length of break, program context, time of day, how well the commercial is executed and what's being advertised.

Turning to program content, older studies reported that about 50-65% of the program audience was "attentive" to the show, but that was not a second-by-second finding nor was it backed by precise camera observations. People who are attentive to program content rarely watch a show in its entirety, with their eyes glued to the screen. Most look at it, then away, then back again. Consequently, a second-by-second analysis reveals a much lower eyes-on-screen factor. As it happens, the average second visual attentiveness norm, per TVision, is about 35%, which is much higher than for commercials but not as high as was reported in the less precise earlier studies.

What happens when we apply these attentiveness factors to what the TV surveys tell us about ad-supported TV consumption? The comparisons are most interesting and are summarized in Table 1.

Based on the most recent Nielsen reports for first half of 2025, we estimate that an average adult spends about 135 minutes per day "watching" linear TV content and 129 minutes per day watching streaming shows. These are broken out by type of service (ad-supported or not) and for program content versus commercials. Taking linear TV, the ad-supported viewing time is 85 minutes per day for program content and 31 minutes for ads, while the streaming numbers are 79 and 8, respectively.

Table 2 applies the viewing-per-second factors to the stats in Table 1. This shows that an average adult is visually attentive to only 78 minutes of linear and/or streaming ad-supported program content daily, but the amount of time allocated to commercials is far lower, at only 8 minutes per day for linear TV, and a mere 2 minutes for streaming commercials.

We are not saying that viewers who are present but not looking at the screen get nothing from the content—either program or commercial—as they can get secondary impressions from the sound or from glancing back and forth from the TV screen as many do. However, in terms of the most intense indicator of attentiveness, which is eyes focused on the screen, very little time is spent with commercials and much more on program content. This is why most people watch TV in the first place, for the shows, not the ads. The latter are just a price that must be paid to get the programming.

Table 1 AVERAGE ADULT'S DAILY TIME WITH AD-SUPPORTED OR AD-FREE TV¹			
	Ad-Supported	Ad-Free	Total
Linear TV			
Program Content	85	19	104
Ads	31	--	31
Total	116	19	135
Streaming TV			
Program Content	79	42	121
Ads	8	--	8
Total	87	42	129

¹In minutes.

Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.

Table 2 AVERAGE ADULT'S DAILY EYES-ON-SCREEN TIME WITH TV CONTENT¹			
	Linear TV	Streaming TV	Total
Program Content	36	42	78
Ads	8	2	10
Total	44	44	88

¹In minutes.

Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.