



How much advertising is enough?

And how much do marketers have to spend for the effect they desire? Asks **Andrew Green**

ADVERTISERS ADVERTISE IN order to have an effect on consumers. They need to know how much is enough and how much is overkill.

Only then can they make informed judgements about how much to spend.

In a simple world, an advertiser might determine from various sources that he needs to reach target consumers three times a month to have an impact. From this, he can calculate how much it will cost to buy media that reach a given number of people the requisite three times.

Following on from that, relevant connections between different levels of spending and marketplace effects can be made - will a 10% increase in budget, for example, reach more people the right number of times or the same people with excess frequency?

The issue

In the real world, things are more complex. First, everybody is different. But we have to work with averages (a campaign that reaches one person once and a second five times reaches both an average of three times...).

Second, advertising is not the only influence on people's decision to buy one brand over another.

Third, consumers may not always consciously know why they make the choices they make.

But, as Roderick White has written, 'advertising can only work by what it gets into the mind and memory of the target consumer.' Here, over time and aided by other factors, especially brand experience, it builds a pattern of brand associations, which can be strengthened by repeated exposure to ads and may weaken without regular 'topping up.'

Traditionally, marketers were taught that advertising influenced consumers in a rational sequence of steps: a consumer would see an ad and it would generate interest in the brand. On repeat viewing, this might turn into desire and, eventually, some sort of action.

The most famous of these hierarchical models is AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action). It is not the only one - at

least 16 are reviewed in the literature. The main feature of these models is that a positive response to one step is a necessary - but not sufficient - condition for a favourable outcome at the next.

Recent work by neurologists suggests that feelings, not reason, are the dominant determinant of human behaviour. Advertising is not something people sit down consciously to learn and memorise. So asking people what they remember cannot get to the heart of how they make purchasing decisions and the role marketing and advertising play in the process.

Growing clutter has made consumers increasingly adept at screening out messages they do not want to hear, and increased the difficulty of recalling individual ads or campaigns.

Approaches

AIDA-type models have spawned measures of consumer recall and ad recognition as surrogates of advertising effect. These have become standard. Obviously, the argument goes, consumers have to remember advertising for it to have any effect. When recall or recognition are tracked over time, they help guide marketers to the right level and mix of marketing activity.

Analysis of single-source behavioural data by McDonald and Jones showed that significant short-term advertising effects on brand purchasing behaviour certainly exist, even at quite low levels of frequency.

Ephron built on this, arguing that it would pay to focus on 'recency' rather than frequency of exposure. Just one message at the right moment (once a decision to purchase has been made) can be sufficient; additional exposures make little difference.

So, spreading a campaign over as many weeks as possible will be more effective than concentrating it into a short period.

Ehrenberg argues that the primary role of advertising is not to persuade, but to publicise a brand. Brand purchasing fits into a well-established pattern for most people that changes little over time. All advertising can do is to increase the saliency of a brand - ensuring it comes to mind when a purchase is made.

This seems to tie in with recency.

Robert Heath has criticised using recall as a way of helping make decisions on advertising effect ('asking people to recall things they have no reason at all to remember'), arguing that most ads are processed subconsciously and must be tracked in a different way.

In an analysis of a large database of ad research, Cramphorn concluded that AIDA failed to explain the effect of advertising on brand purchase intentions. There was, however, a strong link between people's feelings about brands, especially when combined with experience of the brand, and purchase intention.

The implication was that the most important thing marketers must do is manage the emotional links between consumers and their brand. This is not the same as maximising ad recall or brand recognition and may involve indirect approaches that minimise opportunities for respondents to think too much.

Summary

None of this provides 'the' answer to how much advertising is enough. That is because there is no single answer; but also because much work to date has not succeeded in identifying what makes consumers tick.

Evidence favours those who argue that most purchasing takes place on autopilot, with advertising playing a long-term role in building positive feelings towards brands (in conjunction with brand experience) and helping to nudge consumers between familiar brands in a repertoire.

The implication is that marketers still need to track how people feel about brands over time, but that the measures used need to link more closely with their feelings and experience of brands in a given product category than they do with recall of specific advertising messages. •

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