
Misplaced marketing

Understanding advertising clutter and the real solution to declining audience attention to mass media commercial messages

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Abstract

Purpose – In all mass media advertising, the increasing advertising to editorial ratio is causing audience inattention and consumer complaints. The usual solutions are more creative advertising or better hiding of the messages within the editorial content. This discussion aims to describe the real solution, first predicted by Howard Gossage five decades ago, which requires understanding the problem in historical perspective and maybe a shift back to some older practices.

Design/methodology/approach – Uses a historical perspective plus the wisdom to Gossage to point out the potential salvation and future for effective advertising.

Findings – More effective advertising would mean that there would be less of it.

Originality/value – Abuse of audiences by intrusive advertising lowers the effectiveness of the entire communications form. For better advertising, there should be less of it and more targeted both in placement and content. This offers a more realistic statement of how advertising can maximize its persuasive power in the future.

Keywords Advertising, Television commercials, Advertising media, Advertising effectiveness

Paper type Viewpoint

Consumers were always able to avoid mass media advertising. Television breaks would be the time to make snacks or go to the toilet, magazine readers could turn the page and newspapers could have entire sections tossed aside. Since the advent of preset buttons on car radios five decades ago, commuter audiences would shift between alternative stations as the string of commercials outran the listener's ability to tolerate the repetitive messages. And today, advertising avoidance becomes increasingly easy. Televisions all have remote controls, many people watch only shows that were recorded earlier so the commercials can be skipped, or many broadcast services are now by subscription and commercial-free.

Yet it appears that the advertisers' "solution" to audience avoidance of their messages is to increase the number of messages, so even effort of commercial avoidance becomes a source of audience frustration. Television commercial breaks are longer and the commercials are shorter, so there are more spots appear per break. Even when time-shifting favorite television programs, the zapping of the increasing quantity and length of commercial breaks gets tedious. Broadcast radio

often seems to have more advertising than entertainment or news, sending the formerly captive audiences of automotive commuters to satellite radio, pre-recorded music and the less-than-safe alternative of talking on a cell phone. Magazines have multiple pages of advertising before you even get to the table of contents while newspapers' the free-standing inserts alone fill their own recycling box.

This increasing advertising-to-editorial ratio is really a function of simple media economics. With the decline of the former mass media into more segmented and targeted options, the total audience size of even the largest vehicles is greatly reduced. With smaller audiences, the vehicles need to sell more time or space to make the same amount of money. And yet, if the clutter were less, each message would have greater impact and the advertisers should be willing to pay more per audience member reached, or so you would intuitively think, assume it is well targeted.

The puzzle to even the most casual audience member is how much of this advertising is wasted, as their children watch advertising for pickup truck tops during "Power puff girls". Despite claims to a highly targeted media environment, advertising is increasing placed without much regard for each vehicle's audience, resulting in the mass media equivalence of advertising spam for audiences.

Too much advertising plans make the purchase of time or space done by little more than counting the size of audiences instead of considering the thoughts and desires of consumers (Miller, 2004). Demographic data remain the predominant basis for how vehicles audiences are defined, despite them being poor predictors of how audiences think or act in the

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marketplace. And even the numbers available are not used. Most newspaper advertising appears run-of-paper, without regard for which audiences read each section, while many broadcast and cable commercials are placed run-of-schedule on a variety of stations or programs whose total audiences are an agreed upon size but may or may not be potential consumers for the advertisers' products.

But aside from issues of vehicle selection, the quantity of commercials alone creates the feeling of overwhelming mass media spam. As noted, the problem is increasing but not necessarily new. The audience complaints and advertiser persuasion problems of message clutter with repetitive messages was frequently criticized by Howard Gossage from the mid-1950s to his death in 1969. The books that posthumously collected his writings contain an article titled "Is advertising worth saving?" that stated that "From an economic point of view I don't think that most of it is. From an aesthetic point of view I'm damn sure it's not; it is thoughtless, boring, and there is simply too much of it." All this advertising might work if it dealt with captive audiences, like shooting fish in a barrel, but, he said, the fish are learning to swim faster and are developing armor plate (Gossage, 1985, Gossage *et al.*, 1987; also see Rotzoll, 1980).

To some, advertising's future lies in doing a better job of hiding the sales message in the news or editorial content of the media (e.g. Donaton, 2004). Numerous anecdotes detail how product placement have generated publicity that drove increased product sales for various companies. Unfortunately, the alternative is too restrictive and depends too much on sales driven by simple name recognition, since the format does not allow for providing much of detailed product information in the message.

In reality, the solution for advertising might be to turn back the clock, to a time of sponsorships and fewer commercials. Gossage's basic philosophy of advertising stressed the importance of a single advertising message delivered with respect for the intelligence and values of its audience. An advertiser who prepares a targeted interesting and entertaining ad would no more have to run it multiple times than the newspaper has a need to run the same page one headline day after day. After all, he noted that Nobody reads ads *per se*. People read what interests them, and sometimes it is an ad. And he proved it time and again (Harris and Gossage, 1962).

When Gossage first started writing, the main form of television advertising was program sponsorship, though use of 60-second spots was growing. By the time of his death, spots replaced sponsorships as the main type of broadcast purchase and the 30-second spot started to supplant the 60 as the common length for a television commercial, but prime time network programs had only eight or nine minutes of advertising per hour. Today the commercial breaks have gone from four per hour to five or six, with many spots running 15 seconds.

Advertising writers say that the solution is more creative advertising that breaks out from the advertising clutter. They are partially right, since the problems of clutter are compounded when the exact same dull message is seen multiple times within the same vehicle. But for advertisers, they need to realize that a less cluttered environment is worth more money. A sponsored vehicle with a greatly reduced number of advertising messages means that each message would have a greater impact, assuming the provide information that the audiences would like to receive.

People throw out direct mail messages because it is irrelevant to them; spam is the plethora of e-mail you would never want to read. The solution for clutter is for advertisers to be willing to pay the price for messages surrounded by less of it.

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