

TOTAL TV DIMENSIONS 2022

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WHAT'S THE LATEST ON MULTITASKING WHILE WATCHING TV?

For some time now we have been bombarded with studies (usually online polls) that supposedly describe how TV viewers turn to alternate screens while "watching" television programs, especially commercials. These are invariably put out by advocates of digital media, particularly mobile phone advertising, and the obvious purpose is to imply—or even claim—that TV viewers pay no attention to TV commercials.

Without going into great detail, here are some examples of the findings of such studies. First, it seems that whenever we watch we make sure to have a smartphone with us. Indeed, in one poll 95% of the respondents claimed that this was the case, at a time when other research showed that 10-15% of the adult population didn't even have a smartphone. More specifically, another study tells us that 76% of the TV audience looks at a smartphone when commercials appear, 38% turn to their laptops and 22% to their desktop PCs. Another study found that 86% skip commercials entirely. And finally, we are told by a different source that 59% of TV viewers are "receptive" to mobile ads while "watching" TV.

Back in the real world, it has always been true that people did other things while watching TV, and this was even the case for radio when it was the media kingpin in the 1930s and 1940s. In the early-1960s, Dr. Charles Allen of Oklahoma State University conducted a study of 95 homes containing 358 residents using a special camera device that sat on the TV set and took pictures of the TV room every 15 seconds while the receiver was in use, assembling 1.5 million pictures across a number of months for these households. All told, at least one person was looking at the screen while a set was in use and a commercial was on only 52% of the time

More recently, a small scale research study was conducted by the Council for Research Excellence in two phases. In 2014, 273 former members of Nielsen's national peplemeter

panel were monitored as they used various media. When TV was the primary medium in use it was discovered that multitasking took place only 15% of the time. A second CRE study in 2016 followed up with a more detailed analysis of 126 people watching TV in the late afternoon and evening hours. Their viewing was observed via a combination of cameras and "observational glasses," and each was person asked to have a smartphone handy while viewing. CRE noted that viewers were absent 23% of the time and that when commercials were shown, 48% of those who were present were either not looking, were engaged in various activities, or were using a second screen. We estimate that 27% of the viewers engaged in second screen usage per commercial.

Finally, we come to TVision's ongoing panel of 5,000 homes comprised of 12,000-15,000 people whose TV usage is monitored, second-by-second, by an electronic camera device. For some years TVision has been reporting that an average 30-second commercial is watched for at least two seconds by about 35-40% of those who were present in the room just before the break for an average of about 14 seconds. Of the rest, about 30% are absent from the room and the remaining 30% are engaged in other activities or are present but not looking at the set. In other words, TVision's findings from a much larger sample over many more observations are directly in line with the earlier CRE study. The significance is clear. Yes, many viewers are distracted from time to time and do not watch every TV commercial, and such distractions can involve turning to other screens, but this is not the dominant activity when commercials appear on TV screens. The studies cited at the outset of this report are not necessarily wrong. What they describe no doubt takes place at various times when a TV set is on. But we take exception with the intent of such research. It is trying to plant the idea that multitasking avoidance when a TV commercial is on the consumer's screen is so frequent that we are expected to believe that just about nobody—except, perhaps, very old folks—watches TV commercials. That's just not true.