

MDI ALERT

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HOW A TV COMMERCIAL ATTAINS ITS "AUDIENCE"

We've covered this subject before in a number of reports, but these keep stimulating new questions that need considering. So, this time we will provide more detail in a step by step demonstration of what probably happens when an average TV commercial appears on a TV screen. The accompanying table takes us through the process. We start with 2.3 million viewers of a program, just prior to a commercial break. As it happens, 2 million were watching the show live while 300,000 were watching it on a delayed basis (see table).

The first factor that must be dealt with is overt commercial avoidance. In the past, meter studies revealed that only 2-4% of the homes that were tuned in to a TV show "zapped" an average commercial, meaning that they dial switched or tuned out. But that was a time when there were much shorter breaks, many fewer channels to switch to, and some homes didn't have remotes. The current zapping rate for live TV is higher; we're using 5% in this analysis. In contrast, "zipping"—commercial avoidance by delayed viewers who fast forward past commercials—is far higher. We estimate that 65% of the ads are zipped by the delayed program viewers. As a result, approximately 13% of the program viewers do not have an opportunity to see the commercial as it does not appear on their screen. Nielsen routinely deducts such homes and their assumed viewers from its national rating tallies, but they are included in its local TV ratings.

The next type of avoidance is far more serious as observational studies by TVision and others tell us that approximately a third of those who were watching program content just before an ad break leave the room. So, we deduct 30% of those who might have seen the commercial as not being present. At this point, our "audience" has declined from 2.3 million program viewers to 1.4 million who remained in the room when the ad message appeared on their screens. But there's more. When people are asked about sound muting during TV commercials, upwards of 35-40% claim that they "often" do this, but we doubt that such replies actually describe an average commercial exposure situation. In the past, meter studies by R. D. Percy revealed that sound muting was a fairly infrequent activity, representing perhaps 2% of the sets in use. But as we said about zapping, those were different times with shorter breaks, fewer remotes, etc. We have tried without success to obtain current data on sound muting during commercials from several meter study sources that may have such information. Lacking that, we estimate that about 10% of those present when the commercial is viewable mute the sound.

Now we come to the major form of ad avoidance, which is paying no attention to the screen. According to TVision's webcam surveys—with general confirmation by other observational

studies—about half of those who remain in the room during an average TV commercial, or 30% of the program's total pre-break audience, watches the screen for at least two seconds while the other half is visually inattentive. If we assume that the commercial viewers also mute the sound and deduct half of those who do so, we're left with 632,000 pre-break program viewers who remained in the room and looked at the screen for at least 2 seconds but did not mute the sound. This represents a mere 32% of the actual program viewers who might have watched the ad message.

But we're not done yet. TVision findings tell us that many of the viewers who look at the TV screen for at least two seconds while a commercial is presented, do so for a few seconds while others may watch for 5 seconds, 8 seconds, or more. On average such ad viewers are visually attentive to only 45% or so of the average commercial's content and just under a tenth watch it from start to finish. Commercial dwell time is an important factor in message registration as most commercials are designed as sales pitches, starting with a brief creative hook to snare viewers, followed by a short "story". The intent is to make a complete presentation to the audience. Most pre-testing systems invite samples of targeted consumers to watch programs, knowing that they will be questioned later about the shows— as well as the inserted commercials that are being tested. As a result, the pre-testing methodologies mostly obtain highly attentive respondents, many watching the commercials in their entirety, which is the ideal situation that the agency creatives would like to see replicated during real world ad exposure occasions.

But as TVision and others have shown, the real world is quite different from the testing world. Even if their eyes are drawn to the screen, few people watch the entire commercial. In our example, only 3% of those who might have watched actually see and hear the entire ad message.

Of course, some may believe that portions of the non-exposed audience are still influenced to some degree by the ad message. For example, when DVR users zip commercials, they may pay fairly close attention to the ads they are zipping by so they can stop their fast forwarding as soon as program content resumes. Perhaps. And who is to say that a viewer who watches only 5 seconds of a TV commercial gets nothing from the experience? Again, that's a possibility. But in terms of getting a complete pitch—or story—across, most creatives would prefer to have a viewer experience their message as it plays out from start to finish.

There's another interesting point. In most pre-testing designs, where viewers see and hear a commercial's message in its entirety, only a third are able—with some reminder prompting—to demonstrate that they actually recall the ad message and only half of these can provide a fairly accurate description of the basic sales point(s) the brand was trying to make. Moreover, an even smaller subgroup indicates that it has changed its mind in favor of buying the advertised brand. If the respondents consist of a targeted demographic or product users, the figures may work out to an average persuasion lift of 5-7% with highs of 15% and lows of -1%. If we bear in mind that in most pre-tests a far higher proportion of the ad viewers watch the message than do so in the real world, then this normative lift average falls neatly in line with our estimate

that only 3% of those who might have an opportunity to watch a commercial see and hear the entire message. If we redid our example based only on targeted—not all—viewers, our 3% estimate might work out to 5% or higher.

We close with this observation. Virtually every TV commercial we are exposed to is part of an extended promotional campaign. Providing that the commercial is reasonably effective in getting its sales points and/or message across to those consumers who are most likely to be interested or swayed, no brand expects a single exposure to do the whole job. Instead, a succession of exposures that are sensibly paced to avoid wasteful short term duplication will gradually increase awareness to levels approaching 30-50%. At the same time, each exposure will function to reinforce the positive response generated by previous encounters with the campaign as well as countering inroads made by competing brands. If a campaign is successful, a brand may score enough small day by day wins to offset losses and wind up with a net gain in cumulative sales volume, which means that frequency is not “crabgrass” as some may believe. It just needs to be used sensibly. You can’t build an effective branding campaign—and sustain it—without a balanced combination of reach and frequency.

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	Live (000)	Delayed (000)	Total (000)
Watched Show Before Break	2,000	300	2,300
% Who Zap Ad	5	--	4
% Who Zip Ad	--	65	9
Viewers When Ad Is On Screen	1,900	105	2,005
% Who Leave Room	30	30	30
Potential Viewers In Room	1,330	74	1,404
% Who Mute Sound	10	10	10
% Who Watch Ad 2+ Seconds	50	50	50
% Who Watch And Listen To Ad	45	45	45
Commercial Audience: Watch and Listen	599	33	632
% Of Potential Viewers Who Watch/Listen 2+ Secs.	32	31	32
% Who Watch/Listen To Entire Message	10	10	10
% Of Potential Viewers Who See/Hear Entire Message	3	3	3

Source: Media Dynamics, Inc.