

MDI ALERT

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WHAT'S AN IMPRESSION WORTH?

The quest for comparability between media platforms seems to have taken precedence over other, more ad relevant metrics like whether anyone actually watched, read or listened to an ad message. This is because the media sellers, who are the primary financial supporters of audience surveys, want the largest possible numbers to be used by buyers when negotiating ad placements. Therefore, it's important to understand what they really mean by media ad "impressions" and whether such information is really comparable across media venues.

Let's begin by summarizing the definition of an "impression" for each medium.

NATIONAL TV

It is assumed that if a commercial appears on a TV screen and runs without interruption from start to finish, this represents an "impression" for those who the system believes were watching program content just before the commercial break. The IAB has further specified that any ad message that appears on a TV set or other screen for at least two seconds also qualifies as an "impression," which would be credited to any program viewer(s) for a TV set or, in the case of other screens (smartphone, tablet, laptop), to the person in whose name the device is registered.

RADIO

As near as we can tell, an ad "impression" would be counted for a person wearing or carrying a portable people meter (PPM) who "hears" an audio signal embedded in a commercial message transmitted by an audio device. So far nobody has proposed a time limit or duration but in all likelihood, it would be the same as for TV, say at least two seconds. But is the PPM panel member even listening?

MAGAZINES

Like radio, no specific definition has been considered, but if it were, it's likely that any claimed reading of (or looking at) any issue of a monthly magazine would qualify as an ad "impression" for any of the ads appearing in an issue, even though surveys tell us that 75% of readers never get to an average ad page in the issue.

NEWSPAPERS

Again, nobody seems to be coming up with a new definition. So, anyone who claims to have read (or looked at) a paper in the past 24 hours would probably be considered to represent an ad "impression" for all of the ads in an average edition of the paper, even though it's absurd to credit small space ads with the same degree of potential exposure as larger ads.

DIGITAL

The IAB has proposed that any ad that is visible on-screen for at least one second be counted as an ad "impression" by the person who is registered as the owner of the device. As with other media, this does not mean that the user actually saw the ad.

OUT-OF-HOME

Traditionally, OOH media is credited with delivering ad "impressions" based on estimates of traffic at the site of the signs or posters. This has also been applied to OOH ads in malls, cabs, medical offices, etc. If a person passes by a sign, poster or an ad displayed on a screen, this counts as an ad "impression."

It's been contended that these "impressions," as defined above, are comparable since they supposedly represent an "opportunity" to see, read or hear. But what exactly is meant by the term "comparable"? Certainly, this has nothing to do with whether the "impression" reflects actual ad exposure, namely that the person "exposed" watched the TV commercial, listened to the radio commercial, noted and/or read the print media or display ad, or looked at the OOH ad. It follows that "impressions" are hardly valid surrogates for ad impact, if that is defined as the ability of the ad message to generate ad awareness and motivate buying intent.

Let's consider the case of TV. We know from numerous observational studies that the national TV rating service people meter system has been providing a hugely inflated projection of estimated "commercial minute viewers." That's because many of its participants leave the room or pay no attention at all when a commercial is on-screen but are still counted as "viewers." We also know that there are major variations by demographics, program type, time of day, commercial length, commercial positioning, and, of course, by individual ad campaigns. Yet none of these variables are adequately accounted for by the people meter system. In addition, observational studies have found that an average person who remains in the room and watches at least two seconds of a commercial watches about 40-50% of its content. Webcam studies further reveal that there are considerable variations depending on the placement of the commercial, the type of platform, etc. Yet all of these distinctions are washed over by the "opportunity to see" or "impression" concept.

So, there is very little comparability between the value of an "impression" and what advertisers really think they are paying for: getting their ad messages to consumers. Indeed, within TV, the gradations between high and low ad exposure are very high, especially if the duration of exposure aspect is factored in, not just merely getting someone to look at your commercial. A high performing ad message in a particular ad placement environment may perform 50% better than one in another situation, yet both will be credited with virtually the same degree of value if "opportunity to see" using "impressions" is the defining metric.

And it gets even worse when decisions are made based on "impressions" across media platforms, because they simply are not comparable.

The solution—one that is being strongly resisted by media sellers, we might add—is to include a meaningful indicator of ad exposure into the equation and with it a corresponding dwell time factor. Were such a gauge included in audience measurement systems for TV, digital video, OOH and—once suitable methods were developed—audio and print media, we could at least say that *ad audiences* were actually being measured, not just people who are reached by the media vehicle that carries the ad messages. Then we would see many of the important distinctions mentioned in this commentary, which are hidden by the "impression" stats. Of course, the media sellers would be terrified because their numbers would be far lower than now. But the findings would be much more meaningful, and for the first time, advertisers would be able to see how their ads perform in gaining real world exposure. This would lead to better use of the media and a better media experience for consumers. Without "impressions" to protect them, such programmers would have to improve their content and commercial scheduling practices to survive.