

Turning down the volume on TV commercials

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You've put the baby to bed, gotten the dog to calm down and managed to sit down in front of the television for an evening's viewing. Perhaps you've chosen a moody drama. Suddenly the actors' whispers are interrupted by a man shouting about the great deals available at the used-car lot.

Broadcasting regulators like the U.S. Federal Communications Commission have long had guidelines to try to prevent this. Still, consumers insist that television channels continue to turn up the volume during advertising breaks in an effort to grab their attention, even when they flee to the kitchen or the bathroom.

In Britain, regulators moved last week to dial down the noise. The Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice, which sets British TV ad guidelines, adopted a new rule, saying TV ads should not be "excessively noisy or strident."

That might sound straightforward. But gauging the loudness - not to mention the stridency - of advertising is complicated, according to the regulators, and that is how some broadcasters have gotten away with running ads that the neighbors might hear.

Many ads, according to the broadcast committee, are recorded using a technique called audio compression. This shrinks the range of sounds in a 30-second spot. That way the ads can remain within previous guidelines, which typically prevent advertising from being louder than the maximum volume in a program.

But a feature film, for instance, may have a wide range of sound levels, from a whisper to an explosion. If an ad runs at the same volume level as the explosion, you can forget about that quiet evening.

The new British rules take account of this, saying "broadcasters must endeavor to minimize the annoyance that perceived imbalances could cause, with the aim that the audience need not adjust the volume of their television sets during program breaks."

The guidelines advise broadcasters to use a piece of equipment called a loudness-level meter to ensure compliance, which can measure "subjective volume," the audio level that the ear perceives in a show with a variety of sounds. This, according to the committee, is the best way to deal with compressed ads.

Television channels that choose not to invest in the new loudness meters may actually have to turn down the sound during commercials. Broadcasters that rely on older meters, which measure peak noise levels, have been instructed to keep the volume of the ads several decibels below the maximum program level.

"The maximum subjective loudness of advertisements must be consistent and in line with the maximum loudness of programs," the rules say.

What happens to broadcasters whose ads keep shouting?

Several years ago the Advertising Standards Authority, which investigates complaints about British advertising, warned two broadcasters, Five and ITV, about what it said were violations of the previous standards. But the authority still received more than 100 complaints from consumers about noisy ads last year.

In theory, the authority can forward cases to Ofcom, the British media regulator, which can impose sanctions on offenders. But such action rarely occurs in cases involving advertising, and Lynsay Taffe, policy adviser at the Advertising Standards Authority, said she hoped that common sense would prevail.

"I suppose they will have to be responsible enough not to scare the living daylights out of people as they are watching a Jane Austen film or something," she said.

Consumers, meanwhile, are not exactly powerless. They can switch the channel or buy a digital video recorder, allowing them to skip the ads when they watch recorded programming. Several companies, including Dolby Labs, also make devices that smooth out television volume levels.

And there's the tried-and-true solution: the "mute" button.

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