

Commercial Wearout

"All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others." Thus declared Napoleon the pig who takes over leadership of a rebellion against a human farmer in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. This can be applied to "commercials" because while advertising on the radio is the same, it is not. Commercials may be viewed as being equal in the listeners' minds, but ads can have a different impact and can "wear out" at different rates. While this overview will lump all commercials together and focus on broadcast AM/FM radio, remember that according to Eric Clapton, "It all depends." Insights gleaned from this treatise can be applied to streaming audio.

The issue of commercial wearout is closely associated with "effective frequency" or what are enough ad exposures, followed by how many are too many leading to wearout.

Effective Frequency

There have been many proprietary studies on the issue of effective frequency. The classic public work on this subject was completed over thirty years ago; entitled *Effective Frequency*, it was authored by Mike Naples, then Director of Research at Lever Brothers, and later head of the Advertising Research Foundation. In its *Journal of Advertising Research*, the ARF has published many articles on effective frequency, including a whole issue dedicated to the subject.

The principles of effective frequency can be understood best by reviewing Naples' conclusions, which are still meaningful today. According to Naples, "the following conclusions are based on learning theory, advertising laboratory experimentation and empirical marketplace studies":

- **Once is not enough.** "One exposure of an ad to a target group consumer within a purchase cycle has little or no effect in all but a minority of circumstances."
- **Frequency is more important than reach.** "Since one exposure is usually ineffective, the central goal of productive media planning should be to place emphasis on enhancing frequency rather than reach."
- **Two may be enough.** "The weight of evidence suggests strongly that an exposure frequency of two within a purchase cycle is an effective level."
- **But, the optimum is three.** "By and large, optimal exposure frequency appears to be at least three exposures within a brand purchase cycle, or over a period of four or even eight weeks, increasing frequency continues to build advertising effectiveness at a decreasing weight, but with no evidence of decline."
- **After three, there is decreasing impact.** "Beyond three exposures within a brand purchase cycle, or over a period of four or even eight weeks, increasing frequency continues to build advertising effectiveness at a decreasing weight, but with no evidence of decline."

The above is based on the average frequency. Depending on the radio advertising schedule (e.g., daypart distribution, length of campaign, multi-station buy, station format), this means that some listeners might have only heard the commercial once or twice; some maybe even being exposed to all of the ads in the schedule. It represents a mean average.

Learning from Television (and someday from digital, hopefully) There have been a great many tests and much written about television commercial wearout, but no one knows "how much is too much." Unfortunately, radio has not undertaken the amount of research to study wearout as much as television, but lessons learned by television can equally be applied to radio.

Observations:

- Research has indicated that even when television commercials are initially effective, subsequent exposures cause effectiveness to level off and ultimately decline.
- Repeated exposures, even to advertising that is initially persuasive, may cause a campaign to lose its effectiveness.
- Research has established that wearout is not a gradual process. Once the point of maximum effectiveness is reached, wearout occurs quite rapidly.
- Wearout is a function of both frequency and exposure and time. If one runs a heavy schedule within a given week, one is directly affecting both exposure and time, which is compressed as opposed to running the same schedule over several weeks.
- In the ridiculous extreme, it is obvious that no matter how good one's ad is, a person exposed to it every hour on the hour will eventually reach the gag point.
- The greater number of different commercials one has (for the same product), the greater the probability that one will maintain the attention of the target audience throughout the campaign.
- A convincing case can be made that there exists some form of drop-off in the effectiveness of a commercial over time. This has been shown in the form of day-after-recall, awareness interest, and attitude.
- In general, advertising strategies tend not to wear out. It is the execution which tires and lends to irritation or "tune-out."
- It also definitely depends on the copy. Commercials with a strong attention-getting gimmick or those which rely on verbal or visual hyperbole will wear out quickly. One can only tell the same joke once to the same audience.
- A good selling idea will not wear out. Most product commercials are based on product differentiation. With these commercials, it is more likely to be the execution which wears out and stimulate irritation.
- One key factor is the target audience. A commercial aimed mainly for mothers, for example, might have a quick wearout factor among young teenage girls.
- Some studies indicate young children and the elderly appear to be more tolerant of repetition.

- Varying the content of the message rather than its execution is the appropriate strategy for overcoming wearout.
- Strong competition can accelerate wearout, particularly if there is little differentiation in creative strategy within a product field. Loss of “share of mind” may not be just through failing to rejuvenate a campaign but due to the effects of competing claims.

All of the above observations assume a radio-only campaign. Studies need to be undertaken when radio is part of a larger cross-media buy.

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